

Working to Transform Community at Emory University

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In the nearly twenty years since I co-founded Emory University's Transforming Community Project, I have watched in amazement as an ever-growing number of institutions of higher education in the United States have sought to explore their histories of slavery and racism in the pre-Civil War era. Over seventy universities are engaged in such projects, often initiated by groups of students and faculty, but with a significant amount of funding and other support from college and university administrations.¹ Research by these groups as well as by individual scholars makes clear the ways in which colleges and universities were closely connected to and benefited financially from slavery, from their founding until slavery's end.² Colleges and universities were not ivory towers removed from the most pressing issues of the day. Faculty, staff, and students were themselves enslavers and in some cases staff and students were or had been enslaved. Higher education institutions were intimately involved in struggles for and against slavery, supporting the development of pro-slavery and, eventually, anti-slavery beliefs, as well as ideologies about racial hierarchies.

Those involved in the recovery of histories of slavery and racial hierarchies in higher education institutions have done so not simply to add to the store of knowledge. Many of these projects have an activist agenda: Once we know more about these longer histories of racial inequality (and slavery is only the beginning), they ask, should our institutions think of their mission differently? The

¹ Leslie M. Harris, "Higher Education's Reckoning with Slavery," *Academe*, Winter 2020, <https://www.aaup.org/article/higher-education-s-reckoning-slavery#>.

² A representative sampling of this research is in Leslie M. Harris, James T. Campbell, and Alfred L. Brophy, *Slavery and the University: Histories and Legacies* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2019). See also Craig Steven Wilder, *Ebony and Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America's Universities* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014); Alfred L. Brophy, *University, Court and Slave: Pro-Slavery Thought in Southern Colleges and Courts and the Coming of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

development of the Transforming Community Project (TCP) at Emory University, which I co-founded and co-led between 2003 and 2012, sought to provide members of the Emory community with a creative space to answer that question. The project developed in response to a series of “racial incidents” on campus over the course of the 2003–2004 academic year.³ Less important than the particular incidents (which happen with regularity on every college campus in the nation) was the decision of a small number of people at Emory—faculty, staff (including administrators), and a few students—to come together to talk about what these incidents meant for Emory’s sense of itself as a forward-thinking institution of higher education. We sought to understand how one of the most diverse and intellectually sophisticated campuses in the country, located in Atlanta, Georgia—the city “too busy to hate”—could continue to be subject to flashpoint racial incidents as well more persistent racial inequities. For example, non-white faculty members were concentrated in some departments, while other departments had none. Although the undergraduate student population was diverse by many population markers, the campus ranked near the top of institutions with limited interaction across differences of race and ethnicity.⁴ What were we doing wrong?

Our small interracial group of faculty, staff and students met informally to discuss our understandings of the history and experiences of race in the institution. Similar to current discussions about whether or not the United States is intrinsically racist, our discussions over the course of that year were an attempt to discuss two opposing views of Emory: was it an institution with a deep-seated tradition of racism that continued to the present day? Or was it an institution that had moved beyond such racism in the 1960s, and thus the events we were experiencing were isolated moments in an overall positive history of racial reform? In these discussions, I learned experientially of the ways in which community members often hold multiple meanings and contradictory knowledge of an ostensibly shared history. By the end of our year of discussion and debate, which included sharing data as well as experiences, the members of this group had all become part of the same broad library of knowledge, even if we weren’t all on the same page on what to do with that knowledge. We recognized that historically rooted racial inequities remained from the incomplete processes of racial integration and affirmative action efforts of the 1960s and the 1970s that had sought to create greater access and equity for African Americans. We also discussed new tensions that emerged as other groups also sought to find their place on campus. Indeed, the year of strife had not only involved issues between Blacks and whites, but also charges of anti-Semitism rooted in political differences about Israeli-Palestinian politics; anti-Asian American slurs hurled at students; and tensions between faculty and staff rooted in class-based as well as race-based mistrust.

³ I discuss the events of that year in “(Re)Writing the History of Race at Emory,” *Academe* (July–August 2006), 31–34.

⁴ Beverly Tatum, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? And Other Conversations About Race* (New York: Basic Books, 1997) describes this phenomenon.

Many years later, I read Dominick LaCapra's *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. One of the many helpful formulations he outlines in terms of how societies can deal with difficult histories—traumatic histories—is the concept of “working through.”⁵ From a psychoanalytic perspective, societies can either fetishize the past, or can work through the trauma of the past, to come to a new, more just present. Without intending to, our small group had in fact engaged in a process of “working through.” We had committed to moving past the positive histories that Emory (and other institutions) often touted internally and certainly externally.

