

Confronting Racism in CWR: A List of Student Reform Demands

Although the seeds of the ideas for many of these points come from a range of our peers in CWR, the text of this list and the linked resources have been primarily compiled by Christina Im '22 and Grace Simmons '22.

Support Divestment, Abolition, & Reparations

- Stand with students in urging the university to [divest from the prison industrial complex](#), [abolish campus police](#), and [pay reparations to descendants of enslaved people](#).
- Allocate funding for collaborative student or faculty creative projects that radically imagine a more socially just world. This is a call to broaden the tradition of [the Toni Morrison Prize](#) and challenge the idea that recognition of art should always fall on individuals rather than collectives or collaborators.

Mandate Anti-Racism Training

- **Require all CWR faculty to undergo anti-racism training each semester, with non-Princeton-affiliated facilitator(s) who are compensated for their time and labor.** It should not take a review or decision that a faculty member is racist for faculty members to be invested in the lifelong work of anti-racism. At a baseline level, a faculty member who is not actively engaging in anti-racism work is unable to teach all students equitably. Without exaggeration, this is a matter of faculty being proficient at their jobs.
 - For example, NYU [has a training for faculty and staff on facilitating anti-racist and other difficult dialogues as well as understanding and mitigating racial and other microaggressions](#).
- **Invite the entire CWR community to engage with anti-racism education throughout the year.** In many CWR workshops, it is customary to require students to attend anywhere from 1–3 writers' readings over the course of the semester, potentially summarizing their thoughts on these events. This custom provides a reasonable precedent for making at least one of these required events a lecture, workshop, reading, or teach-in that relates to anti-racism or centers BIPOC experiences.
 - To address the dearth of these educational offerings on Princeton's campus, CWR should commit to a reading series focused exclusively on BIPOC writers that compensates these writers for their time and work.
 - Krishni Metivier (*Inside Higher Ed*) recommends that universities “develop funded, mandatory antiracism workshops, reading groups and teach-ins for department faculty, university staff and students led by experts in their respective disciplines that include BIPOC histories of racism.” [\[x\]](#)
 - Metivier: “Advance campus debate about racial justice by inviting antiracist and BIPOC history speakers to hold discussions in and outside classrooms.” [\[x\]](#)

Dismantle White Supremacy in the Workshop Space

- **Require CWR workshop classes to establish anti-oppressive discussion norms at the beginning of each semester.** These discussion norms should deal explicitly with thoughtfully engaging with peers' work without applying a white, colonial, heteropatriarchal lens. While specific norms may vary with the group of students in a particular workshop, potential points to consider include:
 - Challenge norms that require the writer to be silent when their work is being workshopped or that require the work to “stand on its own” without context before being workshopped. Consider how these “workshop strategies” may actually privilege writing that comes from dominant-culture or privileged perspectives, while opening up writing that comes from different perspectives to criticism from an oppressive lens.
 - Discuss specific procedures for discussing work that reclaims slurs, is written partially or completely in vernacular / dialect / a different language, or is otherwise engaging in language that only people of a particular background should be using. If having a student who is not the writer read the work aloud is a norm of the workshop, the student reading should always have the writer's consent.
 - Discuss students' paradigms for what is treated as “realistic.” Consider how BIPOC students' experiences may be invalidated by comments like, “It's unrealistic to have this many Black people in a story,” or “The blatant display of racism by the speaker's friend in this stanza is unrealistic.”
- **Create infrastructure within CWR for reporting and pursuing accountability for experiences of discrimination in the classroom.** Too often, these experiences are communicated only to fellow BIPOC students in order to caution them against a particular course or a particular professor. BIPOC students should not have to rely on a “whisper network” to avoid experiencing racism in the classroom, which means that CWR should be proactive about holding discriminatory students and faculty members accountable.
 - Krishni Metivier (*Inside Higher Ed*) recommends that universities “implement a . . . hate and bias incident reporting system with safeguards for victims and transparent methods for addressing all reports effectively. You ensure that collected data on incidents is disseminated for analysis, policy improvements and prevention.” [\[x\]](#)
 - Metivier: “Follow transparent procedures for removing faculty, staff and students who are found to be perpetuating discrimination, hate and/or bias on and off campus.” [\[x\]](#)

Foster BIPOC Community for CWR Students

- **Intentionally hire more permanent BIPOC faculty, especially Black and Indigenous faculty.** CWR has only one permanent Black professor and no Indigenous faculty members. Rather than temporary fellowships or visiting professorships, BIPOC writers—with a focus

on Black and Indigenous writers—should be given permanent faculty positions to ensure a lasting impact on CWR.

- **Create affinity spaces for BIPOC students.** These spaces should allow for and encourage regular meeting and community building among BIPOC students. They should occur under the auspices of the program itself rather than as an initiative that is dependent on the labor of student leaders for its existence.
 - If spaces are created for white CWR students, it is imperative that these spaces exist only as anti-racism learning spaces that are accountable to BIPOC.

