

Anti-Racist Programmatic and Professional Development

Programmatic Approaches to Antiracist Writing Program Policy

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In our 2016 *WPA* symposium essay, “The Role of Composition Programs in De-Normalizing Whiteness in the University,” we discussed discouraging statistics about degree attainment for students of color, despite an overall increase in enrollment nationwide. We proposed that one way to reach these students is through efforts to combat normative whiteness and by working to “cultivate, nurture, and support curricular innovations or other pedagogical interventions that make room for nontraditional and/or disadvantaged minority students in the writing classroom” (49–50). But, as García de Müeller and Ruiz wrote in “Race, Silence, and Writing Program Administration” two years later, many white WPAs don’t even perceive race to be an issue in their programs in the first place. García de Müeller and Ruiz found that “white/Caucasian participants were more likely to respond that their institution, writing program, and personal strategies were very or extremely effective in addressing issues of race and ethnicity” (25). Therefore, while the pedagogical innovations we argued for in 2016 are important, it is clear that fundamental change cannot happen without deliberate antiracist writing program policies that prioritize antiracism at an institutional level. Just as the Black Lives Matter movement has shown that change will not happen until police departments accept comprehensive policy changes, so too must WPAs intentionally integrate antiracism into their programs to create a culture that both supports and incentivizes faculty and graduate students to pursue antiracist initiatives.

According to the Anti-Racist Digital Library, antiracism can be defined as “the active process of identifying, challenging, and changing the values, structures and behaviors that perpetuate individual and systemic racism.” In order to *change the values* of racism in writing programs across the country, it is imperative WPAs facilitate not just passive agreement with antiracism but widespread participation in explicitly antiracist initiatives. One challenge for implementing antiracist policies, though (and there are many), is a lack of literature on race and WPA work. For example, while there is research in writing studies more broadly on ways to analyze race as it relates to writing instruction (see Clary-Lemon or Prendergast, for instance), it is also the case that many of the interventions our field has

made with regard to race are thanks in large part to the unequal labor of scholars of color (Kynard). Moreover, as critical race theorists have worked diligently in our field to interrogate these inequalities (Smitherman and Villanueva; Gilyard; Jones Royster and Williams), and others like Inoue and Poe or Perryman-Clark and Craig have done very important work in this area, it is still the case that, as García de Müller and Ruiz write, “discourse about race in writing programs has been very scarce” (20). And this dearth of scholarship has led to some unfortunate realities in the lived experiences of WPAs of color throughout the country. García de Müller and Ruiz’s survey, for instance, asked participants to reflect on their institutions, writing programs, and “their own personal strategies when dealing with issues of race” (23). Many respondents indicated that while they knew of institution-wide initiatives focused on combating racism, they were at a loss with regard to implementing them in their own writing classrooms due to a lack of departmental and/or programmatic support. Moreover, respondents indicated that strategies for combating racism in writing programs happened more or less at the *individual level* as opposed to extending out of explicit, formalized practices. Thus, we want to reiterate that it is important for WPAs to make a distinction between work done by individuals to combat racism and formal, program-wide policies that are explicitly focused on achieving antiracist goals. To us, the most important antiracist policy recommendation that programs need to change is in curriculum development. However, we see this as only the beginning of what we hope becomes a larger, more comprehensive list of policy recommendations.

One of the most fundamental components of fostering a programmatic approach to antiracism is to decenter whiteness within the freshman writing curriculum. Even in the most diverse and progressive graduate schools and writing programs, people still emphasize whiteness. Often there are no insidious motives or an explicit intent to promote it; rather, we teach what we have learned. For decades in our field, people did not prioritize other voices and that lack of priority is demonstrated in the institutional structures in many departments around the country (see, for instance, Ruiz and Baca). Therefore, to move forward, we cannot simply rely on individuals to change their course materials. We need to implement changes via policy decisions.