Our common understandings were hard-won, as was our ability to remain in conversation even when we disagreed. In exploring these difficult topics together, we created a community of trust that allowed us to grow and change, and that encouraged us to turn to each other to discuss “racial incidents” that continued to emerge during that difficult year. Even more, our experience of working through, rather than avoiding, challenging conversations and painful histories encouraged us to recommit to making Emory a more equitable place, even though we didn't all agree about how to make that happen. But in our diverse approaches, we trusted that ultimately we would figure out some common areas in which we could work together, as well as parallel areas for action.

That year was so transformational for our small group of perhaps twenty to thirty that we began to think of ways to replicate the experience. Two of us, myself and Catherine Manegold, James Cox Professor of Journalism, came up with an initial interrelated process of discussion and research that we thought could be expanded across the university. We spent the better part of the 2004–2005 academic year meeting with various stakeholders on campus, and then invited the most interested to a weekend retreat in the spring to explore how to put together this program for the following fall. “Community Dialogues” were diverse (in terms of race, gender, and university status) small groups that met over a meal or a snack, led by two peer facilitators. The groups followed a common syllabus of short readings and films that illuminated aspects of Emory's racial history and their links to US history. To put together the initial syllabus for the Community Dialogues, a group of faculty, staff, and students met for several weeks during the summer of 2005 to read materials and view films, seeking to strike a balance between substance and accessibility. That fall, we drew our first group of peer facilitators from retreat participants, the summer group, and from those who had participated in our previous year-long conversations. At the end of each semester-long Community Dialogue, group members were invited to develop a project of their own through which they might bring some of the materials or experiences of their dialogue to their work or dorm setting.⁶

5 Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000).

6 This process is discussed in more detail in Leslie M. Harris and Jody Usher, “From Disenchantment to Dialogue and Action: The “Transforming Community” Project at Emory University,” *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning* (March–April 2008), 18–23.

The other part of the Transforming Community Project, “Gathering the Tools,” was an opportunity for community members to ask and answer their own questions about Emory’s racial history through research in the University Archives and through oral history. Over the life of the Transforming Community Project we experimented with many different ways to encourage community research projects outside of the classroom. The goal was not only to uncover and deepen the community’s understanding of its history, but also to give the community a sense of what it meant to do historical research: how do we create history? What are the possibilities and the obstacles to uncovering “facts,” and weaving them into an historical interpretation? And of course, why and how do interpretations differ? This aspect of TCP seems especially important today, as it is more urgent than ever to have communities understand what historical research is, or perhaps even more broadly, what research is: how researchers ask and answer questions, pursue solutions and then accept or reject them, and in the process create new knowledge.

Both interrelated elements were undertaken in a spirit of exploration and experimentation. Throughout the life of the project, the leadership team modeled interracial, intergenerational, and cross-status relationships. After Catherine Manegold left Emory in the spring of 2005, and with the assistance of Emory University and Ford Foundation Difficult Dialogues Initiative funding, I hired a co-director, JoNell “Jody” Usher, a white woman who earned her BA and her PhD in Psychology from Emory, and who had spent many years in Emory’s administration. Most importantly, as a native of Georgia, she had made it part of her life’s work to understand issues of diversity, broadly speaking, but most importantly racial diversity. She had worked with the National Coalition Building Institute, and at Emory, as a special assistant to President William Chace, she worked on the 1999 exhibition “Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America.” Her community-focused experience balanced my academic experience. In addition, she personally supported me in a way that I had never experienced in my career. It’s hard to communicate how much I learned from her, and how well-supported I was by her over the many years we worked together, day in and day out. Six months before I hired her, we went to lunch to discuss what was shaping up at Emory. As we concluded our conversation, she said to me, “I want to help you in any way that I can. I just want to spread rose petals in front of your feet.” What in the world? I thought. And yet, between 2006 and 2012, our years of working together, I learned what it meant to be fully supported and seen in a way I had never before experienced in my professional life.

Together, Jody and I created a diverse team who helped us bring regularity and structure to our support for our peer facilitators and the Community Dialogues. The Community Dialogue process was the most popular part of our program. Participants had the opportunity to engage in conversations that were, for most, unique at Emory. The opportunity to create projects of their own around the history of Emory inspired the creativity of a small but significant group of

participants. From the beginning, I stated that a “project” could be simple: to meet for lunch or coffee with someone they had never discussed such issues with before; or to take a film or reading from the dialogue and use it to foster a group conversation in a dorm or workplace. Some engaged in such projects, but more ambitious ones emerged as well. One group attended Barack Obama’s first inauguration as president and filmed their experiences there. Another dialogue participant, Mary Catherine Johnson, who was then assistant director of Emory’s visual arts department and gallery, worked with the TCP to invite photographer Dawoud Bey to campus to create “The Emory Project”: paired portraits of members of Emory’s diverse community, accompanied by text the sitters contributed about themselves. These went on display in the Visual Arts gallery and online in early 2011.⁷ The process of participating in “The Emory Project” itself brought together people who might not have met otherwise, and both the physical and online exhibitions invited conversation and commentary among visitors—a mirror to the Community Dialogue process.

