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## **Column: SCSU task force tackles racism**

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*Times Writers Group*

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In her Times Writers Group article last week, Ytmar Santiago suggested our community efforts to respond to racism and discrimination, especially at St. Cloud State University, have resulted in responses that may make us "feel good" but in reality are "all talk" and "no action." She suggests action, not talk, leads to tolerance.

You guessed it. I want to talk about that.

Although it may strike some as oxymoronical (if that's a word) to talk about how some are taking action, especially on the opinion page, such is the truism here.

For almost three years, I have been working with a university group organized by the Faculty Association leadership. The group is to think about how the university can educate employees about what many refer to as issues related to "tolerance" and/or "diversity."

In true "feel-good" form, as Santiago might suggest, the terms tolerance and diversity are, among other things, feel-good terms for one of the central elements of intolerance -- racism.

I have worked with the Committee on Diversity Education, or CODE. It was given the task of finding a training program that could be used to educate faculty members about diversity concerns. More importantly, action was taken to secure funding that will allow the university community, with involvement from the greater St. Cloud community, to move forward on the training.

An important point about this process --• and yes, it does involve more talk - is that attention is given to the dynamics of institutional power and the dynamics of privilege in our society. These things affect all of our attitudes toward other people.

The St. Cloud Times covered stories referencing the Otto Bremer Foundation support given to the university to help assist in efforts to address these difficult concerns. The project, referred to as the Community Anti-Racism Education, or CARE Initiative, is centered on organizing the

## Task force

To this end, a Planning and Design Task Force has been formed to make decisions about how the leadership team will be selected. The leadership team is likely to include more than 20 people, including representatives from faculty, staff and students, along with representation from the larger St. Cloud community. Once the team is selected, it will go through an intensive three-day workshop on anti-racism education.

From there, the plan is to identify people who will become anti-racism trainers. Those people will go through another three-day intensive workshop focused on training people about anti-racism, a kind of "train-the-trainers" event.

At the end of this process, we will have a leadership team representing people from various areas of the campus and the greater community. We also will have a group of anti-racism educators who can offer their training and services to schools, civic groups, businesses or other community groups.

## Looking ahead

Perhaps this committee will earn a central role in campus decision-making. Or it could serve as a resource to assist the university administration, faculty, staff and students. The design is in its initial stages, and these decisions will be made by the leadership team down the road.

The structure, organization and role of that team has been the center of ongoing dialogue. These efforts have focused on systematically reviewing processes that perpetuate power differentials and create conditions that suppress opportunities for people to express their full potential.

What a great ideal. Are there going to be difficulties?• You betcha. Will there be disagreements about how this happens? Of course. Is there one right way to do this? Of course not.

Are there people who have a great deal of knowledge on this topic already? Yes! Are there people who think they know a great deal about this topic who don't have a clue? Yes!

Are there well-intended people, like myself, who are learning more about the dynamics of race, reading and reviewing the work done on race studies? Who thought they knew what racism was all about only to find out being well-intentioned is not enough? Yes, yes and yes.

The importance of the anti-racism work• -- and what sets it apart from other kinds of "diversity" trainings• -- is the simple idea that as an individual it is difficult, if not impossible, to "Just Say No" to racism. You have to look at the systems. This takes active engagement from people throughout the organization or system. For many like myself, this requires you to rethink how you view power and privilege -- a self-examination process that is not

always an easy one.

On the "all talk no action" scale, however, this process constantly reminds me that talk is cheap and actions do speak louder than words.

Mary Clifford's column is published the second Friday of the month.

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