

Bringing Conversations About Racial Equity to Construction Engineering Faculty Meetings

Prof. Meredith Kirkmann, University of Maine

Meredith Kirkmann is an Associate Professor and Program Coordinator of Construction Engineering Technology at the University of Maine. She joined UMaine after working as a geotechnical engineer, construction superintendent, and senior project manager at the Maine Department of Transportation.

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Abstract

During monthly meetings over the 2023-24 academic year, the Construction Engineering Technology (CET) faculty engaged with concepts of racial equity and the impacts that race and systemic whiteness have on higher education, and specifically construction engineering academic programs and professional careers in the field. After participating in years-long learning communities regarding Racial Equity in Higher Education, and co-facilitating two Racial Equity Institute Workshops for faculty, Associate Professor Meredith Kirkmann grew comfortable discussing and engaging with racial equity and race at our predominantly white institution. She deeply engaged with the CET faculty on topics that white people in the USA often find uncomfortable, and led discussions of privilege, dominant narratives, and the norms in education and construction engineering with a critical lens. Discussions included how to create more equitable learning environments for all students by changing classroom structures, assignments, and assessments, and on pushing back against the cultural norms that higher education and construction engineers often consider unchangeable.

Reflecting on the faculty meetings, as well as the outcomes and goals of the conversations, Prof. Kirkmann considered both her personal experience and growth, and interviewed participating colleagues and her planning partner at the teaching center at the University of Maine. Prof. Kirkmann discusses the impact this project had on her and her ongoing projects. These self-reflections and interviews interrogate how the process impacted participants, where we learned and how we changed, and how it felt to engage in an intentional conversation about race in engineering higher education in retrospect.

Literature review

Whiteness and racial inequity in higher education are embedded in the culture of higher education institutions, engineering departments, and the field of construction engineering in the United States [1]. Research has shown that STEM faculty often chose to ignore race even when prompted to specifically consider race in classroom interactions that are racialized [2]. In addition, when faculty members participate in learning workshops about historically marginalized populations and identities, including race and ethnicity, it can lead to improvements in outcomes for their students [3].

The construction field is in line with many fields in the United States, with historically marginalized populations excluded from managerial and professional positions and occupations [4]. Students and professionals of color have been shown to experience explicit racial discrimination while working in construction engineering [5], [6]. It is not startling that students in these historically marginalized racial groups are less likely to choose and remain in construction fields during their professional careers [7].

A literature review [8] on racial disparity in construction found that there were two distinct ideologies that led to racial disparity in construction, meritocracy and colorblindness. Meritocracy and colorblindness combine the ideas that hard work leads to good outcomes for both workers and students, and the ideas that construction is a race-neutral field where work

determines success and there are equal opportunities for all mean that actual disadvantages and discrimination are often ignored or deemphasized in construction and construction education.

The literature review [8] found that only 2.7% of educational organizations and 3.4% of workplace organizations in construction were actively using one of the suggested initiatives from the review (training, courses, interventions, and workshops) to address systematic racism. There is a critical need in the construction engineering field to dismantle the systems that harm students and prevent them from engaging in sustainable construction engineering careers.

Background

The University of Maine is a predominantly white institution, in a predominantly white state.

The fall 2025 Engineering Technology undergraduate student body (consisting of Construction, Mechanical, Survey, and Electrical Engineering Technology majors) was 83.6% White, 5.42% Hispanic/Latino, 2.46% Black/African American, 1.81% two or more ethnicities, 0.82% American Indian/Alaskan Native, 0.82% Asian, 0.82% International, and 4.27% unknown according to published data created from federally reported demographics [9]. These demographics are largely in line with the University of Maine's Maine College of Engineering and Computing demographics, which reports a 82.4% White student body. The entire university reported an undergraduate student body that was 81.4% White during the same time frame.

Maine's 2024 demographic population estimates by race were published by the State of Maine Department of Administrative and Financial Services' State Economist [10]. They estimate that 91.4% of Maine's population is White, 2.5% Black, 2.4% Hispanic/Latino, 2.1% two or more races, 1.5% Asian, and 0.7% American Indian/Alaskan Native.

