Discussion Questions

Spring Quarter 2013
Whistling Vivaldi: How Stereotypes Affect Us and What We Can Do

1. Claude Steele says that Whistling Vivaldi is about identity contingencies, or

   the things you have to deal with because you have a given social identity, because you are old, young, gay, a white male, a woman, black, Latino, politically conservative or liberal, diagnosed with bipolar disorder, a cancer patient, and so on. Generally speaking, contingencies are circumstances you have to deal with in order to get what you want or need in a situation. (p.4)

Questions for Discussion:

In what ways can we help students, and assist or encourage others in helping students, to understand aspects that make up their own social identity (e.g. race, disability, social class, gender, sexual orientation, etc.) as well as that of their peers?
2. At the center of Claude Steele’s book is a particular kind of identity contingency—the idea of stereotype threat. He writes

As members of society we have a pretty good idea about a lot of things, including the major groups and identities in society. We could all take out a piece of paper, write down the major stereotypes of those identities, and show a high degree of agreement in what we wrote. This means that whenever we’re in a situation where a bad stereotype about one of our identities could be applied—such as being old, poor, rich, or female—we know it...it is also a threat...And this means that it follows members of the stereotyped group into these situations like a balloon over their heads. (p.5)

Questions for Discussion:

What distortions, deficiencies, assumptions, and historical and cultural omissions do you see influencing students, staff, and faculty at the UW—and contributing to the stereotype threat that particular groups may experience?

How might social identity and stereotype threat influence what resources or support students and staff need at UW?
3. Steele says that racism cannot fully account for the marginalization of students of color on college campuses. Rather, he says, marginalization occurs because of “a concentration of racialized aspects of campus life—racial marginalization, racial segregation of social and academic networks, group underrepresentation in important campus roles, even a racialized organization of curriculum choices, all reflecting, to some degree, the racial organization of the larger society.” (p.26)

Compare this with argument of national bestselling author Beverly Daniel Tatum, author of “Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria.”

Tatum differentiates between active racism—blatant, intentional acts of racial bigotry and discrimination—and passive racism. She says, “Passive racism is more subtle and can be seen in the collusion of laughing when a racist joke is told, of letting exclusionary hiring practices go unchallenged, of accepting as appropriate the omissions of people of color from the curriculum, and of avoiding difficult race-related issues.” (p.11)

Discussion Questions:

Are Steele and Tatum making the same argument about the causes of students’ marginalization on campus?

Do you think that Steele would agree with Tatum that passive racism contributes to the marginalization of students of color on campus?

Do either Steele or Tatum’s argument resonate more with you and, if so, why?
4. Implicit in Claude Steele’s argument, as well as that of Beverly Tatum, is the idea that institutions and people can, often unintentionally, perpetuate stereotypes and inequities.

**Discussion Questions**

Do you agree with this argument? Why?

What benefits might accrue from talking about how systems and institutions that perpetuate inequity--for all of us as individuals, for the groups to which we belong, and for the UW community?
5. Claude Steele calls out segregation in U.S. society saying

_Segregation remains a major feature of American life. The 2000 census shows that the average White American lives in a neighborhood that is 80 percent white and 7 percent black while the average black American lives in a neighborhood that is 33 percent white and 51 percent black. This holds for suburbs as much as cities. What are the implications for students in our present day schools?_

_People, though capable of making decisions and choices, do have a location in society; their lives are located somewhere in its social, economic, and cultural structures and in the networks of relationships that make up society. Being born into a low-income Appalachian family in the hills of Eastern Kentucky is to take life on from a different location in society’s opportunity structure than being born into a high-income family in the northern suburbs of Chicago. Different locations afford people different resources, different access to the “social capital” of skills, knowledge, opportunities, and life chances. Segregation affects location. When people are grouped or segregated on the basis of a characteristic like social class, race or religion, it affects the resources and social capital available to them._ (p.196)

**Questions for Discussion:**

How do we see evidence of segregation-related issues operating in our local community? Within our university?

What are our responsibilities to address segregation and segregation-related issues as employees at a public institution of higher education?
6. Steele writes that stereotype threat can often cause people to feel intense levels of anxiety that, through no fault of their own, can restrict a person from reaching his/her potential. In turn, feeling that you do not belong in a certain space can make it difficult for to remain in that setting, and to sustain your motivation to stay there. (p.111)

**Discussion Questions:**

Have you or someone close to you ever felt that you do not belong somewhere? What impact did that have and what would have helped to make you feel that you belong?

How does segregation relate to underrepresentation? How might segregation impact the makeup of students, staff, and faculty on campus so that certain groups are underrepresented?

What can you do to support people—students, staff, faculty—who may be under stereotype threat, or not feel a sense of belonging, because aspect(s) of their identity are not part of the dominant UAA/program culture? What should UAA strive to do to create an inclusive culture?
7. Let’s think more about Steele’s examples of a few successful strategies to change situational identity contingencies:

- By changing the way you give critical feedback, you can dramatically improve minority students’ motivation and receptiveness.
- By improving a group’s critical mass in a setting, you can improve its members’ trust, comfort, and performance in the setting.
- By simply fostering intergroup conversations among students from different backgrounds, you can improve minority students’ comfort and grades in a setting.
- By allowing students, especially minority students, to affirm their most valued sense of self, you can improve their grades, even for a long time.
- By helping students develop a narrative about the setting that explains their frustrations while projecting positive engagement and success in the setting, you can greatly improve their sense of belonging and achievement—which if done at a critical time could redirect the course of their lives. (p. 216)

Questions for Discussion:

Do you see yourself incorporating any of Steele’s examples in your work?

What other suggestions might help us to ensure that we support all students and staff to achieve their full potential at the UW and within UAA, unrestricted by stereotype threat?