



On Becoming an Anti-Racist University

*Principles and recommendations for universities
from Black Engineering faculty*

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In 2018, Prof. Ibram X. Kendi laid out a vision for an anti-racist America¹. As Black faculty -- who dedicate our livelihoods to university systems that are not “designed with us in mind;” who daily suffer from unequal burdens that affect our experiences on campus, how we perform our jobs, how our work is perceived, and literally what and who we bring home to our families each night -- we have asked ourselves what would the anti-racist university look like? In building on Dr. Kendi’s vision, what about an anti-racist university where we honestly acknowledge and repair our university’s and society’s racial histories? Where do we examine our biases and begin to unlearn them? Where a student’s success is not dependent on their identity, high school, or their knowledge of “the hidden curriculum”? Where the efforts of black staff, faculty, and students in building and improving the institution are acknowledged, applauded, and rewarded? Where instructors implement a classroom structure that fosters equity and improves learning outcomes? Where administrators commit resources and people to actionable goals in recruiting, retaining, and supporting Black faculty, staff, and students? Where Black members of the university are welcomed as full participants, rather than treated as tokens of diversity?

In what follows, we have attempted to articulate specific actions that universities can take toward becoming anti-racist. Most importantly, we first offer a set of **PRINCIPLES** of acknowledgement that are necessary to adopt the strength of character that is necessary to undergo the hard work of making an anti-racist university. Do not skip over them. We next offer a series of **RECOMMENDATIONS** for actions to build an anti-racist university climate. Several of these recommendations draw from examples of diversity statements publicly available by many institutions. However, do not make the mistake of applauding yourselves merely for having such a statement already, or for the work that you feel has already been done on your campus. Such complacency is the enemy of real change, and change is the only thing that will realize the vision.

Overarching Principles

Attitude | The best way to approach this document is with the assumption that *your institution* suffers from deep, systemic racism. Fact: U.S. history is racist, and the responsibility for fixing systemic racism within your institution lies with current members of the institution. Refusal to acknowledge this responsibility is a complicit act of agreement to perpetuate systemic racism.

Clarity | The issue of focus is not a broad diversity issue: the issue at hand is *anti-Black racism*. Historically, institutions have lumped this issue with many other worthy causes. However, the roots of racism in the U.S. are different than sexism, homophobia, and other inequities. We believe that race



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must be tackled specifically in order for progress to be made. Don't cloak this work with the label "diversity."

Institutional Accountability | Promises and statements of commitment without corresponding incentives for success and -- more importantly -- clear consequences for failure -- are inadequate to address systemic racism. Goals for change and racial equity are measurable and hold real implications for university administration. Such measures and implications should be incorporated into your action plan so that the work will not stop until success is achieved.

Personal Accountability | Every university leader -- department heads, deans, the provost, and the president -- needs to make a *personal* commitment to understanding the effects and evidences of racism within your institution and to becoming anti-racist, as an individual. This work of re-making the individual cannot be outsourced to a committee or task force: that is, you cannot become anti-racist by creating a committee. Ultimately this work must be done by *every member* of the academic community, starting with the leadership and policy-makers.

Commitment and Resources | The only action that will yield results is a firm commitment to change, NOW. Universities *must* commit funds and resources *first*. Only then will any committee or task force formed to study issues further be empowered with real teeth to get things done, as their work becomes one of determining how the resources and funds can best be used. Where possible, skip the step of forming a committee or task force. Empower someone with authority to make necessary changes. Root out and eliminate all hypocrisy that exists in the form of "empty" written and spoken statements of support by you or your institution for ideals that are not consistent with actual practices by you, your institution or any institution you affiliate with.

Recommendations

SYSTEM-WIDE INITIATIVES

On Historical Education. Knowledge is power. As workers in higher education, we believe that knowledge influences the heart, which influences behavior, which influences culture. Lasting change will only be achieved if each individual at the institution is aware of the problem and subsequently empowered to change. Institutions of higher education must equip their students to interact in a diverse world, and they must equip all faculty and staff to interact with a diverse student body.² Perform a thorough investigation into the systemic racism, both past and present, embedded in your institution. All faculty and staff must be required to learn the racist history of the institution and understand the persistent patterns of racism so that they are equipped to counteract them. For example, include such training during onboarding or orientation, with periodic refreshers. Require all faculty and staff to learn about past and present systemic racism as it has manifested in the U.S. For example, incorporate it into mandatory training programs. Add degree requirements, at all levels, that include education on past and present racial injustice within the respective disciplines. For example, this could be coupled with current training on ethics and academic integrity within the discipline. The courses should also highlight the contributions of Black people to each discipline.³



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On implicit Bias and Diversity Training. The impact and prevalence of microaggressions are well documented. Every student, faculty, and staff member at the institution should be trained to understand their own biases and be equipped to work through them^{2-4,7} through a series of *ongoing* implicit bias and diversity training initiatives.