Students of color are in a visible minority within their classes, academic major cohorts, and within the student body at large. It is likely that these student's experiences at the University of Maine and within the Construction Engineering Technology department are impacted by these factors, and that creating a supportive environment for their learning may require specific factors that an all-white faculty may not be well prepared to provide.

Beginning in Fall 2021, Prof. Kirkmann participated in a 3-year research and learning community at the University of Maine, named REFLeCT. This REFLeCT community was co-led by the director of faculty educational development at the University of Maine's teaching center, and an associate professor in the college of liberal arts and sciences who is the director of education for her program. They facilitated a group of faculty members who were specifically interested in participating in institutional research based learning about racial equity.

This group provided community and a space specifically to center race in conversations, something that had not been done prior to this in Prof. Kirkmann's professional life. This included engaging in scholarly analysis of race data and outcomes at their institution, interrogating higher education's traditional methods of research through the perspective of whiteness and race, and learning about other methods of learning and knowing such as co-created research with research participants and found poetry as research.

One outcome of REFLeCT was the facilitation of Racial Equity Institute Workshops. These workshops were prepared and co-facilitated by Prof. Kirkmann with the two co-leads of

REFLeCT. These four-day workshops for instructors of all levels in higher education at the University of Maine occurred in Summer 2023 and 2024. Helping to prepare and facilitate the workshops was instrumental in preparing Prof. Kirkmann for engaging with topics of race and teaching, and leading these conversations with construction engineering technology faculty. This preparation was necessary both in feeling comfortable with the topics and being able to answer questions and find resources, and with the physical comfort of leading conversations that were sometimes contentious, vulnerable, or awkward. Understanding how Prof. Kirkmann physically reacted to these situations and when she needed a break or could continue with full participation was extremely helpful in planning for and holding the faculty meetings with her colleagues.

Faculty Meetings

During the 2023-2024 academic year, faculty members in the CET department at the University of Maine met monthly specifically to learn about and discuss race, racial equity, the culture in construction engineering and construction engineering education, and the intersections between these wide ranging topics. These meetings replaced one faculty meeting per month, and were specifically set aside to discuss these topics, without any other agenda items.

Prof. Kirkmann supplied an agenda and preparatory readings, podcasts, or other information to all faculty members a week prior to the conversations. She led the conversations and worked to engage participation from all faculty members during each meeting.

Meeting topics included themes that white people in the United States often find uncomfortable and meetings intentionally focused on building comfort with those topics. This included (1) discussions of the privilege and identities of all faculty members, (2) learning and discussion about white supremacy cultural characteristics [1] that have shaped construction engineering and higher education in the United States, (3) dominant narratives in our classrooms and engineering spaces that might be invisible to us until they are interrogated, (4) discussions of creating equitable learning environments by changing classroom structures, assignments, and assessments, and (5) conversations about pushing back against cultural norms that higher education and construction engineers often consider unchangeable.

Methodology

Prof. Kirkmann received IRB approval from the University of Maine's Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects for this study. The study was judged exempt from further review.

Interviews were voluntary, and interviewees chose between three different consent options. 1) Consent to being identified by name in any publications. Comments and quotations may be published with name and identity attached. 2) Do not consent to being identified by name in any publication. Consent to comments and quotations being shared anonymously without name and identity attached. 3) Do not consent to being identified in any publication. Do not consent to comments or quotations being used in any publications with or without name and identity attached.

Risks associated with the study included possible discomfort, as well as political risk due to the politicization of racial equity research in the United States. Prof. Kirkmann discussed these risks and the consent choices with each interviewee. Some chose anonymity while having their

comments and quotations shared, and others stated that they would prefer to be named in this research. Due to some choosing anonymity, all participants were anonymized in order to help anonymize participants who requested anonymity.

During the interviews, Prof. Kirkmann took notes on her computer. She then shared her notes with interview participants, providing the opportunity for clarification, correction, or any additional thoughts or comments that participants wanted to add. In addition, participants were told that they could request any comments be removed from the notes and paper, and they could change their consent choices at any time.

