

# **The Perpetual Disservice of “Passive Action” to Reduce Racism on College Campuses: Why Things Like Cluster Hires, Talks, Reading Groups, and Pedagogy Workshops Don’t Work**

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## **Abstract**

In the wake of increasing pressure to address issues of system racism, college and university administrators’ announcements of institutional initiatives to combat racism on their campuses have also increased. However, incidences of hate crimes and racist acts at these schools continue to increase as well suggesting that either the types of initiatives undertaken, or the processes of implementation are ineffective in the goal of reducing racism in these settings. This conceptual paper argues that is it likely both, problematizing the use of programming aimed only at generating discussion as “passive action” that which seeks to look like action, but actually engenders very little social change. Instead, colleges and universities truly committed to transforming their institutions into anti-racist ones must start with shifting hierarchies of power and reimagining the institutional mission before attempting to implement things like cluster hires, invited talks, reading groups, and pedagogy workshops. Only then do predominately white institutions founded on ideologies of white supremacy have the potential to become anti-racist organizations.

**Keywords:** anti-racism, predominately white institutions, racism, higher education, institutional strategy, organizational change

## **Introduction**

Diversity is important across the educational landscape in the U.S. because diverse schools improve everyone’s social (Cherny and Halpin 2016, Wells, Fox, and Cordova-Cobo 2016) and learning outcomes (Maruyama and Moreno 2000, Gurin, Dey, and Gurin 2002). A student body and faculty from diverse backgrounds mean that classrooms become environments where prejudices must be confronted (Harris 2018). This is important because schools are where we create citizens and thereby teach citizenship (Collins 2009). Racial and ethnic homogeneity in classrooms (both among students and teachers) then defines who belongs in those classrooms and therefore, who belongs in larger American society. The historical legacy of higher education as for white male students specifically, means that diverse college classrooms are still hard to find in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Lewis 2004). Schools are still in an active cycle of racism where passivity ensures perpetuation. Therefore, creating inclusive classrooms on campus, or more broadly, the development of anti-racist institutions, requires direct and perpetual action to overcome the continual prevalence of racism in these settings.

At present, most predominately white institutions (PWIs) remain bastions of white supremacy (Morris, Allen, Maurrass, Gilbert 1994; Gusa 2010) steeped in white privilege (Owen 2009, Ray 2019) and attending to the needs and concerns of its white members first and foremost (Brunsmma, Brown, and Placier 2013; Cabrera 2014a). It is a classic example of white supremacy culture (Okun and Jones 2001). This means that Black and brown members of the campus community remain isolated and subsequently traumatized at PWIs (Feagin, Vera, and Imani 1996; Cabrera 2014b); subject to evaluation using characteristics explicitly valued by white people like “objectivity”, “one’s right to comfort”, and paternalism. (Okun and Jones 2001). They’re exposure to racism in a variety of forms may be to blame for disproportionate experiences of depression, and anxiety on campus (McClain, Beasley, Jones, Awosogba, Jackson, and Cokley 2016). However, institutional interventions fail to improve the experiences of Black and brown folks on PWi campuses (Morrison 2010; Von Robertson, Bravo, and Chaney 2016) despite continued lip service ensuring their commitment to long-term change.

In summer 2020, following the murder of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police officers, it became trendy for organizations to pledge a focus on anti-racism both internally and in support of more local and national efforts. College and university leaders across the country joined the chorus of “commitments” to tackle institutional racism on their campuses,

though taking different approaches in these efforts. Cluster hires of faculty members of color, and with pedagogical and research experience in race and racism, more funding for public on-campus talks by experts in anti-racism issues, and the introduction of “public discussion” in the form of reading groups, book clubs, and pedagogy workshops are the most common manifestations of these efforts. Such initiatives have in common a passive approach to institutional change, meaning they are about talking and listening rather than doing, so how effective are they? This paper examines how college campuses address issues of racism to answer why racism persists despite institutional interventions. It seeks to provide alternative thinking for developing truly anti-racist institutions.

Institutional implementation of “passive action” programs is unlikely to improve issues of racism on campus because: 1. frank discussion cannot be had while people are performing teacher, student, or scholar as normatively as possible. The unknown is what happens at home behind closed doors where real beliefs and feelings are expressed more freely, 2. understanding racism, privilege, and white supremacy can’t be “learned” in an afternoon, or series of afternoons, because it requires complex connections between critical thinking and muscle memory, and 3. these programs silo important discussions within groups of people who’ve already bought in, and institutional change does not happen by preaching to the choir. As diversity increases at colleges and universities across the country and effective inclusion efforts lag behind, honest assessments of current practices suggest very little cultural change on these campuses. A complete re-envisioning of the entire structure and culture of higher education systems is required.

