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Accountability for Action: Moving from Conference to Community

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Abstract

This paper reports on a pilot program to assess the impacts of the White Privilege Conference on participants in specific accountability workshop sessions. These sessions were designed with attention to “accountability for action,” to agreements about behaving in specific and intentional ways that dismantle systemic privilege. The results indicate that accountability-focused programs can help learners translate ideas from workshop sessions into specific actions to challenge privilege at three levels.

Keywords: Accountability for action; Accountability programs; Transfer of learning; White Privilege

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As an academic, artist, and activist, Vanessa Roberts possesses years of experience working with various communities and organizations on issues related to diversity, inclusion, and sustainable social change. She has been a part of the White Privilege Conference for over 10 years and is a former co-chair of the Accountability for Action Initiative. Currently Vanessa is completing her doctorate in the Sociology department at the University of Colorado-Boulder, where her areas of expertise as a community-based researcher are youth development, cultural sociology, and race & ethnicity.

The national White Privilege Conference (WPC) brings diverse participants with varying perspectives together to equip people to work for equity and justice through self and social transformation. As the conference grew in size and impact, action and accountability were more systematically integrated into the conference experience. In 2013, a team now known as Accountability for Action (#A4A) was formed to support this endeavor with designated “accountability” sessions, where accountability and action were clearly defined and encouraged through the “lens” of facilitator-chosen topics. This team’s charge expanded two years later with a pilot program at the 16th annual WPC to gather information from accountability session participants about conference impacts.

For this program, previous WPC workshop presenters were invited to submit their ideas for accountability sessions, with a focus on helping participants take their learning beyond the conference and into their communities by way of meaningful action. Although one accountability session, entitled “Accountability 101,” was directed solely to accountability concepts, others encouraged accountability through the lens of specific identity groups and/or topics, such as “College Students/Young People Taking Action,” “Indigenous Activists Taking Action,” and “Accountability for Public Schools.” All accountability session facilitators set behavioral objectives for their sessions and participated in facilitator training meetings to assure shared understanding, adequate support, and alignment of learning objectives.

Procedures

Brief written narratives were collected from participants who attended the WPC 16 accountability sessions. Responses were analyzed for themes. The purpose was to learn more about WPC’s impacts on conference attendees. Specifically the actions that were taken and what actions were planned because of their experience. Participants also provided information on how many times they had attended WPC and on how they intended to ensure their own follow-through.

One hundred eighty-four participants from 11 accountability sessions responded. These participants were newer to WPC than many attendees. Seventy-five had attended WPC once, 27 attended 2–5 times, 6 attended 6–10 times and 1 attended more than 10 times. Seventy-three did not answer that question.

Participants were asked, “What specific actions have you taken in your work/life as a result of the impact of WPC?” and “What concrete action will you take as a result of participating in the WPC?” Though this type of open-ended question requires more than multiple choice or closed-ended survey questions, we chose to place no limits on how participants might respond. This both avoids bias and allows for more response detail and new discoveries about the concepts under investigation.

Findings

Responses fell into three general action categories: personal action, community building, and institutional/systemic action (Alyn & Cabbil, 2018). Ten specific action themes were identified within those categories and

are listed, with example statements, here (Alyn & Roberts, 2015).

Personal Action

This theme category includes activities that improve personal reflection, capacity for insight, ability to examine strengths and challenges, recognition of environmental influences, etc., and other actions undertaken as an individual

Personal growth/awareness.

“Being more open-minded about others’ perspectives.”

“A daily reminder to build my own will, skill and knowledge.”

Specific personal action not included elsewhere.

“Consciously make an effort to change language and grading techniques (as a teacher).”

“Brought analysis into local art scene (Seattle Poetry Slam).”

Community Building/Community Action

This theme category covers actions that move beyond the level of the personal or private and out into the community through connection and engagement with others. These actions take place in or with a group and are public in nature.

Engage with others in critical conversations.

“Created ‘race conversations’ discussion group monthly in my community.”

