

Collaboration at the Center: Anti-Racist Writing Program Architecture at California State University Dominguez Hills

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In 2015, California State University Dominguez Hills—the most racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse of the CSU’s sprawling 23 campuses—hired a writing across the curriculum coordinator, a position that had never before existed. The hire was part of an initiative funded by the Office of the Provost in an effort to improve writing instruction and build a true culture of writing at CSUDH, where longstanding narratives typically constructed our predominantly local, Los Angeles students as academically “deficient” and even incapable of “writing a proper sentence.” Those narratives came as no surprise, but for the new WAC coordinator (Siskanna Naynaha), the fact that the university would hire a dedicated, 12-month position to disrupt that narrative and transform writing instruction and student writing success was thrilling, inspiring, and, yes, also terrifying in its scope. In 2018, the English department hired a new faculty member with a specialization in composition and rhetoric (Mara Lee Grayson), signaling the institution’s ongoing commitment to building that culture of writing and improving writing outcomes for our students. Here, the co-authors discuss how the halting development of the WAC program—grounded in principles and practices of social justice—led to the creation of CSUDH’s first dedicated writing center (WC) and describe how the WC and WAC program have collaborated to develop an explicitly anti-racist writing program architecture on our campus.

In her first moves as WAC coordinator, Siskanna took the helm of the University Writing Committee (formerly the Writing Competency Committee) and developed the WAC program’s *Statement of Mission, Vision, and Values*:

Mission: The mission of the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) Program is to draw upon our students’ greatest strengths—their diverse educational, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds—to cultivate a robust culture of writing at CSUDH, and so to facilitate the creation, integration, and synthesis of critical writing experiences both across the curriculum and throughout students’ time at CSUDH.

Vision: The vision of the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) Program is that CSUDH students will use rhetorically forceful and effective writing to transform their own lives, their communities, and their world to help create a more socially just and sustainable future for all.

Core Values: The WAC Program will work daily to help build, deepen, and sustain a culture of writing at CSUDH that is:

- **Socially just**
- **Accessible** to all
- **Collaborative** in methods and approach
- Academically **rigorous**
- Educationally and personally **transformative**
- **Accountable** to all stakeholders

When the statement was ratified by the University Writing Committee (UWC), it seemed that things were off to an auspicious start. However, the newness of the WAC program and the WAC coordinator position created complications. While Siskanna labored to design and implement WAC programming, pressing exigencies continually cropped up: the desire to institute a free-standing writing center separate from the learning and testing center, which offered writing tutoring but did not incorporate disciplinary approaches to writing pedagogy; the need to update the Early Start English (ESE)/Summer Bridge curriculum; and, following statewide mandates that eliminated outdated, inequitable placement exams and remediation requirements, the necessity to revise the first-year composition (FYC) curriculum to align with the revised ESE curriculum. Without a firmly established WAC Program, Siskanna was tapped for leadership roles in these efforts, turning the program's development into a rash of fits and starts.

With Mara Lee's hire, that burden began to ease. She came in just as the newly-revised FYC curriculum rolled out, and Siskanna was freer to refocus on WAC priorities. Then, in spring 2019, Siskanna was given 48 hours to draft a proposal for a free-standing writing center, to be run by disciplinary faculty, as part of the university's annual budget prioritizing process. Though the timeline was daunting and WAC priorities once again temporarily sidelined, a golden opportunity was presented: If the university would fund a writing center, then the mission, vision, and values of the of the WAC program—including firmly anchoring the development of the new writing center in a social justice framework—could become a collaborative effort that engaged faculty members, programs, and units across campus, including the UWC, the WAC program, the new writing center, the revised

FYC and ESE programs, and the English graduate program, which was slated to begin curricular revision the following year.

The proposal was funded and Siskanna took on the role of interim writing center director. The first two semesters included successes and challenges, but things essentially unfolded as planned. However, when Siskanna was forced to take family medical leave, Mara Lee stepped into the role of interim director. It was a rapid and unexpected shift, but Mara Lee had been part of the WC from its inception, and her work examining rhetorics of race, racism, and white supremacy in writing studies and education ensured the seamless continuation and deepening of our shared vision for the WC. In the following semesters, we saw additional changes to writing instruction campus-wide, not to mention a global pandemic, remote instruction, and nationwide anti-racist uprisings. Below, we discuss how we leveraged our collaboration in this kairoic moment to draw attention to anti-racist writing pedagogy and make additional shifts in writing program architecture across campus. We tell the rest of this story not from an imagined ending but from somewhere in the middle, closer, we hope, to its beginning than its conclusion, with recognition that our work remains in flux and dependent upon our ongoing collaboration as well as institutional support.

BUILDING AN ANTI-RACIST WRITING CENTER

The metaphor of architecture reminds us that “material, logistical, and rhetorical elements of a writing program” help “anchor a program to the ground and keep it standing (White-Farham and Finer 4). When we launched the WC in summer of 2019, we occupied a borrowed space in the library with no technological infrastructure and had no stable funding beyond the first year. If writing centers are “liminal spaces” as so many have marked before—noting our institutional positions as simultaneously “privileged and illegitimate” (Denny 41)—our writing center sprouted in a space that was liminal par excellence.

Financial struggles abound. Due to increasing enrollment, the supplemental instruction program was no longer able to staff supported sections of FYC, and grant funding for the graduate student support center expired. The demise of these programs coincided with the WC’s creation, leading to both resistance to the WC and additional pressure to succeed. Fortunately, as the university’s gaze turned toward the WC, so did resources. Over the next year, we were given a new space and we received approval to conduct a search for a director. We hired student and faculty tutors, purchased specialized software, and launched a website.

