

Anti-Racist Leadership and Representation

Why So Few of US: Addressing Larger Issues of Systemic Exclusions That Limit the Numbers of Black Writing Program Administrators

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It is impossible to begin to quantify the trauma of the current national racial unrest.¹ Such unprecedented upsurges in accounts and coverage of racial violence both on and off campuses, in the past five to seven years,² have had multiple direct and indirect implications for students, faculty and Writing Program Administrators (WPAs). There have been a range of disciplinary-based responses from letters, panels and position statements to teach-ins, videos and resources designed to address anti-racist programmatic and larger institutional practices. Within these efforts many WPAs have evaluated the roles that race and racialized curriculum play in reinscribing existing systems of white privilege. Yet, in the midst of all of these attempts at creating equitable learning spaces for students, few have considered the inequitable systems that exist for Black faculty as well as other faculty of color (FOC)³ coming to and through institutions of higher education. When we consider the gradual attrition of Blacks from graduate study, to being hired to faculty appointments, to being tenured and promoted, and ultimately to being selected for administrative appointments, it becomes clear why there is a need for, as Staci Perryman-Clark (2016) put it, “interrogating how whiteness functions institutionally” (25). It is through first acknowledging, and then changing these inequitable systemic practices that real sustainable change can be made towards better disciplinary racial equity.

In this piece I examine two specific structural challenges faced by Black faculty. Racist practices implicit and perpetuated in hiring practices and racialized practices in the creation, and epistemological exclusion that happens through the selection and evaluation of research/scholarly material are but two of the factors that clearly contribute to why there are so few of us Black WPAs. While these are only two practices of many designed to maintain majority structures of power, in exploring them, I seek to shed light on what Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2015) called “the white innocence game.”⁴ Within this “game” lies the false assumption that disciplinary or institutional practices are somehow either isolated or neutral. When

this assumption is challenged by those experiencing discrimination, it becomes the individual's burden to describe, educate or change instead of casting the gaze more broadly to question discriminatory racialized practices systemically.

OUR LIMITED STATISTICS

If we consider the statistics of Black faculty who enter, matriculate through post baccalaureate programs, and earn doctorate degrees, we begin with somewhat diminished numbers. The National Center for Educational Statistics (2018) reports that students of color (SOC) make up roughly 12%⁵ of earned doctorates. When we further focus this investigation to consider Black faculty, the National Center for Educational Statistics (2018) reports that of all full-time faculty, in degree-granting postsecondary institutions, only three percent were Black males and three percent Black females. Even though there are more and more situations where WPAs are hired at various levels, when these statistics are examined in terms of traditional academic ranks, the percentages are equally as few with 73% white and 10% Black assistant professors, which then is reduced to 4% Black full professors—compared to 80% white full professors. These statistics simply give numbers for what we already know, and that is that the majority of institutions of higher education are made up of significantly larger numbers of white faculty than Black. This explains statistically why there are so few of us, but what it does not fully explain is why these statistics have been the same since 2011, while the statistics of Blacks students enrolled in and graduating from graduate programs have slowly increased.

HIRING PRACTICES

One possible explanation for no real statistical change in Black faculty in institutions of higher education is the range of systemic discriminatory hiring practices cloaked in language like “fit” or “a lack of qualified applicants.” There are many studies that have explored systemic discriminatory hiring practices. In their article, “‘We Are All for Diversity, but . . .’: How Faculty Hiring Committees Reproduce Whiteness and Practical Suggestions for How They Can Change,” Özlem Sensoy and Robin DiAngelo (2017) examined how the stages of the academic search process are “illustrative [of] practices that serve to block greater diversification of academic units. They conclude that these practices protect the inherent Whiteness of HWCUs.” In his article “The Facade of Fit in Faculty Search Processes,” Damani K. White-Lewis (2020) explored the concept of “fit” which is often used to describe why one faculty member is chosen over another, in a hiring

