

Telling It Like It Is: A Narrative Account of Designing a Race and Ethnicity Requirement at a PWI in the Middle of Black Lives Matter

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The 2020 Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement and protests following the murder of Black individuals by law enforcement produced an immediate response across higher education, from the deluge of formal statements to attempts to include anti-racist practices. The responses from our primarily white institution (PWI) exemplify the fraught nature of these initiatives when undertaken by faculty of color. Even as institutions are compelled to assess their complicity in the systemic racism that undergirds violence toward Blacks, resistance to policy and pedagogical shifts remain palpable. We narrate our experiences here to identify the complexities of speaking back and initiating change at a PWI, and how a race and ethnicity (R&E) requirement revealed the disparity between the status quo and institutional commitments in the wake of BLM.

In the spring of 2020, we, two early-career, untenured, WPAs worked with a senior team of experts in diversity, inclusion, and ethnic studies to develop a proposal for an R&E requirement as one method of meeting institutional goals for diversity and inclusion.¹ The team was mostly composed of faculty of color, including ourselves (serving as WPAs in our respective programs of literature and professional writing). By harnessing our curricular expertise as WPAs, we proposed that all students would take a writing course with approved outcomes related to race, racism, and ethnic diversity prior to graduation.

We recognized that such a requirement is just a single step toward inclusion and remediating the long history of PWIs privileging Eurocentric and colonialist forms of knowledge. A race and ethnicity requirement alone does not decrease racism and increase anti-racist practices; however, its implementation acknowledges the roles that systemic racism, white privilege, and culturally-based prejudice play in marginalizing diverse experiences.

We viewed this requirement as a bureaucratically complex, but ultimately necessary move toward more inclusive pedagogical practices—practices that have been successfully implemented throughout the state and normalized elsewhere since the 1990s. Our proposal argued that such a requirement would be vital at our university, where “race and racism inform all encounters on campus and in our curriculum,” and that following the

institutional “emphasis on diversity and inclusivity as a method of attracting and retaining students” such a requirement is simply “overdue.”

For some, this requirement was a logical step toward the diversification of knowledge. It would complement pre-existing writing courses in interdisciplinary ethnic studies programs and align with the work already accomplished by our mentors and colleagues. We remain tremendously grateful for these responses and commitments.

Our experiences fielding the other three common responses exemplify racial battle fatigue, which refers to the aggregate psychological and physiological stressors triggered by racism within institutions that center whiteness and devalue the work and expertise of faculty of color, particularly Black faculty (Smith 2004; Hughes 2019). We use racial battle fatigue as a framework to articulate the misalignment between widespread positive responses to BLM versus the limitations of allyship when the status quo entails disengagement from race-related issues.

We identify these responses as follows:

- (1) **Hands in the cookie jar:** immediate attempts by academic units without pre-existing experience or interest teaching in these areas to stake out a claim to race-based and anti-racist pedagogy rather than prioritizing the experiences of faculty already working in these areas (largely BIPOC); this extends not from an eagerness to learn about these topics, but from concerns about missing out on any possible revenue generated by this requirement.
- (2) **Same ol', same ol':** the refusal to take the proposal seriously and creatively engage with its implementation, followed by comments that the requirement is too complicated, unnecessary, and expensive.
- (3) **Not enough melanin:** the realization that the longstanding lack of BIPOC faculty and faculty who can instruct in these areas might actually be an impediment toward institutional progress (despite numerous climate surveys, institutional mandates, and working groups that previously identified this issue), and embarrassment that the homogeneity of the professoriate would be laid bare by the requirement's implementation.

The proposal's development was atypical and informal, and developed on a volunteer basis rather than through a normative committee or formal structures. This approach was necessary due to the lack of a standing senate committee to address issues on race and diversity.² This glaring omission speaks to systemic issues and furthers the racial battle fatigue experienced by BIPOC faculty. As a solution to the above three responses and outcry

over the R&E proposal's informal development, the faculty senate created a temporary task-force to consider the proposal alongside other antiracist strategies. This solution takes a weaker position (i.e. less official) to address the aggregate systemic issues identified in the original proposal, and risks undermining the research, advocacy, and expertise of BIPOC faculty and white accomplices involved in developing the requirement. The task force's temporary nature coupled with its membership criteria hampers their ability to address systemic issues both within the R&E proposal and beyond.³

We are left grappling with how this attempt to address systemic racism reproduced numerous racial stressors. For faculty of color, this process placed racial battle fatigue at the nexus of the institutional discussions and debates in the months to come. Many faculty, including white accomplices and experts, engaged with the R&E proposal thoughtfully during committee meetings, offering support and knowledge while deferring to expertise of BIPOC. Yet these contributions could not temper the suspicion, indifference, and uncollegial resistance that followed via informal complaints to upper administrators from the academic units who benefit from the status quo, nor the microaggressions that devalue the work of those who teach writing about race and racism at a PWI.

Our recommendation to other WPAs at PWIs would be to remain aware that academic and program proposals follow a very standardized and routine process through the institutional review structure, which is often reviewed by individuals lacking expertise and experiential awareness needed to foster antiracist initiatives. Working instead with higher level administrators who may, at the very least, see these initiatives as beneficial for recruitment and retention can potentially bypass these pathways altogether, or imbue these proposals with the authority necessary to disrupt the status quo and establish a new institutional ethos.

NOTES

1. CWU has received the Diversity Higher Education Excellence in Diversity (HEED) Award six out of the last seven years, with the most recent award in 2020.

2. A request for a standing senate committee of this nature was formally proposed in 2019 and never implemented.

3. As with other senate committees, this task-force is composed of one representative from each College. However, this standardized approach to membership is not equitable in this case when there is a profound lack of spaces where Faculty of Color can have their experiential knowledge taken seriously. It thus works to limit the participation of faculty of color under the guise of equality or equal representation.

REFERENCES

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