

Working in John Wayne Country

Racist and Sexist Termination at a Pacific Northwest University

ROBERT FREE GALVAN

When asked in the fall of 2000 to be a consultant to an AIDS education and training center at a Pacific Northwest university's health education research center, it was an opportunity long in the waiting. I had been working in the frontlines of HIV/AIDS in Native communities for the last twelve years without much pay! This would be a change, as I knew that working in the ivory tower, one of the last bastions of racism, came with many resources. It was an opportunity to have an impact on AIDS in Indian Country.

The center had received a two-year grant from a congressional act responsible for HIV/AIDS care education in the United States. The center trains health care providers in five northwestern states. The black congressional caucus had agreed with the rest of Congress to reauthorize the almost two billion dollar act, but only if monies were set aside to provide services to minority populations. The administrators of the act had consistently failed to include minority communities in the funding streams for the act; the university went after these minority monies!

During the first year and a half into its two-year grant, the center could not successfully gain entry into the Native communities in the five states it serviced. In desperation I was hired as a tribal liaison consultant, and we were able to coordinate five conferences in three states, with two on reservations. We provided training to two hundred health care providers to Native communities within the remaining six months of the grant.

Apparently impressed with this work, the center hired me as tribal liaison on July 1, 2001. I insisted on similar pay as other employees, mentioning that all those with master's degrees and PhDs were unable to produce in one-and-a-half years what had been produced in the last six months

with my help; however, I still received a lower pay rate due to the fact that I did not have a master's degree.

Months later at the annual all-staff retreat, a historic review of the organization by the founder explained that the center had been created to counter male-dominated research. With a commitment to one another for continued employment, the center has hired gender-specific researchers for their gender-dominated organization.

I mentioned that I noticed the staff consisted of fifty mostly white women and three men, which resulted in an obvious lack of racial and gender diversity. The staff adamantly defended their diversity and commitment to diversity. The scale of variables they used to define diversity listed race very low. This set a tone between myself and the organization from which I never recovered.

The "commitment to diversity" still did not appear to be getting implemented as time went on. Later, in other meetings when I asked where and how job announcements were made and where consultants were sought, there were few responses, and suggestions I made were not taken seriously beyond just listening.

At one point the head of the center stated, "minorities just don't know how to write resumes" as a reason for the lack of diverse recruitment. I quickly reminded all at that meeting that there are minorities who write excellent resumes and could replace us all, including myself. To voice such a comment showed a limited exposure, and I was appalled by the lack of cultural sensitivity if not outright racist attitude.

The project that I predominantly had conceptualized was designed to bring AIDS care training services directly on to reservations, and it became my focus. The effort to get a commitment of hiring minorities to better communicate with the communities served was not seriously addressed. I was able to get several Natives hired at the center after strong insistence. This trend was quickly reversed, however, and there is now a lack of Native employees within this project.

At the April 2002 annual retreat for AIDS educators in the region, where several hundred health providers meet for training, I presented a cultural competency session. In my presentation I stated that the five hundred years of sexual molestation and abuse by the Catholic priests could have possibly contributed (as multigenerational learned behavior) to the anal sex practices of males in Latin American communities, separate from the practices of the gay community.

This resulted in me getting reprimanded, and I was told the gay community had been insulted and that I did not know what I was talking about. (Though I have worked for and with many gays over time, including gay men of Hispanic or Latin descent). I later discussed the incident with the gay nonminority nurse on staff, who had knowledge of my gay relatives, and confided that this made me “family”—a common term among gay and lesbian people. During this conversation he stated that gays had historically found sanctuary in the churches as a place of refuge and that sixteen years of age was the age of consent between a priest and a child. This was most revolting to me, and when I shared this with my supervisor, she stated I had no right to question gays. My attempt to challenge this condoning of the violation of children as justifiable was to no avail.

