Your Contract Grading Ain't It

Sherri Craig

In 2020, many writing programs had fallen for the trap of addressing anti-racist efforts by crafting quickly composed affirmations of #BlackLivesMatter and condemning the violent murders of Black citizens. In such statements, authors proclaimed a commitment to diversity and other such buzzwords like equity and inclusion. Some incorporated measurable actions, but most provided the same vague boilerplate language around fairness in their writing programs as their writing studies peers. Position statements in 2020 responded to calls for anti-racist action with contract grading trainings, assessments, and discussions. An unfortunate and inevitable conclusion. I want to be clear, I'm not arguing against contract grading. I believe that it is an acceptable method of assessment and that there are worthwhile reasons for using it in writing programs across the country and the world. Asao Inoue and others make strong arguments for why embracing the approach creates new opportunities for student success, but why does contract grading have to be labeled as anti-racist or pro-Black? Based on my experiences in the classroom, both as teacher and student, contract grading expresses anti-Black racism in unforeseen and deeply felt ways.

Such interests in contract grading ignore the anti-Black racism rampant in many English departments and IWPs. The interests also ignore the systemic racism present at universities and the utter lack of approaches to such "equitable" grading practices across the curriculum—an absence that leads to student confusion and a lack of preparation and transfer. I took these views to my department during a forum on building a more equitable writing program where the only solution presented was to encourage contract grading practices throughout the first-year writing curriculum based on the experiences of a few instructors. I became frustrated. Being in a conversation with a small group of well-meaning white people arguing for the removal of traditional assessment practices to express their equitable views towards their BIPOC students was surprising. Had my colleagues never considered the big picture? White savior complex concerns aside, for now, the prevailing idea seemed to be that it was possible to read a few articles, engage in a couple of conversations, and magically implement a collaboratively designed grading contract to a group of students who were not only new to the university, but who would be beginning their college careers in the middle of a global pandemic with the stress and anxiety of their targeted Black bodies. These same students who would be bringing 12 plus

years of traditional writing assessment practices and would be held to similar standards throughout our university, were to suddenly embrace a new set of grading practices comfortably. These few BIPOC students were to trust their white teachers that completing an agreed upon number of tasks in their new journeys would satisfy evaluation in the course. How? I was frustrated. This was NOT the answer. Contract grading might make my colleagues feel good and ease the guilty burden of using practices with deep white supremacist origins in other areas of their courses, but it felt like a trap to me.

The department wanted me, a pre-tenure Black woman, to tell my students, most of whom were white, that grades were oppressive and inherently racist. That no matter what the common practice at the university was, in my classroom, my one locally controlled space with 25 students, they would be evaluated differently—in a way that valued their process and not the product and that desired to recognize their individuality, voice, and writing skills—with no attention to the expectations outside of our course. I am supposed to convince my students that their secondary school teachers had it wrong. The standardized testing system had it wrong. The direct placement test had it wrong. That every other writing evaluative space and opportunity and instructor had it wrong. That I, the young Black woman they had no knowledge of or trust for, was in fact correct and we would assess our writing the right way—the anti-racist way. Further, that by doing so, I could prove to them, and to the 1-2 Black students I might have that semester, that I was committed to equality in my classroom while existing in a program that still performed annual assessments, course and instructor evaluations, adjunct labor, and tenure and promotion protocols (all of which are arguably also rooted in white supremacy). So no. Contract grading ain't it. It ain't the answer to anti-racist practices in writing programs. It is low hanging fruit that does the most injustice to our Black students, to our Black faculty because it attempts to convince them that the university cares for their lives and their experiences. We might be able to control our courses or our collection of courses in a writing program, but we cannot correct the violence and the potential for violence in our universities, on the streets, in our own homes.

Sherri Craig is assistant professor of professional and technical writing at Virginia Tech University where she specializes in teaching diversity and inclusion through business and non-profit writing courses. Much of her research centers upon the experiences of Black women in their academic and industry careers and their professionalization and mentorship. Her work can be found in *WPA: Writing Program Administration* and at SparkActivism.com.