

The Learning Centers' Commitment to Antiracism

I. Introduction

This commitment is part of an ongoing effort within the JMU Learning Centers to identify, understand, and respond to the ways that racism affects who we are, what we do, and whom we serve. Learning assistance programs like ours provide customized, supplemental instruction to students striving to achieve their academic goals. At the heart of our work is the fact that we support students in vulnerable places, whether they are struggling with their coursework, seeking acceptance into a profession or discipline, or figuring out where they belong in an academic culture that can feel unfamiliar, exclusive, and bewildering.

Examining the ways that racism affects our work—and our ability to fulfill our [mission and values](#)—is particularly critical given that JMU is a predominantly white institution (PWI). [Research](#) has shown that the psychological stresses associated with being part of a minoritized group can affect the mind and body in ways that negatively impact learning. Stereotype threat (the fear of being associated with a negative stereotype) and the perception of discrimination have been shown to inhibit academic performance. Additionally, racially inflected interactions with peers and instructors in educational settings influence how BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) students [think about themselves as learners](#).

Our Commitment to Antiracism aligns not only with our department's mission and values, but also with [JMU's Core Qualities of Access, Inclusion, and Diversity](#); the [Division of Academic Affairs' value of Equity](#); and the work of [JMU's Task Force on Racial Equity](#). Additional information about racial equity, including a helpful [glossary of terms](#), is available on the Racial Equity Tools [website](#) (<https://www.racialequitytools.org>).

We know that our Commitment to Antiracism will necessarily evolve and is by nature incomplete. Still, we share it so that others can join us in this work, hold us accountable, and offer expertise that might help us better enact this commitment.

II. Our Learning Process

As learning professionals, we recognize education as a lifelong process and have collectively committed to deepening our knowledge of what racism is and how it manifests in our work.

While we acknowledge the presence of overt racism (which includes observable and intentional acts such as racial slurs) on our campus, we recognize that racism in learning environments is often covert, taking the form of subtle (sometimes unintentional) slights based on race. We've learned that covert racism can be present in learning contexts in a number of ways. Learners or educators may overvalue writing, communication, or teaching practices favored by dominant groups. For example, they may perceive dialect or written accent as error or ignore the contributions of scholars, thinkers, and innovators of color to their fields. Covert racism may also express as [excluding or ignoring BIPOC](#) individuals, discomfort with or attempts to avoid [discussions of race](#) in learning interactions, ["tokenizing"](#) by asking people to speak as representatives of their races, or stereotyping based on race (for example, assuming that students of certain races are athletes or on need-based scholarships).

We have also learned that racism can be considered systemic or institutional when it is embedded in and central to an organization's day-to-day functioning. This may be reflected in the administrative power structures at JMU and in the Learning Centers, which are disproportionately white. This might show up in Learning Centers hiring practices, where a "like-me" bias favors those who share similarities to people who recommend potential hires and who make hiring decisions. Because of this, in a learning center at a PWI, qualified BIPOC candidates may be overlooked or might choose not to apply because of a lack of representation among faculty, staff, or student employees.

We acknowledge that these overt, covert, and systemic forms of racism create additional barriers for BIPOC community members to succeed in coursework, pursue employment, and feel safety, support, and a sense of belonging at JMU and within our centers.

III. Our Commitment

As part of our enduring commitment to deepening antiracist practices and pedagogies within our department, the Learning Centers pledges to do the following:

1. Adopt antiracism as a lens for all of our work, rather than relegating it to a sporadic discussion topic.
2. Provide our peer educators, student and professional staff, and faculty with ongoing antiracist training and professional development—in particular, developing a deeper shared knowledge of antiracism constructs, language, and best practices.
3. 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).
4. Regularly 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.
5. Regularly revisit departmental decision-making processes to ensure that BIPOC voices and perspectives are heard, considered, and valued.
6. Review and revise the language of our department's "inclusive" value, with a focus on making it [actionable and justice-oriented](#).
7. Use our spaces to promote the accomplishments of BIPOC students, scholars, innovators, experts, authors, and creators.
8. Ensure that our BIPOC peer educators, staff, and faculty have clear-cut avenues for support and processing.
9. When appropriate, share anti-racist reflections, pedagogies, and practices beyond the Learning Centers via resources, conferences, symposia, and workshops.
10. Seek out collaboration and feedback on this work from outside sources, such as the Office of Access and Inclusion and Center for Faculty Innovation.
11. Reflect on and annually assess our antiracism efforts, allowing them to evolve with our department and our institutional and cultural context.

For Academic Year 2021-22, our department is prioritizing commitments #1 and #2 as an extension of the work we began last year (see section IV). All departmental faculty are expected to undertake antiracist professional development tailored to their program areas and their individual roles and responsibilities. Additionally, the newly established Learning Centers' Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee is investigating training options for student employees, administrative staff, and faculty.