The office laptop computer given to me contained many gay pornographic sites that kept popping up when I was online. Several staff laughed at my concern that I found this offensive. After being insistent that they reformat the computer, the tech person paid someone over \$140 to fix it. Yet it came back with all the porn sites and e-mail pictures still popping up. This brought into question if the tech person understood what was required to remove the offensive sites. Finally, after several attempts to clean the computer, another computer was secured for me. The next person, also Native, to have that computer continued to experience the same problems.

As the project went on, difficulties with the subcontracted site in another state ensued when the head person stated she could not find any minorities to hire. The tribal liaison in the state and I discovered that she planned to hire her Caucasian friend. We became concerned that Natives were not effectively being sought. My coworker and I wrote her a letter with many helpful sites to post job announcements in order to gather a greater pool of Native applicants, such as IHI, AIPA, tribal newspapers, and so forth. The head of the center reprimanded us for daring to try to do her job. We reminded her that my position as tribal liaison was to make linkages. My coworker had applied for the job in question himself, but I was told by my immediate supervisor that “he did not fit into the work style of that agency.”

At numerous occasions in the office lunchroom I was exposed to racial ignorance and arrogance through comments I found insulting, such as “Oh Robert, Indians invented everything, didn’t they?” This occurred

when sharing stories of the potatoes of South America after a coworker brought fresh potatoes from her garden. Another instance of obvious racism occurred when I observed a minority woman coming out of an office followed by six staff workers. Curious, when I asked what was going on my question seemed to surprise all. No one answered and all walked away.

I learned later that it had been an interview committee (composed of friends and coworkers of the acting director) and a token minority for the position of director had been interviewed. The issues that there might be a conflict of interest in this hiring committee and that the job announcement could be in violation of certain aspects of the Civil Rights Act were raised. The acting director was then hired as the new director, without comment on these issues by anyone.

Remarks that I was not sensitive to women's feelings and comfort levels soon surfaced, as well as accusations of gender and gay bias. No specifics were given when I asked, other than I should just know these things. I asked for these things that "I should just know" to be itemized on paper. Nothing was given to me.

The project I was heading started getting a lot of national recognition, and the head of the center stated that she would publish an article about it in a prestigious journal. My reminder to mention that people without master's degrees or PhDs had found innovative solutions for their communities prompted more efforts to find serious faults in my performance. The opportunity to discuss any complaint made about me with others was not provided, which led me to believe that there were no real complaints. It was brought to my attention that we had to try to find a Native woman with a PhD to help. A candidate was found and over time it was revealed that it had been their desire to hire her full-time. (She was later engineered into my position.)

At a conference in California in September 2002 in which I was acting as a facilitator, my coworker did not follow my suggestion to lower the music. The suggestion was repeated, and I had to speak loud enough over the music to finally refocus her attention on to the program. This incident was taken out of context and used to validate the accusations that I could not work out differences appropriately.

The coworker, a Native, was willing to testify to her experience at this conference and that later the center denied her the opportunity to discuss the situation. They further tried to get her to say that sexist and ver-

bal abuse issues existed in our working relationship. She stated in writing to the contrary. The issues she wanted addressed were the lack of supervisory and management attention from the main offices. (She has passed away from liver complications since these events. Her testimony is preserved on records, however.)

Repeated attempts to use a conflict resolution process with anyone perceiving a problem was never pursued. Several staff observed these efforts and were very supportive in the fight against racism and sexism.

Earlier in the year of 2002 I uncovered how the minority monies budget was being manipulated. It supported other positions at the center. Without much effort, grant objectives were consistently not reached. Unused monies return to the granting institution, which returns the money back to the center as unrestricted supplemental funds. Spending sprees for equipment and additional hiring of each other as consultants for internal programs was observed. Many trips to conferences were taken by the staff, leaving little money that was originally appropriated for the minority communities. My mentioning to the staff that these manipulations are considered theft from the minority communities and at the expense of those suffering from HIV/AIDS produced no change. These parasitic practices result from no personal investment for successfully working with communities of color.

Minorities account for 75 percent of new cases of AIDS in the current epidemic, and yet 90 percent of the resources at the center are allocated for nonminority staff. It is only logical that historic racial biases will continue to impact effective implementation of services.