### **What they’re doing**

Administrators at hundreds of colleges and universities around the U.S. committed to a variety of “diversity, equity, and inclusion” initiatives focused on symbolism rather than transformation (McKenzie 2020) following Floyd’s murder. Institutional celebrations of Juneteenth (which does not take place during the academic year), establishing anti-racism “taskforces”, hosting town halls, and developing anti-racism trainings do not actually *do* anything to transform the racism Black and brown students experience on campus. This kind of programming focuses on generating discussions as the main source of “action” in the hopes that the discussions themselves will lead organically to solutions to the problem of institutional racism. More damaging, it puts institutions in a perpetual loop of short-term band-aids set in motion as a

reaction to current instances of racism on campus, but without any true resolution, or institutional and cultural change.

A study of a sample of 130 colleges and universities across U.S. and Canada found 82% of institutions released statements following the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officers in May 2020 (Belay 2020). Sixty percent of those institutions who issued statements discussed in their prose, short-term actions, compared to 39% focused on long-term actions. And of those 39%, long-term actions were generally focused on recruiting “diverse” students and faculty to the institutions with little discussion of efforts to explicitly improve retention of these folks. This ignorance of the necessity for interventions focused on long-term institutional change limits the overall impact of the work, and their statements more generally.

Princeton University President, Christopher Eisgruber, pledged that his institution will fund initiatives on racial justice, develop grant programs for student research projects on racial inequality, expand faculty diversity, and change buildings’ names honoring racists (Princeton University Office of Communications 2020). This proposal transfers the majority of responsibility for cultural change on to the students and faculty, and limits structural change to small funding alterations across the institution. Ohio State President, Michael Drake announced a new grant to fund student research of racial health disparities, the establishment of a university task force on racism and racial disparities on campus, and support for a state resolution to declare racism a public health crisis in Ohio, as well as support for the establishment of an independent Citizens Review Board to review allegations of police misconduct in the state (Ohio State University Office of the President). Even more passive than President Eisgruber at Princeton, these initiatives require very little action of the institution itself in the short or long-term.

At Oregon State University President Edward Ray, detailed the institution’s new efforts to improve racial equality on campus. These initiatives include student-hosted webinars to address racial inequality and racism, faculty and staff summer reading groups, a new campus police force, and a four-part webinar series about how to create welcoming and inclusive environments in the classroom which all faculty are required to complete. Reading groups and webinars are notoriously poor facilitators of behavioral or ideological change (Lewis 2020) explicitly *because* they only require superficial participation. The only direct long-term action described by Ray is formation of a new police force which will explicitly negatively impact the lives and experiences of Black and brown students on campus (Jenkins, Tichavakunda, Coles

2020) by subjecting them to policing and surveillance, rather than improve their current experiences. Together, these “interventions” generate neither structural nor cultural change on campus and are therefore little more than placebo.

Similarly, San Diego State University Vice President of Campus Affairs and Diversity, Dr. J. Luke Wood, announced that students would soon be required to complete a course on race relations and criminal justice to fulfill graduation requirements (Statements from the Chief Diversity Office 2020). The course in question would be developed by proposals from a yet-to-be-formed task force. Two-hour “healing” teach-ins for Black faculty, students, and staff will also be held. Both of these initiatives again, place responsibility for change squarely on the faculty and students, without offering additional structural changes to accompany them. The cognitive dissonance between institutional statements condemning racism in the U.S. and the interventions designed to instigate very little actual change suggests that these actions do not actively improve the campus community in the manner to which administrators suggest they are committed. They are actions by definition, but not active in their impact. Rather, this is “passive action”, an escape hatch for institutions looking to be seen as committed to racial equity on campus, without the responsibility of doing the hard work to ensure it in practice.

### **What is anti-racist institutional development?**

Rather than selecting from a list of pre-fabricated initiatives toggling across higher education in reaction to social pressures and current events, the development of an anti-racist institution must focus on dismantling white supremacy (Ash, Hill, Risdon, and Jun 2020) in the very specific ways it happens on a given campus. The context is especially important and the main reason why piece-meal reactive initiatives fail to improve the lives of Black and brown students attending and working at PWIs. Because though all non-HBCU institutions are founded on the same racism (Harris 2020), and maintained via white supremacist structures and cultures, how that translates to inflict trauma on marginalized community members differs across time and place.

