

Countering Equivocation: The Moves Used to Thwart Anti-Racism Work

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Stockton University's First-Year Studies Program (FRST), an interdisciplinary program that oversees first-year courses in writing, critical thinking and reading, and low-level mathematics, is considering implementing program-wide anti-racist classroom policies. Stockton is a public, 4-year, PWI. The majority of first-year students take two or more courses in our program, which has multiple full-time dedicated faculty members, although the majority of our course sections are taught by adjunct faculty members. Our courses have over 3,000 student enrollments per academic year. Our attention to re-imagining faculty's classroom policies—such as attendance, participation, and late work—is an attempt to move away from systemically racist structures like surveillance culture and to prevent withdrawals or failures resulting from course structure and design. Although moving towards an anti-racist program involves changes at every level of activity, re-imagining classroom policies seems like one important step towards dismantling the systemic ways students of color are harmed through, for example, higher rates of withdrawal/failure from program courses. As sample data points, according to the average over five years, 2014–2019, white students are 2 to 5% less likely than Black or Hispanic students to need to repeat the for-credit FRST critical thinking or writing courses after their first try—either due to withdrawing from the course or from earning less than the university-mandated C grade. Asian and white students are 4 to 6% less likely to need to repeat after their first try at our for-credit developmental-level class in math than Black or Hispanic students. These internal data points have documented racial disparities in our program and communicated the need for changes, but data is only one reason to implement anti-racist policies. While data can often be persuasive for some stakeholders, data should not be reason alone to prioritize and value anti-racism within a program. A program-wide commitment to anti-racism invites faculty to acknowledge the ways that classroom policies are always complicit in racial formations.

Indeed, the question of priority and commitment to anti-racism was at the core of our initial discussions among program faculty about implementing program-level anti-racist policies. Namely, this essay functions to briefly define the ways in which faculty pushed back or sought to resist the program-wide anti-racist project. We identify three major themes that

have emerged during our initial planning discussions: (a) concerns about not preparing students for the habits and “positive behaviors” needed for college and professional success; (b) concerns about limiting faculty’s flexibility and academic freedom; and (c) inquiries about how such moves can intersect with other inequalities. Resistance in each of these areas involved advocating for seemingly beneficial or widely accepted ideas, but in ways that practically served to dilute anti-racist efforts or to prevent the program from moving ahead with a proposed policy change. In other words, across these themes we see the co-opting of progressive values of freedom and fairness as a way to re-center whiteness. The following sections explore these concerns and offer initial responses.

SURVEILLANCE CULTURE AND PUNITIVE PUNISHMENTS

Among the concerns posed by program members was that the overtures toward anti-racist classroom policies would elide policies that faculty felt encouraged “positive behaviors” from students. Program faculty worried that without punitive policies focused on attendance, deadlines and late work, the learning process would be disrupted, and students would not adapt to habits perceived as necessary for academic or professional success. These concerns are associated with politics of respectability (Higginbotham) that believe good manners and adherence to hegemonic codes of conduct can garner status for Black and Brown people. They are also associated with neoliberal notions of the university as enculturating students in what are perceived as the norms of the workplace, through classroom management that aims at having students internalize self-regulation of procedures that will make them well-suited for labor, especially in positions that value obedience (Agostinone-Wilson).

Policies that seek to modify student behaviors cannot be easily separated from a desire from faculty to surveil, micromanage, and control students’ bodies. Certainly, Foucault has noted that schools primarily function to maintain discipline; moreover, such systems of surveillance have an outsized and disproportional impact on Black and Brown students. For Carla Shedd, the convergence of public education with the technologies of criminal justice generates a “universal carceral apparatus” that socializes Black people to expect the criminalization of their behaviors and to learn to navigate constant surveillance of their behaviors. Patricia Hill Collins likewise observes that systems of surveillance often produce differential racial outcomes where disciplinary figures—she points particular attention to teachers—are put in a position to exercise power selectively: “the power to see and overlook, to greet and ignore. . .” (66). Hill Collins is clear that this is

an issue regardless of an individual teacher's intentions: the system of surveillance and discipline, itself, will reproduce racial disparities.