Trying to have Native doctors trained in AIDS care was not supported. In fact, one Native doctor was rebuffed when he asked for the same pay scale as other non-Native doctors at the center. Part of capacity building in communities of color is the economic impact of hiring from the community. It helps reduce the variable of poverty as a risk factor. To not hire minorities constitutes a continuation of institutional colonialism.

It was not long after these incidents that I was handed a termination letter. When asked for specific reasons why and who had made this decision, exact details were refused. The dean of the university's school of public health had authorized the firing without ever asking me a question. I appealed to the Internal Conflict Resolution Office at the university. Their lawyer informed me that a response and investigation would be concluded within sixty days. *Five* months later she mailed me a report,

ten days before the statute of limitations for filing with the state's Human Rights Commission expired.

The report was sanitized, and she refused to interview the many witnesses I submitted. Even repeated e-mails to the investigator to interview them did not produce an interview. The university and the government agency responsible for the grant appeared to be complicit in my failed efforts to reveal Civil Right Title 6 and 7 violations, as both did nothing. The response of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) was that without the witnesses' testimony included I had a right to sue.

In front of my house is a teepee and sign that says the university is "a racist sexist workplace." People stop and let me know of similar experiences and how the university tells them an investigation will take place within sixty days, only to conclude days before the statute of limitations expire. Racist people have torn down my signs several times. Each sign costs about \$100.

My experience shows the concerted efforts by the university lawyers to bury the issues of discriminatory racism and sexism in hiring practices and in work environments. It condones chastising for whistle-blowing on issues of gender, gay issues, and racial inequality. Its complicity with the government is further revealed.

These experiences and practices I reported to the government agency's leaders, as overseers of the grant monies and the center, all to no avail. I received a letter from the agency's administrator stating it was not their concern to get involved in the personnel issues of their grantees! Should not administrators of federal dollars concern themselves enough to inquire as to compliance to federal laws regarding racism and sexism, rather than to say it is not their job or problem?

It is time services and research is mandated to have community participation to determine the community's needs and needed solutions. The hiring of community members provides the motivation of vested feelings to the community and better reflects the new face of HIV. The economic benefit of employment contributes to the capacity building toward self-determination in a community. People's lives are improved. Well, I know I made a difference in new standards in the fight against HIV in Indian Country! With many other skins we raised the bar!

A very pietistic mentality exists in Western academia based on linear thinking. Knowledge of people of color has been edited out of the educational systems, and academia is a product of this edited knowledge base.

The institutionalized racism and cultural incompetence is revealed continually. It does not and cannot incorporate a more natural holistic consciousness like that practiced by many Indigenous communities. Getting privileged white people to understand their cultural incompetence and racial bias is most frustrating. This cultural incompetence will always prevent effective service delivery! It will always prevent a real representation of all people of this land.

This case is just one of many across the country that exposes practices that reduce efforts to provide the best care possible for communities. Termination for strong advocacy and dedication is often contrived and buried in false accusations. Racist and sexist motivations dominate and are condoned at the work environments of the university for which I worked and at the government agency overseeing the center. It is the intent of “White Privilege” to create and maintain the artificial barriers to continue racism and sexism in the ivory white towers of academia. The artificial barriers are hidden in the term “comfort zone,” where the issues can be avoided and not addressed because it makes people “uncomfortable”! “Comfort zones” are used to hide behind and as the rationale to fire people that unsettle their “white comfort zones,” saying we do not fit in their environment. They are used to address issues sometime in the future—a future when they dictate when it will be comfortable for themselves, a future that never comes for us! I raised seven children; it has been difficult to provide better for my kids because I always encountered these practices of exclusion. So we went without! The complicity of the institutions of government and academia allow these racist, sexist practices to continue. The pain and suffering of our people is increased by these practices. Let us bring down these bastions of racism! The university and government agency discussed here and other institutions must stop subsidizing racism and sexism! Resources should be returned to our communities. We must continue to demand and investigate the racist and sexist hiring practices of the university and the budget manipulations that take resources from our communities and subsidize bigots!

For our children’s future!

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