

Beyond the Statement: Faculty–Driven Antiracism Work at a Predominantly White STEM University

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of this chapter is to share the experiences, motivations, and reflections of the authors' efforts of establishing an antiracism institute at a predominantly white STEM university in a small, rural county in Northern New York. To accompany their perspectives, the authors interviewed faculty members involved in this process to identify their motivations and hopes for the institute, along with the challenges and difficulties. This chapter traces the trajectory, motivations, expectations, and challenges of establishing an antiracism institute in a predominately white STEM institution.

INTRODUCTION

The murder of George Floyd in May of 2020 sparked a nationwide anti-racist movement. In response, many higher learning institutions, including that of the authors, were quick to denounce anti-Black racism and declared their commitment to anti-racism work. This private, predominantly White STEM university, referred to in this chapter as Gem University, started difficult conversations about racism on campus, in the surrounding town, and in the area of northern New York where it is located. At Gem

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University, like at many other institutions, the student body, faculty, and staff regularly confront persistent racial inequities in higher education. During several faculty and student forums in the summer of 2020, Black students, faculty, and staff shared their experiences with racism on institutional, local, and national levels and demanded that the university address their concerns more effectively and aggressively. Inspired and humbled by these conversations, faculty members came together in a grassroots effort committed to establishing an Anti-racism Institute (ARI), modeled after the Center for Anti-racist Research at Boston University.

In this chapter, the authors, four faculty members who are themselves part of this effort as members of the anti-racism committee, share their insights into the process and the thoughts of other committee members who agreed to be interviewed. As researchers from various disciplines, the authors share their personal and professional perspectives on establishing an ARI and share the questions and concerns that guide this work thus far. In doing so, they trace the conceptualization of the institute, the formation of an organizing committee, conversations with university leadership and the board of trustees, practical matters of space, budget, and organizational structure. Finally, they explore how the ARI situates itself within the university alongside established institutional diversity and inclusion to emphasize where these forms of anti-racism work converge, diverge, and overlap.

Unlike more traditional, empirical research studies, the format and structure here support the authors' ability to reflect on programs and project findings and discuss cases as they emerge. By having the space to reflect upon this experience through narrative inquiry, the authors can engage with the work at a deeper analytical level and take stock of both successes and failures. The authors critically reflect upon the significance and support for anti-racism work in general and the anti-racism institute, in particular, to show how it explicitly unfolds within this institution. This also means reflecting and communicating how this work urges the university to examine its own culture, the kinds of actions that are planned for the ARI, and how the effort establishes ways to create institutional accountability.

While the authors aim for an honest look at this process, its participants, and the university, this is not meant to be an evaluation of any one individual, group, or the institution; instead, they seek to offer insight for other universities who are similarly situated and interested in this vital and necessary, but challenging work. Instead, this chapter traces the trajectory, motivations, expectations, and challenges of establishing an anti-racism institute in a predominately White institution (PWI). In short, this chapter provides a space to reflect on what happened after anti-racism declarations were made: what work has been happening; who is involved; how does it work; what works well; what troubles have been encountered; what happens next? Furthermore, the reflections shared in this work can be leveraged to explore how faculty work might bring change to the current culture and community. The authors hope that this chapter will share experiences that can help others establish and *enact* anti-racism practices to help change the culture of their university, just like other experiences have informed this work. Hopefully, reflecting and reporting on this work can contribute to existing scholarship that helps overcome institutional and personal challenges in changing the historic fabric of higher learning institutions.

Methodology

This chapter utilizes narrative inquiry as a research methodology because it brings “theoretical ideas about the nature of human life as lived to bear on educational experience as lived” (p.3). With this approach, the authors aim to provide a space to share lived experiences as faculty embarking on this educational experience along with their colleagues. Due to the holistic nature of narrative inquiry, the number of

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