Towards the end of the TCP, we finally hit upon the idea of research triads: a faculty mentor, undergraduate researcher, and a staff member with a question would work together. The outcome could be a website, mini-exhibition, or some other project. The most successful of our research triads focused on the work of a staff member, Portia Allen, a program administrative assistant in the medical school who had a deep interest in Africa. She wanted to investigate when the first students from the continent attended Emory, and why. She and her undergraduate research partner used Emory yearbooks to create a poster display of Emory’s African alumni under the guidance of a faculty member. When completed, she and the undergraduate research partner displayed their research project as part of the annual student research fair on campus. (Portia ultimately moved to Africa to work with an NGO.) We also held “Gathering the Tools” seminars once a semester for those interested in research, introducing participants to the University Archives, online resources such as Emory newspapers, and basic oral history techniques. Finally, we hired two postdoctoral fellows who taught undergraduate courses in which students completed a number of historical research projects, and who completed their own research projects as well. The results were displayed on Emory’s website; in exhibition spaces in Woodruff Library, the central library building on campus; and also resulted in a few journal articles. Finally, the critical energy generated by the TCP contributed to the composition of a new Emory history, with a greater focus on themes of racial and gender diversity. Gary Hauk’s 1999 university history, *A Legacy of Heart and Mind: Emory Since 1836*, is a beautiful, largely celebratory coffee table book. The 2010 book, *Where*

⁷ See Paige Parvin, “Faces of Emory: Portraits Showcase Emory’s Diversity,” *Emory Magazine* (Winter 2011), https://www.emory.edu/EMORY_MAGAZINE/issues/2011/winter/of-note/bey-emory-project/index.html.

Courageous Inquiry Leads: The Emerging Life of Emory University, also edited by Hauk with Sally Wolff-King, builds on the work of the TCP and contains essays that elucidated the complexity of historical change via biographical essays.⁸ During the time of the TCP, Hauk served as secretary of the university and deputy to the president, and ex officio on the TCP Steering Committee.

In the eight years between 2003 and 2011, I learned about broad reach of higher education institutions far beyond faculty and students. Universities are often a microcosm of the communities they inhabit, and those who work in them traverse the boundaries between “town and gown,” betraying the idea of the ivory tower removed from day-to-day concerns. If students might now come from places near and far and see themselves as part of campus communities only for the time of their schooling, faculty and staff stay much longer and often set down deep roots in the surrounding community along with their families. Higher education institutions often rank among the top employers in their communities, and if a medical school is involved, provide needed services, not to mention supplying much-needed teachers, lawyers, doctors, nurses, and other professionals. Histories of slavery, twentieth-century Jim Crow racism, and anti-Semitism, as well as the efforts to repair those actions and histories, affected people and communities beyond the faculty and students who inhabited the campus during Emory’s long history.

Recently there has been a push to narrow the focus of higher education to STEM fields. But the events of the first half of 2020, from the disparate racial and class impacts of the coronavirus pandemic to the worldwide uprisings against racialized police brutality in the aftermath of the George Floyd murder, have indicated the need for a greater sophistication in understanding how racism continues to affect healthcare systems, government, the law, and the economy. Leading the Transforming Community Project in the first decade of the twenty-first century demonstrated to me the desire of a large group of our citizens to truly understand what lies beneath the racial flare-ups on campus, and more—how to move beyond these incidents to the work of building a truly more equitable society. The Transforming Community Project began at Emory during an era of “strategic planning” for the university, but I have seen few universities truly engage in strategic planning around issues of diversity. After twenty years of exploring histories of racial diversity, with more years of research to come, higher education institutions must still work to transform knowledge into structural change. Simply accounting for and publicizing these histories is not enough to lead to change, just as simply publishing

8 Gary Hauk, *A Legacy of Heart and Mind: Emory Since 1836* (Atlanta: Emory University, 1999); Gary Hauk and Sally Wolff-King, *Where Courageous Inquiry Leads: The Emerging Life of Emory University* (Atlanta: Emory University, 2010). During the time of the TCP, Hauk served as Secretary of the University and Deputy to the President, and ex officio on the TCP Steering Committee. In 2015, Hauk was appointed the inaugural University Historian, official recognition of his de facto role at Emory for many years. See “Opening Doors (and more): The Storied Career of Gary Hauk,” Emory University News Service, December 3, 2019, <https://news.emory.edu/features/2019/12/gary-hauk/index.html>.

the results of lab experiments in leading journals is not enough to cure patients in hospitals. Yet, in issues of race, we too often rely on publicity rather than action; on individual transformation rather than institutional change.

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