A movement towards anti-racist policies would, thus, necessarily involve dismantling policies that surveil student behaviors and discipline students for infractions. These policies reproduce carceral imperatives or what Jeffrey Moro refers to more bluntly as “cop shit”: “any pedagogical technique or technology that presumes an adversarial relationship between students and teachers.” As Moro points out, “cop shit undoubtedly reaches its *sine qua non* in K–12 classroom” and indeed Shedd and Hill Collins are working within that context, but the desire for punitive policies persist in higher education. Compulsory attendance, total bans on any technology, embarrassing punishments (e.g. confiscating a phone or locking late arrivals out), and unnecessary penalizations for late work to teach lessons about deadlines contribute to coercive relationships with students and harm students of color who already navigate a world that surveils and criminalizes their bodies.

FLEXIBILITY AND ACADEMIC FREEDOM

Faculty in the program also expressed the desire to offer flexibility in the rollout of program-wide policies so that program members can intermingle anti-racist policies with their own teaching philosophies and pedagogical approaches. Part of this line of thinking involved faculty members who expressed that if their policies seemed to work for them and their students in the past, they should be able to continue to use them—especially if there appeared to be no race disparities in their final grades. Similarly, in a more overt resistance to anti-racist policies, some faculty questioned whether anti-racist program-wide policies violate program member's academic freedom.

A desire for flexibility and acknowledgement of instructors' expertise are reasonable, generally speaking. Indeed, the CCCC Position Statement on Preparing Teachers of Writing acknowledges that programs benefit from writing instructors who can “contribute their disciplinary expertise to improve their departments and institutions.” Certainly, an effective program will encourage program members to play to their strengths and share expertise to improve the program. The FRST program remains committed to such collaboration and faculty input. However, calls for flexibility and academic freedom can also function to give faculty license to continue to apply pedagogical approaches that seek to maintain white epistemologies.

Calls for academic freedom in this context are particularly untenable. Mary Boland, in her exploration of how the tenets of academic freedom apply to the administration of writing programs, notes that academic free-

dom “relies, at base, on the notion of a subject matter about which knowledge can be pursued” and allows “scholars to professionalize by forming self-regulating ‘communities of competent enquirers’ engaged in the pursuit of knowledge within those particular communities” (Haskell 44–45 qtd in Boland 34–35). The problem, then, with calls for academic freedom in this context is that there is no (reputable) scholarly community or body of scholarship to call upon to support the idea of race-neutral classroom policies that invariably uphold whiteness.

Drawing upon the infamous pushback to UT Austin’s English 306, “Writing about Difference” course, Boland observes that at the heart of the resistance was framing the writing subject as politically neutral, a belief that emerges outside of composition scholarship. Responding poignantly to these claims, Brodkey bemoans positions from faculty “who know nothing about the theory, research, and practice of teaching composition . . .” (Brodkey 186) and yet make ill-informed presumptions about the subject of writing. In fact, calls for “academic freedom” might better reflect *anti-intellectual* sentiments that seek, as Susan Searls Giroux argues, to “[enable] (a still overwhelmingly white and male) full-time faculty to research and teach as they please, without critical regard for the normative, institutional, and politically consequential assumptions that inevitably issue from their scholarly activities” (321). In-field researchers, thus, must also be held accountable for anti-intellectual tendencies that seek to uphold race-neutral or post-racial realities in academia.

INTERSECTIONAL POLICIES

As we discussed anti-racist policies, faculty members emphasized the need to expand our gaze because issues are also intersectional. For example, program members recognized that attendance policies that harm students of color should be changed, and that changing those policies would also benefit others, like students with children. We are still negotiating intersectionality as part of our anti-racist work. There was tension in the discussion between (a) pointing out that anti-racist policies can benefit many students (in part for rhetorical purposes, to pull other program members on board) and (b) prioritizing anti-racism.