situation. They conclude that “the use of the term fit is problematic for two reasons: (1) its application to understanding and justifying hiring decisions is severely overstated, and (2) it obscures the abundance of idiosyncratic preferences throughout the entire hiring process, which perpetuate racial aversion, neutrality, and convenience” (850). Additionally, Ash, Hill, Risdon, et al. (2020) discussed the language used to evaluate faculty of color during the hiring process. They explain how “Deficit thinking is found in hiring practices when white administrators use the phrase “a lack of qualified candidates” when referring to people of color . . . Shifting the blame of hiring people of color away from the institution and placing it on people of color and their lack of being qualified . . . “ (p. 12). They ultimately call for “shared power across racial lines [with]...all members enlightened to the awareness of systemic racism that has perpetuated systems that marginalize people groups based on race” (p. 23). Because the answers to addressing issues of hiring within institutions of higher education are as rhetorically situated as the culture of the individual institution, there is no “solution” for dismantling the systemic racialized institutional practices that continue to perpetuate existing majority structures. However, one step to addressing these matters lies in a conclusion drawn by Pauline E. Kays when she states that “if search committees are part of the diverse hiring picture, diversification of faculty . . . cannot occur without their eyes being opened to the various biases, assumptions, and stereotypes that influence their perceptions and judgments” (p. 69).

While many universities have checks and balances for hiring practices to make them more equitable, the issue described above, while systemic, can be basically viewed as the judgement of individuals who assume that the language used and decisions made are somehow neutral. Faculty often say that they are following the “regular,” “normal,” or “traditional” hiring procedures. Conducting searches in the ways that they have always done. Or committee members treat having attended their diversity training workshop as if it is an inoculation against discriminatory practices of the normal hiring process or against their own racialized idiosyncratic preferences. Unless consciously addressed directly, by each individual institution, by each individual search committee member, for each individual search, this false assumption of neutrality will mean hiring practices will continue to be systematic barriers to greater numbers of Black scholars entering institutions of higher education.

EPISTEMOLOGICAL EXCLUSION

Directly related to hiring practices, because in the hiring process candidates are judged by their scholarly activities, is the concept of what is valued in terms of scholarship and knowledge and what is not. For many African-American faculty members, there is often a battle to have scholarship on race and/or scholarship that utilizes non-traditional research methods, structures for reporting, and/or publication venues recognized as legitimate. When we choose to engage in research subjects or use “nontraditional” methodologies that are empowering and transformational for ourselves and our communities, our work and chosen publication venues are structurally and systematically questioned and often devalued.

This experience of having one’s scholarship questioned, devalued or even deemed illegitimate by members of the academy is known as epistemological exclusion,⁶ and the work involved defending one’s credibility and/or scholarship is a form of invisible labor for FOC that is particularly pernicious. In “Epistemic Exclusion: Scholar(ly) Devaluation That Marginalizes Faculty of Color,” a “study [that] investigates the multiple ways in which epistemic exclusion occurs, as well as identifies some of the ways in which it creates negative outcomes for faculty of color,” Settles, Jones, Buchanan, and Dotson (2020) describe the foundations of epistemological exclusion as “racial prejudice toward FOC who are viewed as illegitimate and without credibility as scholars. This is based in stereotypes of Black, Latinx, and Native Americans as unintelligent, lazy, and getting unearned advantages” (2). The insidious nature of epistemological exclusion is that it impacts all aspects of Black faculty’s experiences in higher education from choices about subjects and approaches to research in graduate programs to hiring committees’ evaluation of publication types and venues (as earlier mentioned often described in language of deficit), to internal and external reviews of scholarship in tenure and promotion.

Because epistemological exclusion is so tightly ingrained in the structure of higher education, Settles, Jones, Buchanan, and Dotson (2020) suggest that there is a two-part solution. One part is to review disciplinary biased and racialized practices. Next, with a great awareness of epistemic exclusionary practices,

institutions can then work to shift their disciplinary and institutional norms and values, and subsequently their policies and practices. Institutions can make explicit the value and contribution made by scholarship on marginalized groups, communities, and global populations and acknowledge how scholarship that addresses social problems is

core to the mission of higher education. Doing so would then necessitate a shift in policies and practices, particularly those concerning performance reviews, tenure, and promotion. (p. 12)