White supremacy culture centers whiteness in all the norms, behavioral expectations, beliefs, and values that dictate life for its members (Okun and Jones 2001). Standards for success and cultural belonging then are tools to promote the perpetual domination of white members of the culture over everyone else. College and universities, because they are funded and continually shaped by white supremacy culture, over time became racialized institutions (Ray 2019). Institutional standards for faculty, students, and administrators on campus are therefore

unreachable by non-white people. Diminished agency, lack of access to resources, whiteness as a credential, and the informal practices that perpetuate these disadvantages among Black and brown community members ensure its maintenance.

If that’s true, the shape and tenor of those initiatives must reflect the specific needs of the most vulnerable people in those settings. But, even before specific programming and structural changes are instituted, PWIs should make three integral commitments which portend anti-racist institutional development in higher education. The following commitments are derived from the white supremacy culture that is racializing higher education in the U.S. They may sound radical because they’re asking institutions to tear down existing power structures, and engage in practices never before undertaken. But anti-racism is radical, it requires changes not born of the white supremacist cultures we’re attempting to transform. As Audre Lorde reminds us, “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change (Lorde 198).” What follows are suggestions for institutional change that focus specifically on radicalizing the current higher education systems. Using tools of the oppressor has not served to create marked change so far. It’s time to try something new.

First, institutions and their most powerful administrators must acknowledge, call out, and break down how white supremacy and white privilege maintain racism on campus. Rather than relying on “deficit thinking”, the idea that experiences of racism are the result of a lack of available faculty, students, and staff with whom to diversify the community and educate regarding necessary change (Valencia 2010), to determine anti-racist initiatives. Institutions must acknowledge how existing hiring and admissions practices perpetuate the lie that there are simply not enough good candidates from Black and brown communities. The credentializing of whiteness in education perpetuates ideologies about who belongs in school. In higher education this has wrought disproportionate numbers of white students and faculty at the countries top schools, implying that they are the top prospects for top tier education rather than the most suitable combination of expected and desired identities. Bringing more Black and brown folks to campus without first transforming the existing perpetually racist structures and cultures, only ensures they will be subjected to a plethora of trauma and violence upon arrival. Retention issues are rooted in the tension between increasing numbers of marginalized people and the simultaneous guarantee that their experiences on campus are positive ones.

Next, anti-racist institutional development must include a reimagining of administrative leadership from its current state where power is siloed among a small group of mostly white, mostly male administrators making decisions that affect the well-being of marginalized community members. The same mechanisms of white supremacy culture in higher education that perpetually dictate the overwhelming whiteness of students and faculty create an endless pipeline of white administrators with the power to determine community outcomes at their whim. A very literal reading of Lorde (1984) suggests that if the master’s tools cannot dismantle the master’s house, then the master, and all those people whose ideologies and experiences are made in the master’s image, cannot be effective in transforming a racist institution into an anti-racist one. Therefore, it’s unsurprising that institutional efforts to curb racism on predominately white college campuses have been mostly ineffective. The white power brokers leading such programming lack the connection of shared experience and epistemological worldview to adequately address issues of white supremacy culture at its core. Without access to administrative power to implement change Black and brown campus members lack the resources to create satisfaction in our experiences on campus or the agency to demand these supports; a common feature of racialized institutions.

In order to ensure institutional change that explicitly improves the experiences of Black and brown folks on campus, administrative power must instead be diffuse, shared across many teams of people each focused on a specific aspect of anti-racism there. This, of course, means those teams must be made up of people who also come from marginalized communities and have first-hand knowledge and understanding of their needs and experiences – *not* a group of white “experts” on race and racism. There is an argument that reorganizing hierarchies of power in higher education is the first, and most significant, commitment colleges and university presidents genuinely interested in anti-racism at their institutions should address, but I acknowledge that in itself maybe a decade long enterprise.

Lastly, anti-racism must become a part of an institution’s mission, embedded in the values and purpose of its very existence. All hiring and admissions decisions, programming, curriculum, events, buildings, indoor/outdoor spaces, and traditions must focus on anti-racism in perpetuity. Institutions can’t “start over” in the traditional sense, but they can deliberately and consistently work towards a new vision of institutional anti-racism rather than a cycle of reactions to individual incidents. Too often the mission and vision statements of U.S. colleges

reference critical thinking and an appreciation for diverse ideas without acknowledgement of how racism, both institutional and individual, must be combated in this endeavor. Transforming racialized institutions includes recognizing not just the institutional disadvantages caused by white supremacy culture in higher education, but tracing their birth to the intricate relationship of individual, institutional, interpersonal, and structural racism across the life of the school. Such a thorough reckoning then becomes the foundation for a restructure supported by policies and practices dedicated to racial equity.