Prof. Kirkmann reviewed her notes as well as her own reflections of the interview in order to collate takeaways from these interviews. She reflected and wrote about the interview experience within a few days in an effort to maintain clarity of her experience.

This research is a participant ethnography with a critical orientation of how people related to conversations about racial equity in CET. Collaborative reflection and sense making was a key part of the process of the meetings as well as the interviews.

Interviews

The director of faculty educational development at the teaching center at the University of Maine, who co-led the original REFLeCT group that Prof. Kirkmann participated in, participated as a partner in planning, but did not participate in the monthly meetings, except for one. She was integral to the preparation of the faculty meeting agendas, to Prof. Kirkmann's personal preparation for each meeting, and to reflections on how each meeting went in order to plan for the next meeting. The interview with the planning partner at the teaching center was informal, and focused on what supporting Prof. Kirkmann during the year of faculty meetings required, and what lessons and outcomes they took from those planning conversations.

During our interview, the director of faculty educational development discussed feeling like Prof. Kirkmann did not need much support, and that from her perspective what was most important was Prof. Kirkmann's feeling of psychological safety and partnership. Support for these conversations, from her point of view, had generally been in providing opportunities over the previous two years for her growth and learning so that she felt capable of leading these conversations herself. The initial intent of having an engineering faculty member participate in a REFLeCT community with liberal arts and sciences faculty and staff was that in the future these programs might be expanded to engineering audiences, and having someone go through the program would be a doorway to that possibility. Having the actual outcome be a year-long series of faculty meetings on racial equity was an ideal outcome to the director.

One major takeaway from the interview was the impact and chain reaction of bringing conversations from the teaching center to faculty that may not choose to attend workshops or communities of practice. The director had spent time in one end-of-year reflection mapping the impact of the original racial equity program (REFLeCT) that she co-lead, tracking who was influenced and how many faculty were impacted apart from the original group that participated in the program. Mapping out the arc of the impact included the original REFLeCT group, the two Racial Equity Institute Workshops that were held at the University of Maine, the year of faculty meetings in the CET department that Prof. Kirkmann held, and a workshop presentation on

Building Competence Toward an Anti-Racist Teaching Practice at the ASEE 2025 Annual Conference & Exposition, which led to a virtual learning community that is ongoing.

The director of faculty education noted the specific challenge in bringing conversations on racial equity to engineering faculty, especially in comparison to other departments as engineering faculty are not as familiar with discussing race and racial equity academically as many liberal arts programs. Preparing for and reflecting on racial equity learning involved targeting the approach to an engineering mindset included thinking about the issues through a problem solving framework instead of a social justice framework. As she stated during the interview, “You are always talking about engineers as problem solvers.” Framing the entire topic of racial equity as a problem that we are in charge of solving was effective for the construction engineering faculty. Figuring out what topics would be effective and not shut down conversation was important, as summed up in the comment below from the interview.

There’s truth in meeting faculty where they are. Start with something where the first step is too big and people are scared or uncomfortable with their own ignorance too quickly. The conversation is hard to reclaim.

She also noted an important factor to the success of these conversations was having the conversations entirely with a single small department, having only faculty members there, and the amount of preparation that Prof. Kirkmann had done by co-leading multi-day Racial Equity Institute Workshops. There are only 5 faculty members within the CET department, which means faculty work together closely, know one another well, and engage deeply with one another. In a larger department it might be easier to disengage from a complicated relationship or conversation because there are many other faculty members to work with. With only 5 faculty members, relationships are important between each faculty member. For the first CET faculty conversation, the director of faculty education was not available. She did attend the second meeting, but afterward she and Prof. Kirkmann discussed having her no longer attend. In our interview, she discussed that having only department faculty present seemed helpful for the conversations going well. The worry of saying something incorrect to someone outside of the department lessened when the conversation was amongst a small faculty group who know each other well and agree to participate in these conversations in good faith.