On High-Level Commitment. Ensure commitment to anti-racism at the highest level of the institution through approval of a comprehensive action plan via a resolution of the highest governing body at the institution (e.g., Board of Trustees).³

On Accountability. Conduct and publish an annual climate survey to assess progress towards anti-racism, diversity, and inclusion.^{3,4} In addition, academic units that perform particularly well in this area should be rewarded and publicly acknowledged.⁶ Take leadership on a national stage by collaborating with multiple institutions to lobby organizations such as U.S. News and World Report to create an 'Anti-Racism' scorecard that celebrates institutions that achieve best practices in this area with national recognition (e.g., embedding such scores within school rankings).

On Fundraising. As with other university initiatives, allocate significant time and resources to fundraise for anti-racist efforts.⁴

On Leadership and Administration. If it does not currently exist, establish an executive-level position, reporting to the Provost or President, to oversee and spearhead all anti-racist efforts at the institution.⁵ Provide sufficient budget to execute initiatives and to advance anti-racism goals. Further, hiring and retention of Black faculty and staff along with creating an inclusive environment for all students should be critical issues in the selection of university leadership.⁶

On Policing. Black students, faculty, and staff experience the campus police force differently than the broader community. As is being explored nationwide, each campus should tackle racism by those tasked with ensuring public safety. If Black people don't feel protected by the campus police, it is difficult to create a safe academic environment where they can thrive. Modify lighting, security access and other protocols to eliminate the chance that Black members of your university community could be in any way targeted or perceived as threatening. Make past records and offending reports against police officers publicly available. Do not hire officers with a history of discriminatory practices and records. Extend more power to respected and valuable members of the university community (Black students, faculty, staff, etc.) who have been adversely affected by negative policing policies (e.g., racial profiling), empowering them to suggest and devise alternative strategies to change the current system for the better, based on personal and shared experiences. Follow through on this empowerment by implementing the suggestions.

On Spending. Socio-economic barriers strike through the heart of Black communities and contribute to the systemic issues that keep Black students from successfully navigating the academic pathway. Embrace innovative outreach opportunities to invest directly into Black communities as a part of



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ordinary spending (e.g., support Black-owned vendors to conduct university business such as catering, landscaping, etc.).

On Disaggregation. In the same way that considering race as a sub-category of diversity leads to undervaluing of relevant issues to racism, aggregating data across many people hides true wins and losses, especially in hiring. Data, reports and statistics should be disaggregated (e.g., separate Black women from all Blacks and from all women), analyzed from multiple perspectives (e.g., supervisory vs. supervisee status). Supplement quantitative data with descriptive stories to comprehend the experiences of individuals and to identify systemic racism.

On Tokenism. Due to their low numbers, Black community members shoulder an unfair burden to be the visual representation of the change you are trying to make. Efforts should be made to not exploit their presence and the very visual nature of their cultural identity for propaganda or institutional aggrandizement. Examples include posting pictures of Black community members (students, staff, faculty and administrators) in recruitment or promotional materials without their knowledge or permission. Instead, make the necessary changes in your hiring practices to increase the representation of the Black community on your campus to eliminate tokenism. In addition, make intentional efforts to normalize Black scholarship on campus: in the classroom, at the speaker's podium, and on the stage. Include past and present contributions by Black scholars to their specific field of study.

