*Racism and Workforce Development: A Series*

**The Workforce Development Field or a Conduit for Maintaining Systemic Racism?**

Not many people can say they deliberately chose the field of workforce development as a career path. Yet many amazing and formidable people have contributed to the growth and development of this field, despite its original focus: supporting white, dislocated workers.

Prior to the Civil Rights Era Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, workforce development programs focused specifically on putting white Americans back to work.[1] But what began as a federal initiative in the 20th century as a means to foster economic stability has grown into a staple in the labor market and a lifeline for many Americans living in poverty.

As an ecosystem of interconnected services and programs that seek to prepare and place workers in careers fit for the current economy, the field of workforce development plays a critical role in ensuring that learners, workers, and job candidates are trained and equipped to secure employment. While the field has been recognized (and acclaimed) for its roles in connecting people to opportunity and employers to talent, it has largely operated from a perceived belief of "race neutrality" and "universalism," assuming that everyone has equal access and opportunity. But that belief effectively denies the very real roles of race and racism in limiting access and opportunity for Black, Indigenous, and (other non-Black) People of Color (BIPOC).

Workforce development in the United States started with the Wagner-Peyser Act of 1933, which established a public workforce development system but used an individual meritocracy framework (also known as the myth of meritocracy).[2] The act benefited white workers and actively excluded a large portion of the Black workforce. This legislation was quickly followed by the Social Security Act of 1935, which created a pension program for the elderly and provided unemployment insurance for displaced workers. However, at the urging of white Southern politicians,[3] the Social Security Act excluded agricultural and domestic workers. And as Isabel Wilkerson writes in *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*, those workers—who were predominantly Black—were left ineligible for benefits.

Three years later, the 1938 Fair Labor Standards Act established the right to minimum wage and overtime pay but, again, excluded agricultural and domestic workers from protections, further disenfranchising a significant segment of the Black workforce. While the labor union movement of the 1950s provided an avenue for Black workers to organize, protect themselves, and negotiate for improved employment conditions, it wasn't until the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 that federal workforce legislation adopted a race-explicit approach to workforce development in the form of an anti-poverty strategy focused mostly on Black poverty.

This progress was short-lived, however. In 1973, Congress enacted the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act, decentralizing federal workforce programs and, in effect, moving the focus away from racial equality and disparities in workforce development. Individual states now had more control over the design and responsibility for the outcomes, which sent program design back to its race-neutral approach. Subsequent acts—like the Jobs Training Partnership Act of 1982, the Workforce Investment Act of 1998, and the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014—continued to decentralize, downsize, and focus broadly on poverty rather than explicitly on race-specific strategies.[4]

With more than 80 years of legislation that created, shaped, defined, and expanded an entire field, only one piece of legislation was explicitly focused on supporting Black and other workers of color. The others sought to remain race-neutral, which really means that they actively supported an ideology of white superiority and BIPOC inferiority. And this remains true today: when workforce programming is race-neutral in its design, implementation, and focus, it is choosing to support and uphold racism. Stated more directly, when all of us in the ecosystem continue to design and implement—or ignore or enable—race-neutral programming, we are maintaining and sustaining racism and economic oppression.

COVID-19 has laid bare what many already knew to be true: the economic systems and structures we have in place are not designed to support and sustain equity. In April 2020, the unemployment rate peaked at a level not seen since data collection started in 1948. Every state and the District of Columbia reached unemployment rates greater than their highest unemployment rates during the Great Recession. During the current recession, the highest rates of unemployment are concentrated among women, racial and ethnic groups, part-time workers, workers without a high school diploma, and workers who were last employed in industries that provide in-person services.[5] Simply put, the people who were already most at-risk because of historical, systemic, and institutional barriers are at even greater risk in moments of crisis and economic recession.

The plight of these systematically marginalized workers is compounded as the nation steers toward a recovery in which industries and occupations will be changed by new technologies, new and remote ways of working, and increased automation—all demanding new skills. A recent report from *Workforce Matters* notes, "As essential as training programs will continue to be, they cannot alone overcome systemic obstacles to economic prosperity that have held back BIPOC workers and communities."[6]

As the shocking impacts of COVID-19 wear off and the new normal of "pandemic living" sets in, we are forced to reckon with the harsh reality that what began as a public health crisis now threatens to become an economic catastrophe. The public policies of this country and the inadequate HR policies and practices of many businesses have failed its citizens, and now the field of workforce development must respond. But how can we respond adequately if we won't address our own failings and shortcomings?

Workforce development, which is uniquely positioned to disrupt cycles of generational poverty and generational racism, must first acknowledge and address the structural, systemic, and institutional racism built into the very DNA of the field. Stakeholders in and across the field must commit to examining the manifestations of racism and the ideology of white supremacy that permeate the field. Practitioners, funders, public leaders, advocates, policymakers, and employers must examine five core areas:

1) How we talk about our work (the narratives that are perpetuated across the field).

2) How we do our work (service delivery and program design that blame the individual rather than the system).
3) The policy framework we operate in (race-neutral policies that have created the current context and widened wealth gaps).
4) How we work with employers (positioning "employers as king" while silencing workers).
5) How we work with funders/philanthropy (positioning funders as "all-powerful and all-knowing," often reinforcing existing power dynamics, notions of superiority and inferiority, and determining who has value and who doesn't).

In its simplest form, the field of workforce development centers around these five core areas, each in its own way upholding racism while driving racial inequity and widening rather than closing the racial wealth gap. If the field can commit to addressing the manifestations of racism in these five areas, change is possible. If the field and all of the stakeholders connected to it can agree to intentionally and regularly examine, address, and undo the inherent racism embedded in the ecosystem, we can fundamentally shift the trajectory of millions of workers in this country. Imagine if we all agreed to do our part in getting to the root, naming the thing, being explicit, and holding each other accountable. CHANGE IS POSSIBLE.

What will you decide?

**This is the first in a series of articles that will address the manifestations of racism in the field of workforce development across the five core areas listed above. In the next article, we will examine how we talk about our work and the roles of language and narrative in upholding racism within workforce development.**

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[1]Davis, Sharice, Cat Goughnour, and Lillian D. Singh. (2020, July). "Exploring Racial Economic Equity in Workforce Development." *Prosperity Now*, 4.

[2] The ideology that anyone can succeed if he or she works hard. Meritocracy asserts that race, gender, or discriminatory factors do not play a role in determining success.

Bloodworth, James. *The Myth of Meritocracy: Why Working-Class Kids Still Get Working-Class Jobs* (Provocations Series). (London: Biteback Publishing, 2016).

DiAngelo, Robin J. *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018).

[3] Wilkerson, Isabel. *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* (New York: Random House, 2020), 184-185.

[4] Davis, Goughnour, and Singh. "Exploring Racial Economic Equity in Workforce Development."

[5]Falk, Gene et al. *Unemployment Rates During the COVID-19 Pandemic: In Brief.* (Updated 2021, January 12). Congressional Research Service, R46554 (accessed February 4, 2021).

[6] Leung, Loh-Sze. (2021, January). "A Racial Equity Framework for Workforce Development Funders." *Workforce Matters*, 34.