In discussing the arc of their work together, and the ASEE 2025 Annual Conference & Exposition workshop presentation and their own participation in the ongoing learning community that came out of the workshop, the director stated, “It’s like the punctuation at the end of the sentence. It’s a nice way of bringing closure. A lot of the work that I do feels ephemeral. It makes me think these conversations will continue in some way.”

Interviews of CET faculty participants were wide-ranging conversations framed around a list of questions that were available to the interviewee ahead of time for reflection, and during the conversations they were used to prompt discussion and reflection from the interviewees. All members of the University of Maine CET faculty are white, and with exception of Prof. Kirkmann, all are white men. The interview questions are listed below:

Questions

1. Why did you agree to participate in these discussions about racial equity with our department faculty?

2. What intentional learning about race and racial equity within or outside construction engineering had you participated in before these conversations?
3. Were you uncomfortable agreeing to the conversations and learning specifically about race and racial equity before we started meeting?
4. Were you uncomfortable during the conversations, or while completing the readings or listening to the podcasts? How did any discomfort impact your participation?
5. Why did you or didn't you fully participate in preparation work? Did you ever think about this choice and the fact that you got to make a choice about whether to participate in conversations about racial equity as a place of privilege?
6. What has stayed with you?
7. Can you think of concrete things that you learned about or conversations that were impactful during the year of meetings?
8. Can you see any impact in your teaching, professional, or personal work from these conversations?
9. Prior to these conversations how had you considered your positionality and privilege? After these conversations?

Director, P.E. in the CET department is also the Director of the School of Engineering Technology at the University of Maine. He is a full professor with decades of teaching experience who has engaged in intentional learning about gender equity prior to attending this year long series of faculty meetings about racial equity, however, discussions about racial equity were new to him. Asked about why he agreed to participate in these conversations, Director discussed that he thought they would be beneficial to him, to the CET program, and to students. In addition to interest, knowing that Prof. Kirkmann cares about the subject and bringing the discussion to the faculty was important to him, and knowing that she would be the subject matter expert made it easy. "It's good to look at curriculum and what we're doing with a different lens. Trying to look at it through the lens of racial equity only improves teaching and curriculum and learning."

Director spoke of enjoying the readings and podcasts as they were interesting and engaging and the preparation and series of conversations were good background information and a good opportunity to practice using the information. Discussing what has stayed with him, and what specifically he has noticed since the conversations, Director talked about the general ideas; that we have to acknowledge and learn about different cultural norms and make sure everyone is included specifically. He is more aware of the racial makeup of groups he is in, he noted that at our predominantly white institution conversations are often steered by white people and he's paying more attention to how attendees of color perceive the conversation. In meetings with colleagues or with students, he is more aware if there are only a few people of color and spends effort working to make their experience better by building relationships, intentionally including people in conversation, and checking in on student's experience while avoiding singling them out.

One participant is an end of career professor, Professor, P.E., who has decades of teaching experience. He is also new to planned conversations about race and racial equity, but is not new to learning about and thinking about race. Professor has an adopted son of Latino heritage, which has shaped his desire to learn about and understand the experience of people of color in Maine

and in the US. Asked about why he agreed to participate in discussions on racial equity, Professor responded that in 2023 when the conversations started it was easy to see changes in the United States with regard to race, with forward positive movement toward racial equity losing ground. As one example, “I was horrified when I saw” the Supreme Court remove affirmative action programs for admittance to universities in the US.

In discussion about whether he was uncomfortable agreeing to have conversations around race and racial equity, he reflected that he had been in the workplace long enough to know these conversations would be important. He included that knowing his colleagues made a difference in his comfort, saying that he would be more reflective and reticent to speak up with other groups, but with his colleagues he was comfortable, “Making a remark that might be inappropriate felt more safe and I could contribute. We knew each other enough.”

He also spoke about the personal impact of going through an exercise to interrogate our own privilege within the faculty group. He discussed how actively thinking about and discussing his own race and privilege (including education, sexual orientation, gender and gender identity, childhood, income, housing stability, food security, etc.), and comparing these things to the privilege his own son has, and how society judges and perceives both of them based on race and other aspects of privilege were important and that he continued to reflect on this after the series of conversations ended.

