

Emptying the White Knapsack

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By [Jaime Grant](#), Contributing Editor, Gender and Sexualities

Students of color at colleges across the country have been organizing for years to foreground their experiences of racism – raising a broad range of issues from campus life, to curriculum, to hiring practices and faculty representation of people of color. At [Kalamazoo College](#), a growing number of students of color are raising key questions about a college’s readiness for meaningful engagement with issues of racism, while students at the [University of Michigan](#) and the [University of California, Los Angeles](#) are organizing against erasure in the wake of legal decisions against affirmative action.

Student organizing has been accompanied by seemingly endless discussions about white privilege and frequent references to [Peggy McIntosh’s](#) 1988 essay, *Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack*, a classic consciousness-raising piece about white privilege.

For many white students, this article is an eye-opener because of its analysis that white people benefit from racist structures and the racist distribution of power and resources in US society every day of our lives. Yet this article remains limited because it offers no direction for its readers after coming to this awareness.

I offer this piece as a follow-up to McIntosh. Once we get past the idea that racism rests with a few prejudiced, hate-filled individuals and accept that all white people uphold a system of racism in our daily choices and actions, there is a lifetime of anti-racist work ahead of us.

I hope this article helps white students – and faculty, staff and administrators – consider our next, pro-active steps in dismantling racism in our communities of higher education. And beyond – I hope this article becomes part of our toolbox in figuring out how to create the workplaces, institutions, neighborhoods and beloved communities to which we aspire.

Emptying the White Knapsack:

Applying Privilege by Redistributing White-Hoarded Power and Resources

- (1) Stop being the first person to talk at every meeting; stop being the person we hear from the most. Listen. Listen more. Listen when you are uncomfortable.
- (2) Support or be of use to projects that are established and led by people of color.
- (3) Stop segregating around race and class so that the only people of color in your life are either service providers or service recipients. Put yourself in a position to have your thinking and your practices challenged by peers of color and low-income peers.
- (4) Stop saying – and especially stop telling your children – that “race doesn’t matter.” Open your eyes to the impacts of racism all around you; point out the ways racism is playing out in your path and help other white people understand their unearned privileges and their attendant responsibility to dismantle racism.

(5) Do conscious succession planning for your leadership position or high paying job so that people of color and lower income people are prepared to assume your position when you leave.

(6) Advocate for social justice hiring in your workplace or community to address the systemic racism that maintains a supermajority of white people in positions of power (board, executive staff, tenured positions, management). Insist that your workforce (especially leadership) mirrors the racial distribution in your community or your constituency.

(7) Help create economically accessible, people of color driven cooperatives in your neighborhood – child care, food, coaching, farmer’s markets, clothing swaps, etc.

(8) Challenge racial profiling and police brutality in your neighborhood, school, township, or city. Interrupt practices you observe. Speak out. Organize.

(9) Support and frequent businesses that are people of color owned.

(10) Challenge racist lending practices in your community.

(11) Advocate for accessible, high quality health care in people of color majority neighborhoods. Insist that the race of the doctors and health care leadership mirrors the race of the people they are serving.

(12) Stop celebrating holidays that glorify racist history; reframe “thanksgiving” and “independence day” so that white children begin to develop critical skills around the way our nation addresses its history of colonialism, slavery and white supremacy.

(13) Buy your home or rent your apartment in a people of color majority neighborhood and instead of advocating for increased policing, advocate for:

1. free or affordable child care and afterschool programs;
2. citizens’ review boards for local police practices;
3. youth sports leagues;
4. visual, performing arts, music and other creative projects;
5. community gardening and access to affordable fresh food;
6. tax abatement for long-term residents of the neighborhood so that they are not pushed out if more whites move in, and property values rise due to racist gentrification.

(14) Send your children to public school and instead of advocating for “zero tolerance” or “bullying” programs that target children of color for suspension and expulsion, advocate for programs that:

1. hire more people of color in leadership positions at school;
2. restructure ‘gifted’ programs that shut out students of color via ‘objective’ criteria;
3. bring creativity and student voice to the fore in the school culture;
4. address trauma driven by racism, sexism and poverty;
5. reclaim storytelling;
6. teach the history of racism and its impacts;
7. provide respite for low-income parents.

(15) Don't expect people of color to be glad you are in their neighborhood, stores or schools. White people often come into people of color majority spaces and make things worse by:

1. increasing policing and incarceration, especially of men and boys;
2. drawing the attention and intervention of the state to families of color;
3. driving up property values and driving out people of color;
4. increasing investment in the neighborhood that "whitens" every existing institution and closes many long-term people of color led enterprises;
5. bringing in businesses that don't reflect the existing culture or community priorities.

(16) Don't think of yourself as "doing good" or "giving back" by addressing racism; understand that you are making reparations but that you will never share the jeopardy that racism presents to your peers of color. You are benefitting from a daily racist "pass."

(17) Campaign for and fund candidates at the local and national level that address racism in local, national and foreign policy.

(18) Organize, teach and challenge other white people to address systemic racism, outlined above.