“I’ve been doing this work ... for 15 years and living it [but] I started dialoguing with white¹ folks more and trusting them more as a result of WPC for sure.”

Join an existing group or event.

“Become a member of the Equity and Race Relations department in Seattle Public Schools.”

“Rejoined local NAACP chapter.”

Start a new group.

“I am creating a student advisory board on my campus centered around race/diversity.”

“Founding a policy group surrounding admissions....”

Networking.

“Building accountable white anti-racist educators’ network.”

“Nourish a relationship or hopefully more than one with people from our board of trustees.”

Institutional Action/Systemic Change

This category addresses broader action that affects or attempts to affect institutions, entire classes of organizations (e.g., schools), and systems, with their interrelated parts and contexts.

Public event organizing.

“[W]e went back and hosted a lunch discussion with a huge group from the broader campus community; since I

graduated, they have continued building on the work”

“Host teen forum on white privilege and racism. Commitment to same on Board of Illinois Innocence Project.”

Faculty development.

“Organized a think tank of educators around social justice in global citizenship education. Created framework now presented at approx. six conferences/year and offered in annual workshops for teachers (prof development for k-12).”

“Facilitated faculty talks – modeling new ways of approaching students/families of vulnerable communities.”

Curriculum and program development/revision to include conference-related topics like social justice and white privilege.

“I am social studies [teacher. As] a result, I have totally changed my curriculum (U.S. History and U.S. Government) to focus on the history of race, human rights and white privilege.”

“Created a curriculum for early childhood around positive racial identity for all students.”

“I will model a math lesson on one I heard about here at WPC that uses census data, minimum wage, and local restaurant menus to ignite conversation about systemic injustice.”

Research and/or publication.

“Completed my dissertation on white privilege, racism. And intersectionality. Working toward publishing ...”

“Review Louisville, KY, data on school to prison pipeline and perhaps advocate for police change.”

Other

Three additional response types were identified. A “unique, specific response” described actions that may be of interest to WPC but did not occur with any or enough frequency to be counted as a theme. The two other response types were “vague or not classifiable” and “not yet” or not answered.

Once these response categories, themes, and types were identified, the authors independently assigned categories to the two action question responses. Of the 184 respondents, 48 wrote about actions taken and 182 wrote about actions they would take. Seventy-three described a “specific personal action” that they had taken or would take. The other top action themes were “join an existing group or event” (58 total responses), “curriculum/workshop development” (50 total responses), and “engage in critical conversations” (45 total responses).

Responses to the question, “What are some ways you might keep yourself accountable and follow through [on these actions]?” fell into six categories:

1. Self-monitoring
2. Peer or relative accountability partner
3. Accountability to a superior or designated diversity department
4. Accountability to a group or network (external to WPC)

5. Accountability to a WPC group or network
6. NA (not answered)

Self-monitoring was the most frequent way of being personally accountable for these respondents. Respondents also indicated the importance of “accountability partners” in the transfer of learning from the conference environment to their home communities.

Discussion

From this small sample, the impacts of this type of conference experience appear to be substantial. Participants say they are effectively taking their new learning out into their organizations and communities. They describe specific actions in desired action areas.

The results of this pilot program, then, provide food for thought. Accountability sessions can provide participants with important content and skills that add value to their learning experience and help them apply that learning. How important is this to conference organizers? How does specific accountability for action sessions and strategies fit into the overarching priorities of any large learning or organizing endeavor? How should these efforts be resourced?

Application

The practical application of learning from a conference or classroom setting to companies and communities is often stated as a desired outcome, and often described as a struggle, across disciplines. It has never been more urgent than it is now, especially in the work of dismantling privilege and establishing equity, inclusion, and justice

through self and social transformation. Measuring and documenting this type of result can be challenging and time-consuming. Yet the consequences of inaction currently are dire, even life-threatening. Accountability-focused programing can facilitate the translation of ideas into the types of action needed to counter white privilege and supremacy, with utmost urgency.

¹Note: The authors have chosen not to capitalize the word “white” when referring to race.

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