Curriculum policy changes can happen in a few different ways. First, WPAs could start mandating specific antiracist readings in their first-year composition courses, or they could ask all instructors to include a certain number of readings from people of color in their materials. The premise of such an exercise is not that mandating diversity changes attitudes. It often doesn’t. However, it does reflect the values of the program. It also initiates

students to materials they would not necessarily read outside of such provisions, and it leads instructors toward (re)considering what materials they choose in their courses. Such policies can also function as a reflexive nudge when students/instructors are stressed, or less contemplative, or focusing on other aspects of their courses. We can look to the Antiracist Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) Toolkit from Syracuse University as an example of this work. While the toolkit is a list of *tools* and not policies per se, we are inspired by its explicit focus on subverting what they describe as an “academic discourse that upholds white supremacist ideologies of language.” Included in their sample syllabus is an extensive reading list of potential course materials, as well as links to websites of Black-owned bookstores and other businesses in which students can economically support Black communities. In particular, Syracuse’s WAC toolkit is designed to open up a space for teachers to “rethink pedagogical assumptions about writing and confront implicit biases that can emerge in writing assignments and assessment.” What makes Syracuse’s antiracist WAC toolkit a model example of the kind of work we are calling for is the way it frames antiracist writing pedagogy in terms of broader shifts in program values, not just a set of innovative teaching strategies.

In addition to working with course curricula, writing programs and writing program administrators need to make more concerted efforts on explicitly antiracist professional development. Consider, for instance, antiracist writing pedagogy workshops that focus on developing and integrating more diverse texts into the curriculum. These workshops often focus on what texts we value and devalue, the importance of multicultural texts, how to use diverse readings in classroom activities, and more. Most importantly, by formalizing these workshops in faculty orientations, program-wide colloquia, and other mechanisms by which WPAs work to develop writing curriculum, writing programs would signal antiracist values to the community and further support faculty and graduate students in implementing antiracism into their composition courses. And there are already some wonderful examples throughout the country of these kinds of antiracist writing pedagogy workshops, such as professional development events at the University of Washington, Michigan State University, Middlebury College, Loyola University at Chicago, and more. Specifically, the most promising professional development initiatives that enact the kinds of goals we propose are the ones that stress *action* and include multiple stakeholders, like, for instance, the Writing and Rhetoric Program at Middlebury College, who invited antiracism expert Frankie Condon to give a talk about “actionable anti-racist commitments” for all teachers of writing.

While it may seem obvious that professional development can help faculty and graduate students implement antiracist initiatives, García de Müeller and Ruiz’s research indicates that these kinds of practices are not as widespread as we may think. Or worse, workshops on race and pedagogy exist in a reactionary capacity, developed in response to the most recent racial atrocity. Our point is simply that when antiracism becomes a matter of policy, professional development can be more intentionally designed to support the “challenging” and “changing” of values that is so crucial for antiracist agendas. It integrates antiracism into a broader program-wide commitment, normalizing antiracism as part and parcel of its program features—in other words, it’s baked into the program ethos.

It is also important to note that these kinds of formalized, structural changes to writing curricula are not easy to make. For many WPAs around the country, it is easier merely to *suggest*, *align with*, or vocally *support* such curricular improvements, rather than pushing the envelope or risking upsetting colleagues and upper administrators. Yet, as Frankie Condon and Vershawn Ashante Young state, “So long as racism persists in any form—from the micro-aggressions of racism 2.0 to implicit and explicit structural forms of disenfranchisement—those of us who teach and who are committed to the creation of an increasingly just society will need to choose whether and how we address racism in our classrooms” (10). Maybe the most privileged of us, especially those on the tenure-track, and/or those of us who don’t wear the pain of racism on their bodies, can choose the painless route and rationalize it as “easier” or by telling ourselves, “I’ll do better after I get tenure.” We are here to state, unequivocally: Choosing such a route is a form of complicity. WPAs need to step up to do the work of antiracism. These kinds of broad, program-wide administrative decisions to alter, mandate, and/or change the curriculum to better suit 21st century students are bound to be controversial, but it is imperative. If we don’t take this approach, we risk failing all of our students and instructors, and we risk further alienating and isolating minoritized students and colleagues who have already been doing this kind of work without institutional support.

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