In the year and a half since the series of conversations officially concluded, Professor stated that he is more aware and intentional about creating effective learning environments for his students of color. Specifically thinking of an example where he incorrectly used only one last name for a Latino student who goes by two last names as a part of his culture, Professor talked about how he thought about that interaction in terms of providing a positive experience for a student, and about apologizing for making a mistake, and making sure to correct it. While these things may have been similar to how he could have handled the situation in the past, now he is thinking specifically in terms of racial equity, and working to make sure that this student does not shut down because “one old white guy up there is talking and doesn’t know what he’s talking about. I mean. Get the name right first, honest to God.” This reflection and self-interrogation was common in Professor’s reflection on his own experience with the conversations about racial equity in the CET faculty. He ended by talking about how it was a good experience and that while he might have attended a workshop in a different circumstance, he would not have had the chance to ask questions, participate in discussion, and understand demographics and what his colleagues think about race in detail. “We wouldn’t have done this in the working world. In academia we have space to participate in things like this.”

Two participants were early career faculty members, with two to three years of experience teaching prior to participating in the department conversations about race. Both faculty members agreed to participate in these faculty conversations largely because Prof. Kirkmann explicitly asked for their participation. They had differing levels of experience and comfort explicitly discussing race, but both were more familiar and comfortable being in diverse racial groups socially and professionally as opposed to explicitly discussing and deconstructing racial equity and systemic racism in work environments. Both early career faculty member’s first training on racial equity and diversity were at the University of Maine including new faculty orientation or other workshops or panels on teaching pedagogy or diversity.

Both members talked about specific moments or feelings of discomfort before or during the meetings. One specified that he prefers to listen and take significant time thinking about topics before offering his opinion. Engaging quickly in conversations with colleagues where he was asked to share his thoughts was sometimes uncomfortable. He tended to sit and listen and add thoughts only when he felt like he fully understood his point of view. This faculty member mentioned that he often took the conversations from the faculty group to his friend group and continued them in social conversations where he felt more comfortable being open and learning. The other faculty member stated that while he also preferred to listen instead of sharing his own opinions he was largely comfortable, and there was only one moment where he shut down when the group was discussing Worship of the Written Word as a characteristic of white supremacy culture [1]. The interview discussing this discomfort was very useful to Prof. Kirkmann as she plans other conversations about race with different learning communities. Having such thoughtful feedback on what felt uncomfortable or ineffective was valuable.

Both early career faculty members mentioned that prioritizing the preparation and in one case the conversations was difficult due to busyness and time constraints. This was a stumbling block for doing the readings and thoughtfully listening to the podcasts.

When asked about what has stayed with them from these conversations, one early career faculty member discussed that in our program we only have a few Black students, and a few Latino students. He stated that he has spent more time thinking about how to interact with them to create better learning experiences and help everyone learn content, not just with regards to the student's race, but actively thinking about how to present material in more diverse ways so that students can more effectively learn. Later in the interview he discussed his own mindset and making sure to relate to students while acknowledging their diverse backgrounds. Fully understanding his own privilege and acknowledging that many students may have reasons that they are not submitting homework, having a hard time being motivated to learn or show up, or that they are still developing skills does not mean that they will not be successful. Instead we can help them develop these skills and be successful in construction engineering, and the field needs them.

The other early career faculty member similarly mentioned that these conversations stayed relevant in his teaching as he is more mindful about how he responds to students with diverse racial identities and pays attention to how they are doing. He deeply connected these conversations to his LGBTQ+ identity and thought through different lenses about how discomfort can change interactions and relationships on a construction job site or in a classroom. Putting these conversations in context of the privilege wheel that we worked on and discussed as faculty was important to him, and helped him see where he had not realized that he had privilege, making it easier to notice when students might have challenges that impact their learning.

This faculty member discussed that these racial equity conversations and going through discomfort with having them was okay, and it left our faculty group in a better place. Whereas before he might have avoided a difficult conversation with our faculty group, he now feels more comfortable knowing that we can sit down and discuss difficult topics.

