

The Learning Centers' Commitment to Anti-Racism

In the past days, months, and years, we have witnessed overt acts of racism in our country, state, community, and campus. These include the brutal murder of George Floyd in May 2020, the white nationalist rally in Charlottesville in August 2017, the Ku Klux Klan recruitment fliers that appeared throughout the Shenandoah Valley in November 2017, the “Build the Wall” graffiti that appeared on the JMU campus in the wake of the November 2016 presidential election, and most recently, the erasure of “Black” from the words “Black Lives Matter” on the JMU Spirit Rock.

We also recognize that racially motivated violence, abuse, intimidation, and hatred are not the only ways that racism targets and harms Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC). As law professor Rhonda Magee has written, racism asserts power in ways that minimize “freedom, access to resources, and sense of value in the world” for BIPOC and their white allies. Racism can be present in beliefs, actions, and inaction. It can be exercised both consciously and unconsciously—not only by individuals but also by groups, institutions, and broader structures or systems.

Covert racism (which includes a range of subtle, unconscious, and unintentional behaviors, attitudes, practices, and policies) has undoubtedly pervaded our community and campus without deliberate recognition. Covert racism is present when professors steer away from discussions of race to avoid heated or uncomfortable conversations, when they “tokenize” BIPOC students by asking them to speak for their races, and when they penalize BIPOC students’ reactions to microaggressions (rather than pointing out the racism inherent in those microaggressions).

Covert racism is present when students ignore or leave out their BIPOC peers, whether in group assignments or social outings. It’s present when people assume that BIPOC students are either athletes or on need-based scholarships. Covert racism is reflected in the administrative power structures at JMU, which are disproportionately white.

The faculty, staff, and peer educators of the JMU Learning Centers join the many voices that are calling for an end to racism and white supremacy in America. We created this statement to guide us and hold us accountable for enacting our commitment to anti-racist pedagogy and practice.

Our Role

Despite being a department with a commitment to inclusivity in a University that lists access, inclusion, and diversity as core qualities, the Learning Centers acknowledges our complicity in maintaining a status quo that privileges white students, staff, and faculty, as well as white ideas, white behaviors, and white ways of knowing, learning, and communicating. Within our walls, BIPOC students, staff, and faculty have undoubtedly encountered the same forms of racism that they have elsewhere in our institution: exclusion, lack of recognition, white silence in the face of discrimination, white discomfort with the topic of race, assumptions that BIPOC are deficient or low-achievers in particular subjects, beliefs in the innateness of certain abilities (such aptitude in mathematics or language, or athleticism), and pressure to perform whiteness via assimilation and code switching, to name a few.¹ Indeed, the Madison Matters campus climate survey indicated that discrimination at JMU is widespread. In this 2015 survey of 1,865 students (263 of whom were non-white), 8.9% (128 students) reported experiencing racial or ethnic discrimination in a range of settings, from classrooms to dorms. Furthermore, more than one third of respondents reported witnessing discrimination based on race or ethnicity. Clearly, there is more work to be done for us to embody the values we espouse.

Our Commitment

The Learning Centers has attempted to create spaces where BIPOC students, staff, and faculty feel at home; to train faculty, staff, and peer educators to recognize unconscious bias in themselves and others; to support BIPOC faculty, staff, and peer educators when they encounter prejudice; and to advocate for and affirm BIPOC students struggling with academic and disciplinary cultures that demand assimilation. A more specific list of our ongoing initiatives can be found here. These efforts are a start, but they are not enough. In order to deepen our commitment to antiracist practices and pedagogies, The Learning Center pledges to do the following:

1. Provide our peer educators, student and professional staff, and faculty with ongoing anti-racist training and professional development.
2. Ensure that peer educators, staff, and faculty receive feedback and recognition for their efforts related to diversity, equity, and inclusion (e.g., these topics should be addressed in client satisfaction surveys, Faculty Annual Reports, and in peer educator evaluations of

faculty).

3. Review and revise our recruiting and hiring practices, including the ways that meritocracy and affinity bias limit the diversity of our faculty, staff, and peer educators.

4. Revisit departmental decision-making processes to ensure that BIPOC voices and perspectives are heard, considered, and valued.

5. Review and revise the language of our department's "inclusive" value, with a focus on making it actionable and justice-oriented.

6. Use our spaces to promote the accomplishments of BIPOC students, scholars, innovators, experts, authors, and creators.

7. Ensure that our BIPOC peer educators, staff, and faculty have clear-cut avenues for support and processing, potentially in the form of a closed discussion group.

8. When appropriate, share anti-racist reflections, pedagogies, and practices beyond the Learning Centers via resources, conferences, symposia, and workshops.

9. Seek out collaboration and feedback on this work from outside sources, such as the Office of Access and Inclusion and Center for Faculty Innovation.

10. Reflect on and annually assess our antiracism efforts, allowing them to evolve as we make progress.

Enacting these commitments will help us adopt anti-racism as a lens for all our work, rather than relegating it to a sporadic discussion topic. We have suspended formal committee work for Academic Year 2020-21 to work on enacting these commitments.