



# Understanding and Analyzing Systemic Racism: Creating an Anti-Racist Task Force in the Sweetland Center for Writing

## Faculty Communities for Inclusive Teaching, 2019

### Project Overview

The Sweetland Center for Writing (SCW) has participated in DEI work sponsored by UM from the outset—in all three of the LSA Diversity Institutes, the Faculty Dialogue Institute, Inclusive Teaching @ Michigan workshops, the Undergraduate Education Campus Climate Committee, and others to **learn how better to support our diverse students** through inclusive teaching in our classrooms and our one-to-one consultations.

Several of our faculty have attended **workshops on systemic racism** given by the organization ERRACE (Eliminating Racism and Creating/Celebrating Equity), which prompted SCW to take a more active anti-racist position. In 2018, SCW formed a **summer working group** to continue working on DEI issues, including leading faculty at Sweetland's annual August retreat in reading Nancy Grimm's "Rethorizing Writing Center Work to Transform a System of Advantage Based on Race" (2011) and **reexamining our Writing Workshop best practices** in light of Grimm's framework.

From this retreat, faculty saw a need to **form an Anti-Racist Task Force** with the purpose of mindfully examining our pedagogy, practice, and curriculum in light of DEI issues. The Task Force **meets on a monthly basis** throughout the academic year to discuss essays and book excerpts related to writing center work and DEI initiatives, particularly examining racist structures within institutions.

We also saw a continued need for a working group, and in summer 2019, the group developed materials for Sweetland faculty to implement anti-racist practices in the classroom, conduct Writing Workshop consultations from a more actively anti-racist stance, and envision potential outreaches for multilingual students (see Artifacts for more information).

### Participants

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### Key Insights / New Questions

- **A critical mass of Sweetland faculty should be supported to attend ERACCE (Eliminating Racism and Creating/Celebrating Equity) workshops.**
  - These workshops were the starting point for realizing that SCW needed a dedicated group of faculty to concentrate on DEI issues from an anti-racist position, in order to work towards institutional change. Sweetland has committed to paying the registration fee for at least five additional participants.
- **Readings and discussions allow faculty to critically reflect on our roles as educators.**
  - These readings and discussions allowed us to further understand how racist ideations may influence our work as faculty consultants in Sweetland, in particular when we are working 1-1 with students on their writing. The readings and discussions have allowed us to reexamine commonplace practices and mottos of writing center work through an anti-racist lens.
- **Reflective journaling allows for a critical reflective space.**
  - The reflective journaling component of our meetings allows us to critically reflect on our own complicated and situationally unique relationships to race and racism. The prompts are quite broad, but allow us to think through how racism/white supremacy emerges in the writing center and the instructional work we do, and possible ways to respond. Some sample questions we journaled about: When and how were you first aware of your own racial identity? (paired with Oluo's *So You Want To Talk About Race*); What experiences have you had so far in your teaching work this semester that resonate with issues raised in the readings for this week? (paired with Kendi's *How to Be an Antiracist* and Matsuda & Cox's "Reading an ESL Writer's Text").
- **Sweetland's Writing Workshop Consultation Strategies should reflect more actively anti-racist practice.**
  - The revisions undertaken on our Writing Workshop Consultation Strategies reflect some of the insights gleaned from these readings and discussions. For instance, the original document produced by Sweetland faculty in 2013 partitions out multilingual writers and students with disabilities into their own categories — one global revision to the document is to fold in considerations of writers with different needs to the overall structure of what a session looks like. Another substantive addition to the document is more careful consideration of what it means to "write well" and what it means to consult with a student about their writing while being sensitive to standard language ideology and not devaluing a student's home discourse.