Writing programs are “ideological entities” (Gunner 7), and, often, the ideologies that undergird writing centers reflect the white cultural and linguistic supremacy of academe (Greenfield and Rowan; Lockett). Knowing that anti-racist work is active and foundational, not additive, we were clear about the theories and pedagogies that would define our praxis. We invited faculty writing professionals to identify areas where they would contribute and engaged graduate and undergraduate writing associates in readings of composition and writing center scholarship to understand our approach to tutoring.

For both the WAC Program and the WC, our anti-racist mission was “built from a critical framework that acknowledges and examines the ways in which language and text represent, reinforce, or resist ideology.” In tutor preparation, we emphasized self-efficacy, awareness of multiple literacies and academic discourses (Horner), and the critical understanding of multiple Englishes (Canagarajah). We deemphasized “grammar” and notions of “correctness” and “error,” focusing instead on rhetorical effectiveness, rhetorical flexibility, and writerly choice. We encouraged staff members to explore how their positionalities impacted their perspectives on language, composition, education, and tutor-student interaction. Knowing that professional development workshops “need to model the very practices they promote” (Artze-Vega et al. 168), we made sure to model this in our interactions with tutors and other stakeholders.

To combat the deficit-model frameworks that often undergird how faculty (and, by extension, students and tutors) talk about student writers, particularly writers of marginalized racial formations, we knew we needed to do some of the “reframing” work Mya Poe describes: By avoiding “an achievement gap frame” and focusing on the varied “expectations teachers and students bring to rhetorical situations across the curriculum” (95), we helped tutors develop an assets-based approach to working with students across disciplines. Because we encouraged self-efficacy, we discouraged instructors from mandating tutoring and offered in-class information sessions to highlight the benefits of writing tutoring. These sessions also showed students how to access the WC, a practical yet important function on our commuter campus. To accommodate students’ varied schedules, we offered Saturday sessions and piloted online tutoring, which expanded rapidly when campus closed in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Not to say that everything went smoothly or even that everyone in the WC was on board. Many faculty (and, thereby, students), preoccupied by whitely concerns about grammar and mechanics, saw the WC as a “fix-it [shop]” designed “to acculturate marginalized students” (Alvarez 87), and the ghosts of the defunct supplemental instruction and graduate academic

support programs haunted the WC. Students requested appointments for someone to “fix” their grammar. Others brought in papers cluttered with red ink, explaining that their professor had mandated the visit because, as the lament often went: “My writing isn’t good.” Similar requests came from instructors, and, when we tried to negotiate a student-centered and anti-racist approach, we were often reminded that the “other tutoring center” used to do it. These obstacles required that we actively and persistently challenge the deficit model undergirding so much writing instruction on campus.

SPREADING THE WORD

Alexandria Lockett likens writing centers to “academic ghettos” for those “whose performance of academic discourse has been evaluated by authorities as an obstacle to their self-sufficiency and social mobility” (2). As interim WC director, Mara Lee worked to challenge that ghettoized perception through meetings with faculty, visits to Academic Senate, and town halls. Conversations that arose following the killing of George Floyd and subsequent Black Lives Matter protests in summer 2020 presented the opportunity to be more explicit about our anti-racist approach in the WC, ESE, FYC, and the WAC Program.

In collaboration with WC staff and with input from Siskanna, Mara Lee formalized our *Statement of Philosophy and Commitment to Antiracism*, detailing how each of the center’s guiding principles was reflected in practice. Summer professional development for tutors began with discussion of this document, but we wanted to ensure that this work would not be happening *only* in the WC. One unintended consequence of writing centers that employ “diverse methods of transforming students’ engagement with writing and communication” is that “students may not want to ‘leave the hood,’ regardless of how others stigmatize this learning place” (Lockett 2). If this was one of those “points of leverage where even small changes will affect the entire system” (Melzer 76), our collaboration in this time and place could shift perspectives on writing across the university.

We circulated the statement, and, gradually, more people understood that our approach was intentional, grounded in our discipline, and tied to the university’s commitment to educational equity. We then turned back to the composition committee, on which we both serve, which oversees the English department’s FYC program. We suggested the removal of an outdated, racist reference to “Standard Academic English” from the sample syllabus provided to instructors, pointing to the WC’s statement of anti-racism as precedent. Committee members agreed and, when fall semester began, an updated syllabus was distributed. Two years earlier, we’d had neither momentum nor consensus to make this change.

THINKING AHEAD

Our work continues: In fall 2020, Mara Lee led workshops for instructors on assignment design, genre, and commenting on writing, all of which emphasized anti-racist approaches to instruction and assessment. In spring, Siskanna led a faculty learning community aimed at actualizing departments' statements of solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement and anti-racist writing pedagogy.

This exemplifies our approach to collaboration: We are clear about our ideas, we build upon what we've already accomplished, and we communicate a shared vision across campus. Importantly, collaboration distributes work across budgets. The challenges we've faced reflect long-standing dynamics within the supersystem of the California State University, which is often at the forefront of writing initiatives (Bazerman; White) while we find ourselves constrained by limited resources. We imagine this dynamic is familiar to WPAs in general.

There is too much work to tackle on our own. The systemic and ideological changes anti-racism requires collaboration and coalition. Though the writing center's anti-racist approach has gotten some attention recently, it wouldn't exist if the foundation for this work hadn't been laid by the WAC program, persistent efforts by the University Writing Committee and the FYC program, and deepening structural and budgetary commitments from Academic Affairs. Ongoing collaboration—and a shared anti-racist vision and purpose—is the center, and without it, the Center would not hold.

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