

## Turning a Conversation Killer into a Productive Conversation: Race Talk in Governmental Agencies

---



**Susan T. Gooden, Ph.D., Professor  
L. Douglas Wilder School of  
Government and Public Affairs  
and  
Executive Director, Grace E. Harris  
Leadership Institute  
Virginia Commonwealth University**

Transforming Race,  
March 12, 2010

## Area of Focus

---

- What *process* can government agencies use to facilitate an examination of racial disparities in their programs?
- Examination of race is different than other types of assessment



Transforming Race,  
March 12, 2010

## Case of Wisconsin

---

- Legal OCR complaint from ACLU and NAACP regarding racial disparities in welfare program sanctioning
- Institute for Wisconsin's Future and Legislative Audit Bureau Study finds racial disparities
- Division of Workforce Solutions decides further study is needed



Transforming Race,  
March 12, 2010

## Wisconsin Study

---



- DWS establishes a 14 member Steering Committee (very diverse)
- Charge is to provide guidance for study and make recommendations to the DWS administrator

Transforming Race,  
March 12, 2010

## Research Methods

---

- Qualitative study
- Interviews with Steering Committee members and DWD administrators
- Interviews about 60-90 minutes
- Themes used to develop a conceptual model

Transforming Race,  
March 12, 2010

## Key Findings

---



- 1. Advocacy groups were important in elevating racial disparities analysis on the agency agenda**

Transforming Race,  
March 12, 2010

## Finding #1 Quote

---

- “Having the NAACP at the table [Steering Committee member] has not allowed them to forget or brush away race. . .The conversation is just different when a black person is there. I’m sorry but it makes a difference. It’s one thing to talk about these things, but when a black person is there, there’s a different reaction.”

Transforming Race,  
March 12, 2010

## Finding #2

---

- Examining racial disparities within a governmental agency is a “nervous area of government.” However, over time, both the Steering Committee and agency administrators became more comfortable engaging issues of race.

Transforming Race,  
March 12, 2010

## Finding #2 Quote

---

- “What was interesting to me was to listen to the explicit conversations about race. It’s interesting to see how nervous and uncomfortable people are talking about race. Their first reaction is, ‘You’re accusing me of being a racist.’ Don’t accuse me of being a racist. But, you have the data, so why the protest?”

Transforming Race,  
March 12, 2010

## Finding #3

---

- Steering Committee composition was important. It provided legitimacy to the study.



Transforming Race,  
March 12, 2010

## Finding #3 Quote

---

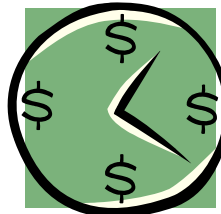
- Having solid, well-respected people regardless of sector was important. We made sure we had solid advocates, solid W-2 agency people, solid researchers. We didn't want to have the charge that we selected solid members from one sector and put them in a setting with weak members from other settings. We had strong, solid people on the entire team.

Transforming Race,  
March 12, 2010

## Finding #4

---

- Agency leadership is important
  - Agency provided significant commitment of time and resources to the study



Transforming Race,  
March 12, 2010

## Finding #4 Quote

---

- “In fairness, I think the state spent more time on this study, than they do on most. It did exceed our expectations. It was given a lot of time and space. There was a real sense of commitment.”

Transforming Race,  
March 12, 2010

## Finding #5

---

- The Steering Committee agreed upon specific methodology, which increased buy-in of results



Transforming Race,  
March 12, 2010

## Finding #5 Quote

---

- “The academic research side was very useful. They were helpful in explaining methodological concerns to the advocates. They were willing to discuss these issues. The Department did not have to broker this discussion. The Department would not have been viewed as an appropriate broker of the data.”

Transforming Race,  
March 12, 2010

## Finding #6

---

- **When developing recommendations, removing the messenger from the message yielded positive results.**
  - Utilized a facilitator and Group Systems
  - Voted on recommendations
  - Developed consensus on 19 recommendations

Transforming Race,  
March 12, 2010

## Quote #6

---

- **“Concern about group sign off was a real concern. No one wanted two sets of recommendations going forward. First of all, what is the Secretary supposed to do with that?”**



Transforming Race,  
March 12, 2010

## Finding #7

---

- The study took a long time, but the process itself was viewed as a clear strength.

“I’m not a patient person. So, when I saw this concept of a slow process, I was not thrilled. But, I did appreciate that more. There are times when a slow process can be helpful.”

Transforming Race,  
March 12, 2010

## Finding #8

---

- Ultimately agency administrators viewed the examination of racial disparities as an important undertaking.



Transforming Race,  
March 12, 2010

## Finding #8 Quote

---

- “I think we are in a better position having done the study itself. It shows a willingness of the agency to look at what it is doing.”



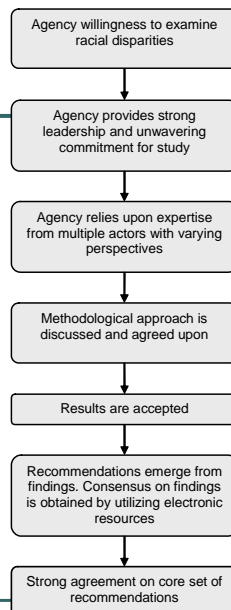
Transforming Race,  
March 12, 2010

## Conceptual Model for Agencies

- What can other agencies learn from Wisconsin?
- How might they engage in a similar process?

Transforming Race,  
March 12, 2010

Figure 1: Conceptual Model for Agency Examination of Racial Disparities



Transforming Race,  
March 12, 2010

## Conclusion

---

Agency willingness to examine racial disparities is an important first step, but many more steps remain



Transforming Race,  
March 12, 2010

## For additional information

---

- Susan T. Gooden, Ph.D.  
[stgooden@vcu.edu](mailto:stgooden@vcu.edu)  
(804) 828-7078

Transforming Race,  
March 12, 2010