### Artifacts

- A revised version of our **Writing Workshop Consultation Strategies**, originally developed by Sweetland faculty in 2013, which takes a more actively anti-racist approach. Here are two examples of expanded revisions:

**Praise the Writer:** Many consultants opt to start with praise and include praise throughout the consultation so the writer comes to know what they are doing well. There's always something to praise in any composition; sincere praise builds rapport and increases a writer's confidence. Not all student populations may react in the same way to the praise first, critique next framework — for instance, research suggests that students of color may be more likely to regard initial praise with suspicion, especially if it comes from a white tutor, and might respond more favorably to direct (productive) critique. Be sensitive to how you may be defaulting to an standardized concept of a dominant-culture student who comes in to Writing Workshop, and strive to be flexible and adaptable to what the student in front of you might respond to best. (Daiker (1989); Elbow (1993); Steele (2010))

**Question Assumptions About What "Writing Well" Means:** Be attentive to the ways in which university students are expected in their various classes to speak an unmarked and privileged version of English, and be open and critical of that with the student, while also addressing the needs of the paper. The idea that all university students need to acculturate to a "privileged variety of English" is, according to Nancy Grimm (2011), "an assumption about students [which] leaves untroubled the notion that 'writing well' is the ability to produce English that is unmarked in the eyes of teachers who are custodians of privileged varieties of English. Anis Bawarshi and Stephanie Pelkowski (1999) note that consultants should "demystify writing processes" by providing the writer "insight into why certain conventions exist for certain discourses" and that the consultant should overall "aim to equip these students with the skills necessary for analyzing conventions so that they can translate their knowledge into successful writing practices beyond the university community."

- Development of **outreach events** for international students to introduce them to issues of race in the U.S., including a possible visit to the Museum of African American History in Detroit, and a Thanksgiving meal with an invited speaker to talk about indigenous perspectives on the story.
- Draft of **antiracist teaching resources**, including general considerations and strategies for an antiracist writing classroom, and an overview of how to implement labor-based grading contracts in a writing classroom.
- A **data report** of 100+ pages drawing together ~5 years of demographic data on Sweetland's course enrollments and use of Writing Workshop and Peer Writing Center services, with figures breaking down various key pieces of demographic information related to race, nationality, SES, language, gender, and other categories.

### Resources

- brown, adrienne marie. *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*. AK Press, 2017.
- Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. *Racism without Racists*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013.
- Diab et al. "Making Commitments to Racial Justice Actionable." Special issue: Anti-Racist Activism: Teaching Rhetoric and Writing. *Across the Disciplines: A Journal of Language, Learning and Academic Writing*, 2013.
- hooks, bell. *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. New York, Routledge, 1994.
- Grimm, Nancy. "Rethorizing Writing Center Work to Transform a System of Advantage Based on Race." *Writing Centers and the New Racism: A Call for Sustainable Dialogue and Change*, edited by Laura Greenfield and Karen Rowan, Utah State UP, 2011.
- Jones, Kenneth, and Tema Okun. "The Characteristics of White Supremacy Culture," in *Dismantling Racism: A Workbook for Social Change Groups*, 2001.
- Inoue, Asao B. "How Do We Language So People Stop Killing Each Other, Or What Do We Do About White Language Supremacy?" Conference on College Composition and Communication, 14 March 2019, Pittsburgh, PA. Keynote Address.
- Inoue, Asao B. *Labor-Based Grading Contracts: Building Equity and Inclusion in the Compassionate Writing Classroom*. The WAC Clearinghouse, 2019.
- Kendi, Ibram X. *How to Be an Antiracist*, One World Press, 2019.
- Matsuda, Paul K. and Michelle Cox. "Reading an ESL Writer's Text." *ESL Writers: A Guide for Writing Center Tutors*. Editors Shanti Bruce and Ben Rafoth. Boynton/Cook Publishers, 2004.
- Oluo, Ijeoma. *So You Want to Talk About Race*. Seal Press, 2018.
- Steele, Claude. *Whistling Vivaldi: How Stereotypes Affect Us and What We Can Do*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2011.

### Next Steps

- The Sweetland Anti-Racist Task Force will continue to **meet on a monthly basis** to discuss relevant texts and journal about anti-racist practice throughout the 2019-20 academic year
- We have taken on a **UROP student** who will assist with conducting relevant research on anti-racist practices and writing, with a focus on code-switching and code-meshing
- We plan on sending additional Sweetland faculty to the **ERRACE 2.5-day workshop** on "Understanding and Analyzing Systemic Racism" in February