Teaching About Racial Equity in Introductory Physics Courses

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Friday, February 9, 2018 - 3:30pm to 4:30pm

PAT C211

Even after you have decided to tackle a problem like racial equity, it may seem daunting to broach the subject in a physics classroom. After all, the idea of a (typically White) instructor in power tackling a sensitive topic such as social justice can be scary in any (mostly White) classroom. Not only that, but physics is typically viewed as a “culture with no culture.” The physicist's quest for objectivity, along with a general focus on a fixed set of laws and formulae, support the treatment of this subject as untouched by people. Sometimes it is easier to ignore the problem and just focus on the Conservation of Energy Principle. However, ignoring the striking underrepresentation of ethnic/racial minorities and women in both the physics classroom and the field at large is a great disservice to all our students. We take the position that the persistence of representation disparities in physics is evidence that culture plays a role in who and what is involved in physics. Instructors have an opportunity to explicitly address the absence of equitable circumstances in classrooms and highlight the obstacles that contribute to the disparity (e.g., varied access to learning opportunities and support structures, dominant cultural norms, stereotype threat, implicit bias, hidden curricula, etc.). We acknowledge that incorporating these discussions in a physics classroom is fraught with difficulty, but we also believe that trying to lead these discussions is better than ignoring the problem. Furthermore, a set of resources for teachers interested in leading these discussions has been developing in the physics teacher community. Rifkin offers resources for leading a two-week unit on equity designed for secondary science classrooms. This talk will describe another possible pathway for integrating a shorter equity unit into the traditional content of a (predominantly White) university physics classroom, addressing racial inequity and sharing common student responses that may arise.