Sierra Orr

Senior Presentation:

Art and Race in a PW Space

Presentation Script:

SLIDE 1:

Hello! My name is Sierra Orr and seven months ago I began what would become my passion

project: Art and Race in a Predominantly White Space. I am proud to say that this initiative was

jump started by a grant from the College of Visual and Performing Arts at James Madison

University which helped to flesh out the details and goals of the project, financed the meetings

and materials, and incentivized participation of the students.

The main purpose of the project was twofold:to establish a space for students of color to discuss

how their racial identity impacted their experience as artists and to initiate a rigorous dialogue of

how change could happen on an institutional level. How does institutional change begin? By

including the majority into the conversation. As James Madison is a predominantly white

institution, all students, including white students, need to feel confident and empowered to take

ownership of the inclusivity (or lack thereof) of the institution.

SLIDE 2:

This nuanced revelation I had seven months ago would come to change how I viewed the

problem of diversity at this institution. How could more students of color feel welcomed into an

institution where their concerns were not mainstreamed? And how could white students work

alongside students of color to effect change if they were excluded from race conversations? The

need was not simply to have more black, latinx, asian, or other minority bodies walking campus

grounds. It was to establish a new norm within the campus community of inclusivity,

transparency, and acknowledgement. Just what are we acknowledging? The unique and

intersectional needs of a diverse student body with the hopes that when a student of color feels

completely seen and heard at an institution, more students of color will follow.

So, now we know the need--but how do we meet it? My solution was to start an open group of

students--and sometimes professors, too--to discuss weekly how to have empathetic, productive

conversations surrounding race. Why? Because lasting change starts with a conversation. With a

relationship. With a changed perspective.

SLIDE 3:

Attached is my video artistic reflection of one session of Art and Race that was particularly

moving.

SLIDE 4:

The deliverable of this project took form as a dossier of the process and of its various

applications. This dossier details the process from grant application to weekly meetings and

covid-19 adaptations. The final section addresses how this process is effective not only in

predominantly white educational spaces but also in various professional spaces with different

demographics.

SLIDE 5:

Before I move forward in the presentation, let's create a shared meaning and "mutual

understanding" of what exactly I mean when I use the terms equity, inclusion, and diversity.

Though often used interchangeably, equity, inclusion, and diversity all make up different but

integral parts of facilitating a safe, welcoming work environment. Equity is constantly and

consistently recognizing and redistributing power. Inclusion says the thoughts, ideas, and

perspectives of all individuals matter. Diversity is multiple identities represented in an

organization.. All are necessary. Understanding the differences will help your team understand what areas your environment is lacking. A diversity problem is very different than that of inclusivity or equity, and should be treated as such.

SLIDE 6:

So how, practically, does an institution effect tangible, revolutionary change? I have collected my findings into a six-step model for instilling change on an institutional level. Acknowledge, Establish, Generate, Invest, Support, and Repeat!

SLIDE 7:

The first of the six steps for instilling institutional change is to acknowledge the issue of race equity, inclusion, and diversity at your institution. This key beginning to effecting change is important. The problems surrounding race in the workplace environment cannot stay below the radar. The fact of the matter is, for many minority students, employees, peers, these problems never were. To not acknowledge the importance of this issue is to ignore the daily realities of both people of color and white people. Everyone is impacted by race relations.

SLIDE 8:

A clear solution is indispensable. It states what the specific goal of the initiative is--what ideal does your company, educational institution, government organization want to meet? Establishing this early on ensures that everyone on the change-making team is on the same page, working smarter not harder, and in agreement with what needs to be done. This may sound simple, but in one of the art and race sessions, I submitted a question regarding racial representation in a theatrical space: "What does representation mean to you?" Now, representation is a buzz word thrown around often in this community. It is familiar. A reasonable goal. And yet each person

who went up to respond to the question had different answers. Some agreed with one answer and wrote a check to indicate their agreement, others thought they had a definition better fitting their perspective. Some participants' responses directly contradicted others--re: "seeing a range of people and experiences" vs. "not noticing differences." This exercise was one that showed, if nothing else, everyone entering a room has different ideas of what diversity and inclusion mean and what they look like, ideally. So, coming to an agreement of what this solution means, specifically, is not just smart, it's necessary.

An attainable solution means one that is achievable within a reasonable timeline.

Finally, the last aspect of this point is having minorities present when this decision is reached. Like in the graphic from the earlier slide, diversity, inclusion, and equity are all necessary in forming a positive space of belonging. Making this decision without minorities present would be missing out on the diversity and equity aspects. A leader can have great intentions for an inclusive work environment, but if a certain demographic does not feel heard, seen, nor thought of to even be included in these conversations; lasting change cannot be reached.

SLIDE 9:

An action plan is step-by-step, it's detailed, specific, and accounts for the impact on both majority and minority racial groups. For my project, the general action plan was crafting weekly, facilitated meetings to discuss race. The specific action plan for each individual meeting was accounted for in the community contract and in the lesson plan for that particular day.

SLIDE 10:

As an institution, it is impossible to see lasting change without financing it. Investing in an initiative is what allows for change to take root effectively. It is what crosses the line from

simply a diverse and inclusive event to an equitable one. Money marks priority. Are diversity,

equity, and inclusion priorities in your workplace? Then a reasonable sum of money should be

allotted to important initiatives regarding these issues.

SLIDE 11:

It takes a village. Just as my project was not just my own, but a compiling of research, advice

from professors and other students, anecdotes from professionals working in access and

inclusion, and several other supporters. Equity, Inclusion, and Diversity are about relationships.

So, it only makes sense that you cannot be successful in these areas without relying on

relationships, connections, and research to support you. Humbly invite and accept support from

others. You need it.

SLIDE 12:

Lastly, this process is ongoing. An initiative is just one of many. An action plan may be the first

of twelve or fifteen or thirty-three. The process never truly ends, the standards just become

higher. This step is meant to be an encouragement--every step gets the work environment closer

to being a complete, perfect brave space. Each action plan completed is one more person feeling

heard and seen in your workplace and institution, which is no small thing. Which brings me to

my final question: So what?

SLIDE 13:

In much of my research, there was statistic after statistic talking about the benefits of workplace

diversity. Higher production rates. More competitive hiring. These insights were a little too

clinical for me. What is the human implications of prioritizing diversity, inclusion, and equity?

And why use this model? There are people every day in your workplace, no matter how large the

demographic, that go about their work experience feeling unseen, unheard, unknown, and not cared about. Investing in "diversity initiatives" like this one takes a step in ensuring that these people know they are valued. So, yes, more diverse and inclusive places have higher productivity rates and that's not a coincidence. Good moral, feeling like your voice makes an impact changes the way you work. Whether you realize it or not, race is impacting your workplace. It is affecting your environment. People are talking about it without even knowing. Having an action plan and initiative to effect change ensures that these discussions are healthy, life-giving, and productive and not the opposite.

SLIDES 14&15:

Thank you so much!