All of these commitments to anti-racist institutional development have in common that they are complex and time-consuming. Solving the problem of racism on campus, *and then* maintaining anti-racist structures and cultures long-term doesn't happen overnight. It doesn't happen in five or 10 years. Transforming university campuses from perpetrators of systemic racism to anti-racist institutions is a decades long process. Because racist and white supremacist ideas are still so popular in the U.S. (Darby 2019) it's also a perpetual process. If being an anti-racist individual “requires persistent self-awareness, constant self-criticism, and regular self-examination (Kendi 2019),” then it stands to reason that institutional leaders must also engage in regular critique and introspection of both the institution at large and the individuals perpetuating institutional culture. Likewise, they must identify contemporary racism, more deeply understand how it's form and impacts shift over time, and subsequently provide equal social, political, and economic capital across racial groups on campus. The kind of reflection required to maintain anti-racism on college campuses takes time, intention, and resocialization.

### **What might work instead**

It is not that the initiatives promised by university administrators are useless, only that alone their general passivity in the pursuit of anti-racist communities is ineffective. They are small components of what must be a much larger institutional transformation project. Instead of thinking in terms of micro-level reactionary measures, reimagining higher education into a collection of anti-racist institutions necessitates strategic plans founded on ideologies of restorative social justice for targets of systemic racism, data-driven interventions focused on the experiences of marginalized community members, and intersectionality among marginalized communities on campus. An eschewing of constant surveillance on campus that reestablish ideologies of the broader prison industrial complex is also necessary. Committing to these ideologies as a major part of a PWI's long-term mission ensures that any policies and practices

created in this effort will be focused on actively and perpetually improving the experiences of Black and brown folks on campus. Only when this is complete can discussions begin about what combinations of micro-level programming work best as tools for successfully executing an anti-racist vision.

In the search for programs and policies better-suited to actively transform the institution to an anti-racist one, institutional reformation projects should center structural, cultural, and local community changes. First, structural changes focused on institutional policies and programs. This includes creating policies explicitly meant to punish instances of racism and hate crimes on campus, especially institutional protections for whistleblowers who report these experiences. The benefit of the doubt given to white folks as a means of “equal treatment” must be abolished as a matter of both formal and informal policy. Zero tolerance policies for racist behavior is imperative to the development of anti-racist institutions. It leaves no room for “interpretation” of an individual’s intent in on-campus interactions and forces white people to be deliberately mindful of their treatment of everyone on campus or be intentionally reprimanded with explicit social cost for racist acts. Teaching, encouraging, and supporting the reporting of experiences of racism makes it difficult for racists and structural racism to hide in plain sight as it does when minority folks are spread across campus.

Defunding or divestment from campus police forces for universities that have them, and campus safety programs for schools that don’t, afford Black and brown community members more equal political capital on campus. An institution’s willingness to take up abolition politics as part of the school’s mission works towards the elimination of surveillance and policing on campus in favor of sustainable alternatives (Kaba 2015, 2018). Instead, a focus on safety as a result of well-developed connections among community members, a wealth of available spaces for folks to commune based on their identities, interests, and activities is necessary. Funding the development and maintenance of these spaces (and the programs that will occupy them) equitably means even those Black and brown folks whose identities or interests are in the minority on campus can access the support provided by them.

Even absent a dependence on campus police, bringing Black and brown faculty into the community is not enough (Kaba 2015). Additional financial support during the relocation, and detailed information about available local businesses to make their lives more comfortable helps ensure they find spaces of support in predominately white areas. Institutional programs designed

to support tenure, retention, and general job satisfaction show schools’ dedication to anti-racism, rather than a superficial focus on “diversity and inclusion”. Likewise, students need access to financial resources and programs focused singularly on their support and retention to encourage academic success. The underlying goal of structural changes like these is to improve retention of Black and brown students and faculty. It’s not enough to get them in the door. They must be supported by institutional policy once they arrive.

Cultural changes focus on institutional practices by members of the campus community. Renaming buildings, awards, grants and endowed chairs honoring known racists, and public campaigns acknowledging and condemning institutions’ racist pasts do more than just strip away these banal forms of racism. The symbolism of removing these names is important to changing a white supremacist culture into an anti-racist culture. Symbols are the basis of any culture, and colleges and universities become white supremacist and maintain white supremacy through naming practices like this. The perpetual harm caused by keeping these names in place is as damaging as individual racist acts perpetrated by white community members because the ideas of those racist namesakes is embedded in institutional ideology. These actions also signal to Black and brown campus community members that racism no longer hides in the very walls (literally and figuratively) of spaces they occupy. But that’s not enough because the historical maintenance of existing merit systems which privilege proximity to whiteness in the name of these white racists must be undone. Committing dollars to highlighting communities of color, more dollars than are provided to white campus members, will start to correct the imbalance in resource access and focus, which is historically white supremacist.

