



Campus Racism 101

On the subject of being black on a white college campus, professor (and poet) Nikki Giovanni offers this freshman course on how to ace it

By Nikki Giovanni

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There is a bumper sticker that reads: "Too bad ignorance isn't painful." I like that. But ignorance is. We just seldom attribute the pain to it or even recognize it when we see it. Like the postcard on my corkboard. It shows a young man in a very hip jacket smoking a cigarette. In the background is a high school with the American flag waving. The caption says: "Too cool for school. Yet too stupid for the real world." Out of

the mouth of the young man is a bubble enclosing the words "Maybe I'll start a band." There could be a postcard showing a jock in a uniform saying "I don't need school. I'm going to the NFL or NBA." Or one showing a young man or woman studying and a group of young people saying "So you want to be white." Or something equally demeaning. We need to quit it.

I am a professor of English at Virginia Tech. I've been here for four years, though for only two years with academic rank. I am tenured, which means I have a

teaching position for life, a rarity on a predominantly white campus. Whether from malice or ignorance, people who think I should be at a predominantly black institutions will say, "Why are you at Tech?" Because it's here. And so are black students. But even if black students weren't here, it's painfully obvious that this nation and this world cannot allow white students to go through higher education without interacting with blacks in authoritative positions. It is equally clear that predominantly black colleges cannot

accommodate the number of black students who want and need an education.

Is it difficult to attend a predominantly white college? Compared to what? Being passed over for promotion because you lack credential? Being turned down for jobs because you are not college-educated? Joining the armed forces or going to jail because you cannot find an alternative to the streets? Let's have a little perspective here. Where can you go and what can you do that frees you from interacting with the white

American mentality? You're going to interact; the only question is, will you be in some control of yourself and your actions, or will you be controlled by others? I'm going to recommend control.

What's the difference between prison and college? They both prescribe your behavior for a given period of time. They both allow you to read books and develop your writing. They both give you time alone to think and time with your peers to talk about issues. But four years of prison doesn't give you a passport to greater