Synthesized Findings

CET faculty members mentioned various motivations for engaging in conversations about racial equity including interest, recognition that it would provide a lens for pedagogical learning and

important departmental change, and acknowledgement that this work was important to Prof. Kirkmann.

Personal identities shaped the experiences of faculty members throughout the conversations. Individual backgrounds included multiracial experiences at work, school, and in their own families. LGBTQ+ identity and other broad systems of privilege helped faculty situate their own perspectives within the frameworks of racial equity during these faculty meetings.

Some faculty members described moments of discomfort including hesitation to engage in conversation, share their own perspectives, or resistance to some of the ways that we discussed and learned about racial equity during the meetings. A shared trust and the close relationships between the five members of the CET faculty helped strengthen the ability to have these conversations, and seemed integral to the success of this and other difficult conversations within the CET faculty group.

The year of conversations and engagement with learning about racial equity had lasting impacts upon participants. Faculty members described changes in their instructional practices to specifically support students of color, correcting missteps and acknowledging them, and diversifying instructional approaches.

Outcomes from this work

During the ASEE 2025 Annual Conference & Exposition, Prof. Kirkmann and her partner, the director of faculty education at the University of Maine's teaching center, led a 90-minute workshop in the DEI track on Building Competence Toward an Anti-Racist Teaching Practice. The conversations prepared for and held specifically with engineering faculty in the CET department helped Prof. Kirkmann and her partner target their workshop for an engineer-specific audience.

The interview with an early career colleague about this discomfort and shutting down was helpful to Prof. Kirkmann as she prepares to have other conversations about the characteristics of white supremacy culture and how they can be considered in engineering education. Having such open conversations about what worked and what could have worked better is invaluable in her reflective practice. One centering exercise that was used with CET faculty discussions, and that Prof. Kirkmann has utilized in other groups is pausing and sharing words from Lama Rod Owens.

When white folks hear me or others speak of white supremacy, there is a tendency to hear this critique as a personal attack rather than an invitation to understand how whiteness in America is and remains an expression of dominance if there is not effort to interrogate this expression [11].

Following the ASEE 2025 Annual Conference & Exposition workshop, Prof. Kirkmann organized and led an ongoing Learning Community amongst workshop participants and their own institution's instructors about Racial Equity and Teaching. Prof. Kirkmann organized meetings every 3 weeks throughout the 2025-2026 academic year to continue the work of sharing resources and creating community and a place for discussion and growth regarding racial equity topics specifically in engineering, and within participants' own teaching.

In the Construction Engineering Technology department, one goal is to continue improving community and belongingness in our student body both before and as we work to broaden our demographic outreach and admission. We acknowledge that bringing in a more diverse student body without preparing for that diversity may not lead to improved outcomes for our students. These conversations and the individual pedagogical changes that members have made in their classrooms are likely having positive impacts on the student body, though in ways that are often hard to measure.

Conclusions

For Prof. Kirkmann's comfort, having the years of experience discussing race openly and intentionally with her REFLeCT colleagues, working to plan and facilitate two-days long institutes specifically about race, and preparing for the CET faculty conversations with a colleague from outside the department providing perspective were all instrumental in providing the psychological comfort needed to lead these conversations. Having a small group where there was trust and an acknowledgement of good intentions was also integral to success.

In order to make positive changes in culture in our academic departments and in the construction and construction engineering community at large, faculty members must be willing to interrogate their own biases and engage in changing them. This work is often difficult and emotionally vulnerable, it requires purposeful facilitation and trust between faculty members. Creating time and space for this learning, and creating psychological safety around these topics can be valuable in contributing to personal change for both participants and leaders of these discussions. These changes can be difficult, and require significant time and resources, however, the impact on student outcomes is important.

Practicing discussing racial equity in our discipline, and discussing our own assumptions, higher education's cultural whiteness, and power and privilege throughout the higher education system can help us to interrogate how and why we participate in or work to dismantle systems that are harming students, and engage thoughtfully in change to help students succeed.

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