FACULTY INITIATIVES

On Recruitment and Retention. Implement sustained efforts to recruit and retain Black faculty.⁸ Identify the unique environmental factors that are barriers to recruitment and retention at your institution (e.g., cost of living, housing, local schools, etc.). Make efforts to understand the specific psychological, socio-familial, and cultural concerns and challenges of Black faculty, then address them directly.⁹ Create a program that trains colleges and departments on strategies and best practices for recruiting Black faculty.^{4,5} Training should include assessment of novel, interdisciplinary work, since people of color are more likely to engage in such work.¹⁰ Each academic unit at the institution should work with its senior administration to set realistic but meaningful, specific goals with timelines with respect to recruitment efforts of Black faculty.^{6,8} The university should partner with key strategic partners that can serve as pipeline institutions for Black faculty candidates.⁶

On Promotion, Tenure and Annual Review. Evaluate effects of anti-black racism on the tenure, promotion and annual review process of all faculty. Develop new criteria that evaluate every faculty member based upon what they have specifically done to promote inclusion, work against racism and support those affected by anti-black racism.^{4,5,8} Currently there is an undue burden, or inclusion tax, on Black faculty to shoulder these efforts, but under this proposed paradigm they would be rewarded -- not penalized -- for doing this much-needed work. Redesign and redefine the promotion and merit review criteria to elevate the importance of these activities on par with other evaluation criteria of teaching and scholarship. Train and calibrate external letter writers to provide responses that conform with institutional values; train members of promotion and tenure committees to recognize and account



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for the impact that bias or cumulative professional disadvantage may have played in consideration of promotion.

On Teaching. Review the process by which teaching is evaluated to mitigate the effect of bias towards the course instructor. Best practices include multiple methods of review (e.g., peer, direct observation) to assess teaching and provide a comprehensive review of one's pedagogical abilities. Such measures evaluate the instruction, not just the instructor. Center evaluations on objective measurements (e.g., did the instructor return most assignments within 3 weeks?) rather than subjective measurements from students or other evaluators (e.g., did the instructor create an effective learning environment?). Train students to interact with Black faculty in an appropriate manner both with regard to classroom conduct (including implicit bias training). Abusive and offensive comments in teaching evaluations promote a racist environment and should lead to disciplinary action.

On Community-building. Black faculty are underrepresented on most campuses and are thus often in desperate need of community to flourish in the Academy. This need often drives them to expend personal funds to participate in community-building activities outside of your institution. Show your support for Black faculty by allocating funds specifically to help them build community within the university as well as with local and regional institutions of higher education. For example, establish funding lines to sponsor travel and registration fees for conferences and other activities that allow Black faculty to develop the necessary community to support their academic and professional development.

On Compensation. Eliminate wage disparities, which are known to be prevalent among people of color, particularly women of color. In many cases, Black faculty carry a higher service burden than the average faculty member and this should be compensated. Therefore, it is necessary to supplement salaries to attract and retain Black faculty.³

On Collaborative Research Funding. In STEM, many of the most significant research questions are interdisciplinary and lie at the interface of multiple fields. Further, significant faculty mentoring occurs when senior faculty take the opportunity to work with junior (pre-tenure) faculty on research. This is the academic model: learning while doing. Therefore, we propose that universities raise funds that encourage research collaborations between junior Black faculty and senior faculty, with clear requirements to benefit the junior faculty. Examples could include university-sponsored matching funds for successful collaborative grants that include junior Black faculty, or unrestricted seed funding for collaborative teams to develop preliminary data for a collaborative proposal.

On Endowed Fellowships. Establish endowed professorships that are named after Black alumni and faculty of the institution³ to promote the visibility and importance of Black scholarship.

On Grant Funding. Many institutions judge research strength by the number and size of funded grants. However, current evaluation standards do not consider known inequities in funding rates caused by bias in the review process. In support of Black scholars at your institution, you would do well to lobby the federal government for reform of the manner in which grants are reviewed and



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administered. There should be a nationwide review of grant funding to determine if there is bias, where it occurs, and how it can be alleviated. Examples include the expanded use of blind reviews and more funding to target populations typically disadvantaged by the broader system (analogous to the EPSCoR at NSF). Other examples include charging the government to examine empty statements in calls for proposals that claim to encourage diverse applicants but are inconsistent with review practices to actually fund them.

STAFF INITIATIVES

On Diversity. The institution must recruit and retain a racially diverse staff, including a substantial proportion of Black staff members, in order to become anti-racist.⁸ Implement innovative training to address intercultural dynamics should be implemented, and update HR policies to mitigate potential conflicts that may arise as staff diversity increases.

On Training and Professional Development. Staff have a tremendous influence on the quality of student life and must be informed and equipped to progress the institution towards becoming anti-racist. It is imperative that all staff undergo training, similar to students and faculty, to overcome address racist views. Institutions should provide funding and work release time for staff to participate in focused professional development aimed at these goals. Progress in efforts should be tracked over time to inform success and/or changes required in training and professional development.