While some journals in writing studies, rhetoric and writing, and writing program administration have been working to disrupt disciplinary biased and racialized publication practices there is still such a long way to go. Accepting a few non-traditional, or racially-based publications does not change the ongoing perception that this work is either not or not equally as “scholarly” as what has been established as the “tradition.” What needs to be done, articulated in the CCCC Black Technical and Professional Communication Position Statement is the disruption of practices of epistemological exclusion by “advocating for their [Black Scholars] inclusion in the body of mainstream disciplinary literature; and carving out the methodological, theoretical, and practical space that will enable other Black scholars in the field to see and do such work (<https://cccc.ncte.org/cccc/black-technical-professional-communication>). This concept was further developed by Cecilia Shelton, in a Black Technical and Professional Communication panel, where she advocates what she calls a techné of marginality which she describes as:

a methodological framework that through its notions of work and workplace, expands the field of vision for technical communicators [and I would add more broadly scholars in writing studies, rhetoric and writing, and writing program administration] solving twenty-first century problems, and embraces cultural rhetorical practices as valuable ways of knowing and doingA techné of marginality . . . offers theoretical and methodological resources . . . to move beyond cultural awareness and even cultural competence toward the integration of cultural[It] is more than a collection of topical inquiries into issues affecting Black people [but also includes] doing theoretical, methodological and pedagogical work So that work like ours that has been excluded in the past, can be centered and amplified moving forward. (1:30 PM Eastern [0:43:44] transcript <https://vtechworks.lib.vt.edu/bitstream/handle/10919/101571/BlackTechComm%20Transcript.pdf?sequence=6&isAllowed=y>)

CONCLUSION

In 2019, as part of the *WPA: Writing Program Administration* forty-year reflection, I wrote a piece that reviewed the journal’s publications on or about race, gender, ability, language diversity, and sexual orientation. I ended that piece by stating that “there are still gaps in inclusivity—little has

been published that directly explores the intersections of . . . the racialized assumptions pervasive in WPA work and perspectives of WPAs of color” (102). In reflection, I would correct my concluding statement to not only focus on addressing the gaps in the research and perspective of WPAs of color but also to more broadly focus on systemic racial practices..

NOTES

1. The documented dehumanizing, traumatizing, and even lethal injustices recently represented by the deaths of Ahmaud Arbery, Rayshard Brooks, Tony McDade, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd along with the many, many other undocumented accounts, as well as the national and international responses to these events.

2. The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education has a running list of Campus Racial Incidents from the present and dating back well before 2014—<https://www.jbhe.com/incidents/> Recent Campus Racial Incidents in the News: A Bibliography (Last updated 2016). https://www.du.edu/diversity-inclusion/media/documents/campusracialincidents_bibliography.pdf. See also: “After 2016 election, campus hate crimes seemed to jump. Here’s what the data tell us.” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from <https://www.chronicle.com/article/After-2016-Election-Campus/242577>. The American Council on Education’s “Campus Inclusion and Freedom of Expression: Hateful Incidents on Campus” <https://www.acenet.edu/Documents/To-The-Point-Hateful-Incidents.pdf>

3. While I am focusing this piece on Black faculty, I am fully aware of the fact that the points that I describe are also true for a range of faculty of color. I address some these issues to more broadly include faculty of color in “Nothing New: Systemic Invisibility, Epistemological Exclusion and Faculty and Administrators of Color,” which is forthcoming in the edited volume *Making Administrative Work Visible: Data-Driven Approaches to Understanding the Labor of Writing Program Administration*.

4. According to Bonilla-Silva (2015), “The white innocence game begins with the assumption that these spaces are racially neutral, but that assumption is false! HWCUs were 100% white institutions until very recently and that white history shaped them in profound ways.”

5. It is important to note that not all faculty have earned PhDs and also that not all PhDs go into faculty positions. Two other considerations that should be acknowledged is that not all WPA positions are situated as faculty nor are they all in tenure-based trajectories. My goal in these statistics is to provide some sense of the numbers and percentages at various stages of the educational “pipeline.”

6. “imported from Black feminist theorists to feminist philosophy, epistemic exclusion questions normative beliefs about what forms of knowledge (epistemol-

ogy) are valued and which producers of knowledge are deemed legitimate . . .” (Settles, Jones, Buchanan and Dotson 2).

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