

White Privilege Conference Action/Accountability Brief: WPC 16 Pilot Program

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The White Privilege Conference (WPC) is entering its 17th year as a nationwide, annual multi-day event. WPC brings diverse participants with varying perspectives together to examine and challenge systems of oppression. As the conference grows in size and impact, action and accountability are being more systematically integrated into the conference experience. In 2012, the Community of Action Team (CoAT) was formed to support this endeavor with designated accountability sessions. For 2015, CoAT's charge expanded with a pilot effort to gather information from session participants about some of the impacts of WPC.

Brief written narratives were collected from those who attended the WPC 16 accountability sessions and analyzed. The purpose was to learn more about WPC's impacts on conference attendees; in particular, what actions were taken and what actions were planned as a result of their experience. Participants also provided information on how many times they had attended WPC and on how they intended to ensure their own accountability.

One hundred eighty-four participants from 11 accountability sessions responded. These participants were newer to WPC. Seventy-five had attended WPC once, 27 attended 2-5 times, six attended 6-10 times, one attended more than 10 times and 73 did not answer that question.

We 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?" Responses fell into three general action categories: personal, community and institutional. Nine specific types of action themes were identified within those categories and are listed, with sample statements, here.¹

- I. **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.
 1. **Personal growth/awareness.**
 - *"Being more open-minded about others' perspectives."*
 - *"A daily reminder to build my own will, skill and knowledge."*
 2. **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)."*

¹ Details of the analysis and a more complete representation of sample statements are provided in the full CoAT Action/Accountability Pilot Report, 06.28.15.

II. **COMMUNITY BUILDING/COMMUNITY ACTION.** This theme category covers actions that move beyond the level of the individual/private efforts and out into the community through connection and engagement with others. These actions are group and public in nature.

3. **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 white folks more and trusting them more as a result of WPC for sure.”*

4. **Join an existing group or event.**

- *“Become a member of the Equity and Race Relations department in Seattle Public Schools.”*
- *“Rejoined local NAACP chapter.”*

5. **Start a new group.**

- *“I am creating a student advisory board on my campus centered around race/diversity.”*
- *“Founding a policy group surrounding admissions....”*

6. **Networking.**

- *“Building accountable white anti-racist educators network.”*
- *“Nourish a relationship or hopefully more than one with people from our board of trustees.”*

III. **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.

7. **Public event organizing.**

- *“...we 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.”*

8. **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.”*

9. **Curriculum & 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 (US History and US 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.”*

10. 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.”*

IV. **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 sufficient 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 coded responses to the two action questions. Of the 184 respondents, 48 wrote answers on actions taken and 182 wrote about actions they will 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: self-monitoring, peer or relative accountability partner, accountability to a superior or designated diversity department, accountability to a group or network (external to WPC), accountability to an WPC group or network or NA.

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. Among the different accountability partners listed by respondents, WPC-affiliated groups and networks are the second most frequently mentioned.

Overall, results of this pilot program provide a great deal of food for thought as WPC moves into the future. Accountability sessions are clearly useful. They provide participants with important content and skills. Do they provide sufficient information to be worth the effort? Where do specific action/accountability sessions and a coordinating team fit in the overall strategy of WPC? How should they be resourced?

From this small sample, the impacts of the conference experience appear to be substantial. Participants say they get a great deal from this experience. Many are effectively taking their new learning out into their organizations and communities. Measuring and documenting this, however, can be challenging. It is time-consuming. It requires a degree of technical expertise. It can also be off-putting to some because of the structure; the culture of grassroots organizing is traditionally more free flowing and organic. WPC leaders are encouraged to evaluate the utility of this effort and to provide direction about these activities for the future.