On Raises and Promotion. Incorporate the evaluation of efforts to promote anti-black racism into the processes for determining raises and promotion of staff members. Every staff member should be evaluated based upon what they have specifically done to promote inclusion and work against racism.

GRADUATE EDUCATION INITIATIVES

On Recruitment. Develop and implement an action plan with measurable goals focused on increasing admission and enrollment of URM graduate students, particularly Black students.^{4,4,7}

On Retention. Commit to improving retention rates for URM students, particularly Black students. Invite senior academic leaders at the university and representatives from offices that provide student services relevant for success to introduce themselves to students at the earliest occasion possible.⁷ Create and track measurable goals and publish disaggregated data for the number of graduates, graduation rate, and time to degree.

On Fellowships and Financial Support. Establish fellowships that ensure no Black students are turned away from the institution due to financial considerations. Consider the economies of the local community and the potential effects of racist practices on housing access to develop means to support Black students in finding suitable housing options.

On Advising. Require that *all* faculty participate in training to specifically equip them to mentor Black graduate students in a manner consistent with anti-racist ideals. Develop ongoing evaluations that



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assess advisor/advisee relationships and revise policies as needed to enhance the experiences of Black graduate students.

On Mental Health. Take necessary steps to expand the capacity for mental health counseling to assist Black students who may be experiencing race-based traumatic stress.^{7,8} The mental health resources and offerings should be comparable to those provided for other mental health issues offered at the university.

On Professional Networking. Professional societies that target under-represented groups serve as critical lifelines to support Black students who find themselves isolated on their campuses. Similar to faculty, the institution should sponsor travel and registration fees that allow Black graduate students to build their professional networks and to connect with others across the nation who provide community in the absence of adequate representation on their own campuses.

On Teaching. All graduate teaching assistants should undergo training to develop cultural competency and be informed and equipped to address racism when interacting with students. Student evaluations of teaching assistants should include assessments of cultural competency and trigger actionable measures to enhance the learning environment for all students.

On Vulnerability. Similar to safe-zone training provided for the LGBTQ community, establish a set of anti-racism courses/modules or training to certify faculty members with whom Black graduate students can feel safe to talk. This is especially important in predominantly white institutions, but would be valuable at all universities. Provide certified faculty members with a display in their office to readily identify such safe spaces. Suggested training content includes profiling and discrimination against Black students.

On Technical Talks. Normalizing Black scholarship will go a long way to bolstering the morale of Black students and stemming racist perspectives of Blacks as “less than.” Departments should be more intentional about bringing more Black and other URM speakers to campus. Consider also bringing in faculty from HBCUs to give talks about their research.

On Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). As a way to invest in strengthening the pathway for Black students, engage more deeply with HBCU student populations. For example, sponsor Black graduate students (especially those from HBCUs) to recruit on their campuses.

On International Students. Anti-racist training and education should be extended to all students, including international students. An example of relevant content that could be helpful includes episodes of Black-ish Season 2 (e.g., episode 16 (‘Hope’) - see the following clip <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VvykfyGTnbQ>).

On Black Organizations. Showcase the research and community activities of Black student organizations on department and college websites as a way to recognize and value this work. This action would acknowledge their contributions to help with more than diversity initiatives.



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UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION INITIATIVES

On Recruitment and Admissions. Bolster recruitment activities aimed at increasing representation of Black students in the undergraduate population.⁴ Reimagine eligibility requirements for undergraduate admissions to provide equitable access for all student populations.⁵

On Widening the Pathway. Enhance outreach efforts at the K-12 level to build awareness and access to higher education for Black students in communities in proximity to the university.^{2-5,7,8}

On Preparation for Engineering. Require transparency on the data and metrics being used to matriculate Black students in first-year engineering programs and engineering majors. Evaluate the processes used to make admissions decisions to ensure the use of holistic metrics to keep students on the engineering pathway. Give careful thought to the messaging of pre-college and introductory programs that may be viewed as “remedial” to other students and unintentionally confer labels to Black students who participate.

On Retention. Establish a University-wide Retention Task Force composed of faculty, staff and students to develop a retention plan for the University.³ The institution should assume that Black students will experience additional stress due to racism that persists in the community. As a result the institution should provide targeted mental health resources for Black students to cope with trauma due to racism on campus. Do not burden Black undergraduate students to volunteer on this task force, but identify task force members who represent all perspectives. If diverse faculty are asked to serve, compensate them appropriately.

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