

# Organizing so Black Lives Matter

Black Lives  
Matter

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to respond to racial injustice and white supremacy, within the context of ongoing Black Lives Matter activism against police brutality through public protests.

**Design/methodology/approach** – In this paper, the authors consider the work of organizing institutions of higher education so that Black Lives Matter.

**Findings** – The authors offer a number of practical insights and suggestions in order to deal with racial injustice and white supremacy and better support Black faculty, staff and students on college campuses.

**Originality/value** – In addressing issues of racial injustice and white supremacy on college campuses, the authors bring together our experiences and perspectives as diversity officer and faculty member, respectively.

**Keywords** Higher education, Organizational culture, Black people, Inclusion, Racial discrimination

**Paper type** Viewpoint

Today, we write this article in a society that is unsafe because of white supremacy, and more stratified than ever in its lack of safety, with Black Americans dying from COVID-19 at a rate of 2.5 times white Americans, reflecting the country's economic and health disparities along racial lines (Guzman, 2020). A rarified few hover above the frenetic abyss of pandemic and panic and pain and poverty, their bounty amplifying, while the rest of us swirl in a slow and relentless drain to the bottom. The pandemic is hurting many of us, but some of us a lot more than others. Like white supremacy, and racial capitalism, and the colonialism of the United States itself.

Which is to say, impossible, untenable, intolerable. Feast and famine. Too much white supremacy and death, both sanctioned and vigilante, and police brutality, law enforcement armed like the military and ready to strike, as if we are the enemy.

A church sign in a predominantly white town reads, "Injustice hurts all of us #BLM" without an understanding of the irony at the way this phrase negates the hashtag. And the way that Black Lives Matter has refused to be effaced into the pleasantries and equivocation of a mere rejection of racism.

It is clearer now than ever that merely to be on the side of Black people – whatever that means or looks like – is not enough. Scholar Barbara Smith (2020) reminds us, "white supremacy is not merely the individual delusion of being superior to Black people. Institutionalized white supremacy does not need individual bigotry in order to function, because it is a universal operating system that relies on entrenched patterns and practices to consistently disadvantage people of color and privilege whites."

It has been now more than five years since I (Cole) first began actively learning from the principles of Black Lives Matter and working to unlearn the decades of existing in and benefiting from a white supremacist society. During this time, I worked to understand white supremacy, my participation in it and also how to refuse my support of it. Today, as a newly tenured associate professor, I write alongside and in service of my college's associate vice president for inclusive excellence (Grace) to reckon with the accumulation of White supremacy and urgency of anti-racist organizing in higher education, with our campus as a microcosm of the wider world in which we live.



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The present moment – as our country and communities wrestle with white supremacy, its lasting legacies and the many forms and functions it takes – offers the opportunity to think beyond traditional notions of diversifying undergraduate teaching, particularly in terms of curriculum, in order to focus on how we organize spaces of higher education so that Black Lives Matter. How we are working to do this at our college now, in the midst of a pandemic, ongoing attention to racial injustice and a fraught presidential election is the focus of our paper.

To begin, it is important to understand higher education as, in practice if not philosophy, fundamentally white supremacist in nature. Even our Catholic colleges, even our women's colleges, even our colleges whose heritages are both Catholic and women's are nonetheless white supremacist institutions. When I say this to young Black and Latinx students in my office, their eyes get wide. "This place is not immune from the structures of racial discrimination and domination that are at the very heart and soul of this nation's history and its ongoing struggles with race and class. It is not different from the rest of the world," I (Cole) say. These students usually nod slowly and admit that they suspected as such. And yet they are surprised to hear me state it so plainly.

To create inclusive and responsive institutions of higher education, faculty – especially white faculty – must recognize the way that white supremacy hampers the safety, success and sanity of our Black and Brown students. For those of us committing to the work of anti-racism, this means articulating the importance and urgency of difference, now more than ever, for our classrooms, our campuses, the academy that will be left after coronavirus and the world at large.

To do this, the first and most important way to do this is to elicit and amplify the voices and experiences of Black community members. This means listening to, believing and acknowledging the experiences of Black students and colleagues. It means making an active effort to encourage and elevate their voices, experiences and expertise. To be in solidarity with Black lives and anti-racist reimagining of organizational life requires white people to make themselves secondary, not the center of focus and not the leading voice.