Center Anti-Racism & BIPOC Writers in the Curriculum

- **Create introductory level courses that center on the intersection between identity, art, and social change.** The only course offered by CWR that explicitly focuses on race should not be an upper-level seminar that is inaccessible to the majority of students. Race in creative writing is not a “special topic” and can only be treated like one in a program that centers whiteness. Instead, this coursework should be as accessible as possible and focus on the contributions of BIPOC writers.
- **Mandate a course in anti-racism and equity in creative writing as a core course for CWR certificate students.** Rigorously engaging with the concerns of empathy and justice is vital to a writer’s craft and is vital above and beyond a writer’s craft. This engagement should not be optional, and especially not for certificate students.
- **Develop or strengthen partnerships with programs and departments that explicitly center BIPOC teaching and experience (e.g., the Department of African American Studies, the Program in Latino Studies, and the Program in Asian American Studies).** Offer a wide range of coursework cross-listed with and informed by these departments and programs.
 - One way these partnerships might work: USF’s English Department has committed to “work[ing] with all instructional faculty across all three USF campuses to include intentional assignments and activities designed to promote anti-racism. A collaborative database of related assignments, readings, and pedagogical strategies will be developed and made available to instructors.” [\[x\]](#)

Expand Access to CWR’s Resources

The following proposals pertain to current students.

- **Perform sustained outreach to BIPOC students in advance of CWR course application periods.** Even students already involved with CWR often miss application deadlines for future courses, providing ample evidence that the students who are most often able to apply are those who are already aware of CWR’s offerings and closely following application periods. Marginalized students who do not already know peers involved with CWR or come into Princeton already familiar with CWR are blocked out of registering for courses without realizing that application deadlines have already come and gone.

- **Fundamentally reconsider the application-only structure of workshop courses.** Outreach around application periods is frankly a stopgap measure. Predicating entry into CWR on a structure of gatekeeping often discourages marginalized students (especially BIPOC and/or FLI students) from pursuing creative writing academically. For *at least* introductory CWR courses, the application should be abolished. For upper-level CWR courses, the program should critically reevaluate whether an application with a writing sample is necessary if upper-level courses are already limited to students who have taken two 200-level CWR courses.

The following proposals pertain to prospective students or people not currently affiliated with the university.

- **Invest in outreach to prospective students of color, especially first-generation / low-income students.** This outreach should not be based on evaluations of the ‘merit’ of prospective students’ work.
- **Offer free community education programs that specifically serve BIPOC.** These community education programs may or may not also be outreach programs for prospective students, depending on the needs of the community(ies) being served. Some potential options include:
 - A local, in-person writing workshop for high school students in the Princeton or Trenton area, taught by compensated CWR students.
 - A global online writing workshop for high school students, taught by compensated CWR students. [Word Camp](#) at the University of Pennsylvania’s Kelly Writers House provides a precedent for this model.
- **Allocate resources and/or funding for CWR student projects that serve BIPOC communities locally, nationally, or globally.** These projects should be developed in partnership with members of the communities they are intended to serve, and they should fundamentally be based on relationship building with these communities. Three potential options for implementation include:
 - Summer funding, to join the Lewis Center’s funding opportunities that are strictly related to costs related to students’ own studies.
 - Coursework, potentially in partnership for the [Program for Community-Engaged Scholarship](#). This option involves faculty members from the very first planning stages of these projects.
 - A new option for the creative writing thesis. This option involves sustained guidance from a faculty advisor, in much the same way a traditional creative writing thesis does.

Equip CWR Students for Anti-Racist Practice Beyond the University

- **Prepare interested BIPOC students for careers in creative writing and the arts.** BIPOC students face countless obstacles pursuing careers in the arts that their white peers may not, including the prevalence of unpaid internships in the arts and the inaccessibility of

MFA programs. Access to meaningful mentorship from faculty and alumni should not be limited to students who enter the certificate program (especially with the gatekeeping inherent in the administration of the program). Some important options for doing this work:

- Create a network of BIPOC alumni mentors for CWR students, and facilitate one-on-one conversation and connection between interested students and alumni.
- Provide yearly workshops aimed at strengthening BIPOC students' applications to graduate degree programs in creative writing.
- Provide paid fellowships or internships for BIPOC students in CWR that help build skills for careers in publishing, teaching, or the arts more broadly.
- **Create consistently offered coursework that interrogates the structural racial dynamics of literary institutions, including but not limited to publications, presses, non-profits, and universities.** Grappling with the structural inequity in literary institutions and developing craft are not mutually exclusive projects. In fact, it is essential that these projects be woven together.
 - For example, the Program in Dance is offering [a Fall 2020 course](#) titled “Are You For Sale? Performance Making, Philanthropy, and Ethics,” which asks, “How are performing artists financing their work, and what does this mean in relationship to economic and social justice?”

Commit to Ongoing Transparency & Accountability

- **Commit to soliciting specific, anonymous feedback from CWR students on coursework and anti-racism initiatives on a regular (e.g., semesterly) basis.** It should not take upheaval or conflict for CWR to seek out student voices, and it should not place undue pressure on students to give their honest opinions on what CWR can do better. One potential option is to time these feedback periods partway through the semester, so that faculty members can attempt to correct course if their workshops have created toxic environments for BIPOC students.
 - If CWR students are ever asked to propose reforms to the program or aid in their implementation, it is imperative that these students be compensated for their time and labor. However, demanding this labor from students should not be the program's default approach.
- **Hire equity, diversity, and inclusion consultants to research and oversee what CWR can do to help marginalized communities as well as BIPOC students.** Seeking feedback from students is vital, but not enough. CWR's movement toward anti-racism should be continuous and should not require the agitation and labor of students. There is a thin line between listening to students and demanding that they do the work for you.
 - These surveys or audits should be conducted on a consistent, regular basis. For example, USF's English Department's Diversity and Inclusion Committee has committed to conducting an “annual climate survey to ensure we identify and improve areas where we fall short and build on areas where we are making progress.” [\[x\]](#)

- **Publish semesterly or yearly summaries of the work of the Committee on Race and the Arts.** What kind of work is the Committee engaged in? Not engaged in? Why is this information not readily available? This Committee should be accountable to the CWR community, especially BIPOC students.