

Reimagining the Possibilities: A Narrative Account of a Journey Toward Anti-Racist Administration

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The summer of 2020 marked one of the most significant cultural changes in the way many Americans talk and think about race. With the death of George Floyd and others, Americans took to the streets to protest police brutality and use of excessive force on and against Black bodies. The politics of change often move slowly. Rhetoric does not always equate to change; however, this time something different occurred. It seemed as though this time, things were different.

As BLM (Black Lives Matter) movements mounted in city after city, I began to wonder what these calls for change would do and specifically, what, if anything, did this kairotic moment mean for higher education? A stream of institutions put forth statements in support of BLM and anti-racist action initiatives. One thing was clear to me, the tide was changing and perhaps the systemic racist policies that have prevailed in the walls of institutions of higher education for so long, might actually meet their reckoning.

As a Black writing program administrator, I knew I needed to do something. Many of the first generation college students that enter the first year writing program at my institution are Black and Brown students. Therefore, I felt a responsibility to reconsider the values of the program.

I knew the time was now. The then current political and cultural movements made the moment ripe with opportunities to support pedagogies that reflected tenets of anti-racism both in curriculum and the administration of the program. As a first step, I crafted a statement of BLM solidarity and sent it to my departmental faculty as well as my part-time faculty. I wanted my colleagues to know that as a program we stood in alliance with the movement. Additionally, I posted the statement on the first-year writing program's departmental website page. In it, I stated:

The first-year writing Program in the Department of Rhetoric and Writing stands in solidarity with our Black American community, and any marginalized group, seeking social justice reform. As a program, we are dedicated to making sure our instructors and students have the resources they need for success within the classroom environment. Creating a more inclusive and equitable environment is one of our many goals. Likewise, inherent in our program's value system and the scholarship of our discipline is a deep passion to remove the

tenacious grip of systemic, institutionalized racism that continues to ravage the lives of so many within our country. As a program, we know there is work to do, and we, as educators, have a significant role to play.

Although the statement acknowledged the need for making the program a more equitable environment for students, I was not convinced it went far enough, mainly I questioned whether or not it would inspire faculty to act or change their approach to teaching. I was well aware that a statement alone, while good, and certainly a step in the right direction, was not going to demonstrate the kind of actions needed.

Equally, I shared the same concern for another statement I had the opportunity to co-author. Like so many other institutions in the state, mine was no different in making pledges and commitments to becoming more inclusive environments. The dean of my college asked me and a faculty member in the Department of History to craft our college's anti-racist statement. We worked together and produced a document that unlike my solidarity statement for the first-year writing program, the college statement included several action items. Writing this statement with another colleague helped me think more mindfully about what the fruits of a statement should actually accomplish. Discussing and writing helped us to each engage more critically with the words "we support" or "we stand in solidarity" with BLM and to build on anti-racist pedagogy that would inform praxis in classrooms.

Still, even though I worked on these two documents, I was hesitant and unsure how to proceed beyond giving faculty members statements. To find out what others were doing to build a more anti-racist writing program, I decided to attend the 2020 CWPA summer workshops designed to help faculty think through ways of approaching anti-racist projects and initiatives in their programs. As a new writing program administrator, I was excited to have the chance to find out how others were planning to administer or spearhead anti-racist goals or outcomes within their programs.

Once the workshops ended, I sent the president of CWPA an email and thanked him for providing opportunities for folks to engage in discussions about anti-racist teaching and administration. He responded with an invitation to join a WPA Task Force. The charge was to revise the *WPA Outcomes Statement 3.0* to better reflect an anti-racist focus. I remember thinking and saying to him, "I have only been a WPA for a few months." He responded, reminding me that a novice voice might be something the task force needs.

Moreover, the opportunities I was able to secure over the summer helped give me perspective about developing a stronger and more robust

anti-racist first-year writing program. I was beginning to grow in my own understanding of what it means to be an anti-racist teacher; however, these experiences ultimately lead me to question, what does anti-racist administration look like?

To answer that question, I went back to my dissertation research. In it, I identified Administrative Rhetorical Mindfulness as the emergent theme from my qualitative study of the experiences of ten WPAs attempting to help prepare part-time faculty to teach writing online. One of the key phrases WPAs consistently articulated or used to describe their roles was the desire to “to do more.” Like those WPAs in my research, the current moment requires us, those managing writing programs, to do more to ensure that our students learn to move beyond conventional notions about writing and language standards. Furthermore, perhaps one way to foster anti-racist administration is to cultivate an ethos around leadership that attempts to build community and harness a level of awareness or openness to the possibilities of change. We must give ourselves permission to push against the grain. Just as there is no single standard of English, there is no single or silver bullet for administering anti-racist administration; however, through intentional teaching praxis and becoming more mindful administrators, we can help to dismantle some of the curricular and policy barriers that have done harm to our students and faculty.

WORK CITED

Dryer, Dylan B., Darsie Bowden, Beth Brunk-Chavez, Susanmarie Harrington, Bump Halbritter, and Kathleen Blake Yancey. *Revising FYC Outcomes for a Multimodal, Digitally Composed World: The WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition (Version 3.0)*. CWPA, *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, vol. 38, no. 1, 2014, pp. 129–43.

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