Because of our different positions and identities, we undertake this work in different ways. As a white professor and program director, it is important for me (Cole) to model both how to get out of the way, literally and figuratively and encourage white community members to do the same. For white people, this is work that takes active effort and attention because white voices and experiences are automatically centered in our country's policies and institutions.

This is the work of anti-racism. To be quiet, strong, consistent supports in service of Black people, their narratives, their needs and their perspectives of how to move forward is essential and incredibly hard for white people who often have no experience of how to or having to do this. As an accomplice in this work, I am a willing participant. But I am only helpful when I can get out of the way, call attention to and interrupt the unconscious racism of other white folks and amplify the voices of those whose experiences and expertise matter most – Black people themselves. Importantly, this also means that when white faculty, staff and administrators ignore, negate or downplay the experiences or insights of our Black community members, it is my job to point this out, stop it and shift the focus back to highlighting and hearing Black people and their insight.

As a Black-identifying multi-racial, multi-ethnic university administrator, it is essential that I (Grace) make sure that conversations about race centered on the experiences of BIPOC students, faculty and staff are happening and expected at all levels of the university and in all decisions we make as an institution. I work to bring people together to actively and intentionally act to dismantle white supremacy and oppression systemically by ensuring that we all have access to the right tools and resources, relevant and accurate data and a clear pathway toward change. We worked together as a community to uncover institutional policies and practices that are reinforcing white supremacy and minimizing Black lives.

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We developed an institutional action plan to begin to address systemic racism that identified a number of short and long-term institutional goals to help acknowledge and begin to dismantle some of the long-standing excuses for inaction. The plan sets forth concrete steps to remove those institutional barriers that are inhibiting individual action. And the entire community is working together to meet these goals for which they are accountable and are energized, even during a pandemic and an election year, where time and compassion are more precious resources than ever before.

As faculty and student support staff, and with all of our students, it is essential that we think critically and talk about our own participation in white supremacy and all systems of oppression. It is not enough that we relegate attention to and engagement with issues of race, identity and difference to ethnic studies classes, rather than making it an essential part of any college student's curriculum. This means making classrooms, offices and meetings places for frank discussions about race and its place in organizational life. What can make a college campus different than other institutions of American life is that it is a place in which to confront, discuss and work to undo the pernicious presence of white supremacy. Some ways that we are working to do this on our campus is through the creation of affinity groups, racial healing conversations and professional development opportunities for faculty and staff to understand how to work inclusively in their roles.

This is work that is essential and – full warning – can and will be exhausting. While many of students of color articulated that they appreciated acknowledgement of the racial reality of their lives, other students were less appreciative. “Dr. Cole talked a lot about race, and it was awkward,” one student wrote on their end-of-semester evaluation for my Media and Society course. I am fairly certain this was not meant as a compliment but I took it as an important observation nonetheless. It informed a new commitment to first day of class discussions in all of my courses. With students we discuss that, whatever the course title, this class is a place where issues of identity and difference will not only be present (always the case) but also that they would acknowledge and engage. So, sure. Let's get a little awkward, especially for those of us who are white and therefore used to being able to engage with issues of race on an elective basis, when and if we feel like it. As we move beyond the milquetoast commitment to diversity, we make a commitment to feeling uncomfortable and being able to identify and rectify when we are wrong.

Second, it is to understand that commitment to anti-racism is both ongoing and evolving. To embrace, own and practice being wrong. In my previous article (Cole, 2017), I used the word ally to describe my work. While initially reluctant, I chose to embrace this common descriptor with the encouragement of peer reviewers. To be an ally in the fight for racial justice is to support people of color, their humanity and their dignity in the face of process and people meant to demean, devalue and even kill them. I also described my students as underprivileged. I regret these descriptors, and I now am pointed in ensuring that students are described less in terms of what they lack (underprivileged) and more in terms of the way that our institutions and policies fail them (underserved). Likewise, I now actively eschew the descriptor of ally, as both presumptuous and problematic. As a white woman, to center or call attention my role is both unimportant and beside the point.