For instance, the co-authors of this essay worked on a statement to frame online program discussion. We encourage faculty to, “Improve at identifying where our past or current policies or practices favor white, patriarchal, middle or upper class, able-bodied, and/or neurotypical epistemologies.” As we drafted, one co-author added “introverted/extroverted students.” The other co-author argued that “white, patriarchal, able-bodied

epistemologies” would capture class and neurodiversity and suggested leaving out less cogent issues. We agreed that intersectional expansion diluted the anti-racism work, but we did not initially agree on whether to continue to list “class,” for instance. This example illustrates how two program members grappled with how referencing intersectionality in its continued discussion would impact how the program conducted anti-racism work.

On one hand, how can we ignore intersectionality? Kimberlé Crenshaw’s argument remains persuasive, “The problem with identity politics is not that it fails to transcend difference . . . but rather . . . that it frequently conflates or ignores intragroup differences” (1242). However, intersectionality discourse can also be used to derail or dilute anti-racist progress and be co-opted by neoliberalism, as argued by researchers like Sirma Bilge (407). Jason Rodriguez and Kendralin Freman, in “‘Your focus on race is narrow and exclusive’: The Derailment of Anti-Racist Work through Discourses of Intersectionality and Diversity,” explore how whiteness was recentered, and people of color re-marginalized, when a campus anti-racism discussion became about diversity. As Bilge explains, “Those who argue that there is no need to argue about racial oppression because such oppression is never ‘purely’ racial are treating intersectionality in the abstract as a directive of universal application, for the specific purpose of suppressing discussion of racial oppression” (407). A program that seeks to move forward with anti-racist changes must resist the co-option of intersectionality discourse to derail action or re-center other issues.

To meet anti-racist priorities, we must center anti-racism work.

CONCLUSION

Much like Frankie Condon and Vershawn Ashanti Young in their introduction to *Performing Antiracist Teaching*, the co-authors admit that “rage tempts us” (7). We drafted this essay after a series of meetings where with every sign of progress, there came new moves to halt the efforts. Exploring these moves through writing this essay has been helpful to understand the contours of the problems we’re facing—and how to address them. We can now recognize that our program’s tactics of resistance seem tethered by a common theme: namely, the co-opting of seemingly well-meaning neoliberal conceptions of encouraging good habits, flexibility, academic freedom, and intersectionality to give license to inaction.

For Stockton’s FRST program, some resistance was expected, yet the degree and kind of pushback to program-wide anti-racist policies in these initial meetings was surprising. At the close of the first semester of discussions, the push towards anti-racism in the program was at a standstill—it

was clear that these discussions needed to be restarted, from the ground up, in the following semester. In preparation for renewed discussions, program members created a shared document with resources that included readings (both scholarly and popular), videos, and podcasts from which we encouraged faculty to read a selection during Winter break. At our next meeting, we also shared a list, from published scholarship, of ways in which people in higher education tend to push back against anti-racist efforts, in hopes of helping all program members reconsider the motivations behind and ramifications of their thoughts and actions.

We remain committed to collaboratively moving forward with anti-racist policies and we believe that reading from a shared corpus of texts may help program members develop a shared understanding of key ideas and practices related to anti-racism. It is too soon at this writing to tell if these or other tactics will be enough to help our program succeed in making program-wide anti-racist changes through consensus. Most faculty members have already identified specific changes they are making as individuals, but as others remain more resistant, especially to particular changes, we have delayed making a program-level policy change. Making needed anti-racist changes to program-wide policies based on the will of the majority, regardless of faculty resistance, remains an option; however, such a decision would almost assuredly strain everyday, interpersonal relationships among program members. Also, without seeking further buy-in among faculty, we could embolden those who aren't philosophically on board to ignore or defy any new policy in practice.

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