Remaking a school’s mission to a culture and structure dedicated to anti-racism means existing curriculums, grading systems, and classrooms must be discarded in favor of new systems of education, in both form and function. Decided by members of a diverse group of campus leaders, an anti-racist education system requires discussions of race and racism become part of campus culture. It ensures that students cannot avoid discussions of racism during their college educations, and that faculty cannot hide behind “disciplinary specializations” to avoid their own learning around issues of racism, incentivizes research, teaching, and service efforts focused on racism and anti-racism, the study of marginalized communities, and/or support for marginalized folks on campus.

Campus practices must also be discarded and begun again without the long shadow of white supremacy culture. Such a culture should work to prevent student hunger, eliminate pay differentials, and work exclusively and deliberately with anti-racist organizations to ensure these colleges and universities are not supporting racist organizations outside itself, but *are* contributing to greater class equality on campus, and encouraging an ongoing anti-racism discourse within the campus community.

The historical relationship between a university and the local communities surrounding the campus is also a part of white supremacy culture that must be transformed in the development of anti-racist institutions. Too often, PWIs ignore the role they play in creating and maintaining class and race inequality in their immediate surroundings, as well as how they encourage localized racism within community residents. An anti-racist institution includes community engagement, specifically the development of relationships with surrounding communities that isn't just focused on extracting resources, but giving back in ways that improve the lives of people in the area not associated with the institution. Including an anti-racist ideology in structural planning and cultural development recognizes that these colleges and universities impact what happens in the communities where they're located rather than pretending they exist in a separate and distinct vacuum.

Organizing the transformation of PWIs from white supremacist to anti-racist via structural, cultural, and local community changes increases the likelihood that any initiatives implemented will actually improve the experiences of Black and brown folks on campus. So, failing to do so signals that institutions which claim to be committed to anti-racism are more interested in being perceived as doing *something* rather than instigating real, measurable change. Without institutional strategies built around specific goals and ideologies how can any proposed programming successfully support anti-racism on campus? Clearly, trying to transform these institutions using the existing structures which remain steeped in white supremacist culture has not worked. It will not work. The administrative, curricular, health support, financial, and ideological institutional systems must be torn down and rebuilt in a new anti-racist image, only that will ensure white supremacist culture is eradicated from higher education.

## **Conclusions**

University administrators at PWIs find themselves in a loop of reactions to internal situations or external public discourse where commitments to anti-racism are made, but the experiences of

Black and brown folks on campus are not improved and racism persists. This cycle remains because the reactive initiatives are usually passive approaches more interested in generating conversations than actions aimed at instigating true reformation. As such, public statements of “passive action” benefit the institutions and their mostly white administrators, providing a public record of their stance on racism without ever having to institute changes that will actually reduce harm to Black and brown folks in their institutional communities. More importantly, because tools born of white supremacist culture are being used to fix institutional problems created by the very same white supremacist culture, the master’s tools are literally being used to feign attempts to dismantle the master’s house. It is a fool’s errand, something said tools were specifically made not to do.

Before the kinds of initiatives university administrators claim prove their commitments to anti-racism can be effective, fundamental transformations regarding power and authority to make decisions about structural changes across the institution must be made. Transforming higher education systems and their institutional homes to anti-racist organizations is a radical act, one that privileges difference. Difference, then becomes a powerful tool in the process. As Audre Lorde contends,

*“Difference must be not merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic. Only then does the necessity for interdependency become unthreatening. Only within that interdependency of difference, strengths, acknowledged and equal, can the power to seek new ways of being in the world generate, as well as the courage and sustenance to act where there are no charters (1984, p.2).”*

Diffuse power spread amongst folks who share marginalized identities with students and faculty on campus, is the first step towards real institutional change. This is not only active in its immediate work, but also activates deeper micro-level change across campus because these people are then tasked with using institutional programming, policies, and messaging to recreate institutions in an anti-racist image. That process of recreation is long and perpetual, and requires administrative commitments to at least a decade of institutional transformation and continuous maintenance across the life of the school. Radical change is revolutionary, and revolution is not a one time event (Lorde 1984). It is this kind of continuous and perpetual approach to institutional

racism that will facilitate the development of anti-racist schools in higher education, not the “passive action” offered at present.

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