



## SERIES: Why Nonprofits Need to Have A Talk About “Diversity”

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*In this special [three-part series](#) on diversity, See3 sat down with Joy Bailey and Derrick Dawson, the co-program coordinators at [Chicago Regional Organization for Antiracism \(ROAR\)](#) to understand how nonprofits, social causes and the providers that serve them, could become more inclusive and more representative of our changing population.*

According to the [Center for American Progress](#), people of color made up nearly one-third of the American workforce, and women made up 47% of the workforce in 2012. That number is expected to grow, and with that comes greater complexities of understanding how to make sure that our workforce is truly representative of this change.

Here's a stone-cold fact: We live in a race-based society. The criminal justice system, health care, schools and other institutions were created with the race construct built in from the very beginning.

As do-gooders, not a day goes by without us seeing social groups, nonprofits and individuals fighting for varying degrees of equality. We witness organizations sending out press releases about their commitment to diversity, and if their budget allows, many begin offering diversity trainings courtesy of the Chief Diversity Officer. But how can a nation be truly committed to diversity when the true meaning of the word often escapes our collective understanding and agreement?

[Merriam-Webster](#) dictionary defines the word “diversity” as:

*the condition of having or being composed of differing elements : variety; especially : the inclusion of different types of people (as people of different races or cultures) in a group or organization.*

By definition, diversity seems all encompassing to include different voices, races, cultures and people. However, we know that diversity is a much more complex construction that takes organizations, people, and nonprofits some getting used to.

Enter [Crossroads Antiracism Organizing & Training](#). Since 1986, Crossroads has worked to dismantle systemic racism and build anti-racist multicultural diversity within institutions and communities nationwide. In 2014, the organization created [Chicago ROAR](#), a regional program that helps institutions connect and engage with the people and organizations that make up its body of constituents. By working with Chicago ROAR, institutions learn how to strategically change policies, structures, practices and shift the organizational culture to be more anti-racist and anti-oppressive.

As a part of See3’s ongoing commitment to diversity and inclusion within our company, we sat down with Chicago ROAR to understand what it truly means to be a “diverse organization” and how we can facilitate that same approach to the way we do business.

### **If we want to be diverse, we have to start at the origins of racism.**

One of the first acts of Congress in 1790 was to decide who can become a naturalized citizen, and written into that [1790 Immigration and Naturalization Act](#) is “free white persons.”

“Whiteness is written into what it means to be a citizen of the United States, and therefore, with that kind of legal construction of who’s really a citizen, then our institutions get set up, whether it be health care institutions, educational institutions, governments, religious institutions...[they all] follow that line of thinking,” explains Joy Bailey, co-program coordinator at Chicago ROAR.

As a result, most of America’s oldest institutions were created to serve white people only or in a superior way. History tells us that there’s always been resistance to racism, and laws have been enacted to try to make our country more racially equitable. However, that racial bias is still baked into the very DNA of our institutions and organizations.

### **We have to understand how institutional racism works.**

For organizations and institutions that want to change, having a concrete understanding of the history of our nation and how systemic racism works is extremely important in being effective and serving its mission.

According to Derrick Dawson, co-program coordinator at Chicago ROAR, institutions often spend a lot of time and energy doing things that are not helpful or effective around diversity issues and inclusion issues because there isn’t an understanding of the history.

If you go to the website of your organization, you will see that similarly to other institutions, you have a core mission to which your stakeholders hold you accountable. Surely, no one would form an organization with glaring inability to deliver on the mission at hand, but that sometimes happens.

**Institutions cannot exist in a bubble.**

Racism is present. Everywhere.

The majority of government institutions, grant-making organizations and nonprofits interact at some point in their lifespan. Whether through public-private partnerships, corporate donations or grants, institutions and nonprofit organizations exist within a larger ecosystem that rely on one another for their very survival. If the voices of certain groups are excluded, how then can institutions claim that they help all people?

"All institutions have inherited this legacy of racism, and therefore, all of our institutions need to address it," Bailey says.

Even if an institution wanted to make certain changes towards a more anti-oppressive way of operating, it would still need the buy-in from its partners in order for there to be transformation across our society. No institution can go at it alone, and the onus is on its leaders to acknowledge the hand they have in perpetuating racism; whether intentionally or unintentionally. We all have to accept this painful part of our nation's history if we're ever truly to avail ourselves to our fullest do-good potential.

**We have to be committed to lasting change.**

As do-gooders, many of us feel the need to address racism in some way, but we often fall short of doing just that because we lack the resources to make an impact.

"Our culture [often] comes up with 'looking good strategies' that aren't well thought out and aren't necessarily effective, but give the illusion of addressing things. Because once you go a little bit deeper, you realize that because it's so baked into our institutions... it becomes a much more complicated situation to get at from a very real way," Dawson says.

Recently, See3's CEO, Michael Hoffman touched upon the challenges of being a more [diverse and inclusive company](#).

For organizations that may not readily have the time, people, or financial resources to bring about change, Chicago ROAR helps them understand that there usually are resources available; and it's often just a matter of reallocation.

"Institutions often feel some sort pressure to address racism in some way but haven't necessarily thought things through to realize that like any other initiative, some resources need to be put behind it," Dawson says. "We don't tell an institution what's wrong, this is what's not working. We say here are the assets that you have."

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Long-term change is a path that takes some time. In fact, for Chicago ROAR, its work with institutions can take place over 10-15 years.

"Racism impacts us all in very powerful ways, in different ways, and that's part of addressing the issue is developing a clear understanding of how it impacts everybody," says Bailey.

It is often said that America is one of the greatest places to live and work. However, in order for our citizens to reach their fullest potential, there needs to be a change with how people of diverse races, cultures, sexes and ideologies are treated; which starts with institutions acknowledging, understanding and accepting the historical shortcomings that have prevented such progress in the past.

***Join us next week for part two of "Why Nonprofits Need to Have a Talk About Diversity" as we delve into the trouble with hiring token employees and how diversity can sometimes be code word for "race."***

Author: Nicole Miles

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## Chicago

4021 N Broadway  
Chicago, IL 60613

PH [\(773\) 784-7333](tel:(773)784-7333)

[info@see3.com](mailto:info@see3.com)



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