Further, it is essential to appreciate the risk and emotional labor involved in being Black in higher education today, more than ever. This means understanding that Black students and colleagues might not speak up for fear of retribution, professional consequences or because they cannot reckon with every instance of racism they encounter on a daily basis. And even if you think of yourself as an advocate and despite protestations that you are a safe space. In the face of the ongoing and active assaults against Black lives, the skin I (Cole) have in the game is merely the loss of my reputation, not my life or physical safety. And because my voice, to the extent that it has a platform (in this journal, of course, as well as in the larger society), is in no small part because of the authority that accompanies the color of my skin.

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As educators, we must challenge the narrative that failure is merely a personal choice. That college, the great equalizer with its systems and resources, can help fill deficits that our “underrepresented” and “underserved” bring into the classroom. But framing that life experience is a deficit is problematic in and of itself. By explicitly centering Black students’ identities, by talking about race in the classroom and by recognizing students’ experiences as an asset, we can reshape education. Faculty must look inward first to see how they are creating disparate outcomes before we look at the student’s behavior, motivation or willingness to learn. We must scrutinize the perceived barriers to Black student success and outcomes – excuses – and help lead our community past these barriers.

This requires open ourselves up to change – redesigning course content or format in order to ensure the success of all students and to accept nothing less from ourselves and our colleagues. For example, while many of my students do not see someone who looks like them when they look at me – a white woman – I can nonetheless work to make the curriculum reflect my student’s identities. Based on the tenets and learning I outlined in my previous article (Cole, 2017), I extended my attention to culturally sustaining pedagogy in my graduate classes in order to ensure that course reading lists were balanced in terms of the gender, racial and ethnic identity of the authors, the geographic context of the organizational contexts and the diversity of research methods used in the journal articles.

Even amongst faculty members committed to diversity and inclusion, there is inadvertent exclusion of women scholars and scholars of color from course syllabi. Colgan (2017) provides evidence of this from a study of graduate syllabi in the field of political science; Stewart (2020) shows that biology textbooks overwhelmingly cite scientists who are white men. This is important but often overlooked work in order to create courses that represent and sustain all our students and, by extension, the organizations and workplaces where all students will bring their learning to bear in the future. This commitment to addressing identity and difference in order to create learning spaces of inclusion was a particularly important – and time consuming – part of the labor of preparing this course. But it is essential in terms of ensuring enough representation of identity and difference to ensure that one scholar, text or perspective is used to represent the experience of all Black people.

With the help of our institutional action plan, I am now putting this experience to work on an academic committee that is working on how we can approach racial injustice pedagogically and institutionally. This includes examining our syllabus template for issues of bias and exclusion, ways of assessing syllabi for diversity and inclusion (or lack thereof) and how we can integrate the essential labor of confronting white supremacy and racial injustice into the annual reviews we do of faculty and programs. All of this is with the aim of making faculty-led spaces that acknowledge and attend to who are students are and the ways in which we can be better teachers and mentors to them. This builds on – but extends beyond – the notion that dealing with white supremacy is an issue of an individual professor or can be dealt with by the actions of one or more professors.

As faculty and administration, we are working to bring greater awareness to faculty about these issues. We assert that social positionality informs curriculum, as well as the way we design our courses and the way we treat our students. If we do not see it, we are not looking hard enough. It is requisite for us to name and engage issues of race in all of the work we do. Beginning this summer, college communication about race referenced Black people – with a capital B. This change, though just capitalizing one letter, speaks to the institution’s efforts to transform and improve the way we communicate about race on our campus.

We are talking about race more than ever before. Since learning from Black Lives Matter, I have made efforts to identify myself (Cole) as a white woman when I introduce myself, present my perspective and share the work that I do. This means calling out my whiteness in order to highlight that it, and my cisgender femininity, are both presumed and privileged aspects of my identity in order to disrupt their durability. In other words, it is imperative and

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take effort to make whiteness visible as something other than the silent default around which higher education, particularly the professoriate, is organized. It is my hope that by at first naming the thing that I am can shift – even just a tiny bit – the ways in which whiteness is the invisible and inviolable assumption around which academic life is organized. While I was often the lone voice to do this in years past and was often met with discomfort when I did, others are now responding in kind. In meetings this fall semester, as faculty and staff have worked collaboratively and willingly on a campus action plan for racial justice, we see greater willingness for (at least some) white folks to name their identities and talk forthrightly about it. And while this does not solve everything, it is a start.

In working with students, one of the most effective strategies is to articulate that, as a white woman, I likely do not understand their experiences. I explain that they are not expected or required to explain them to me or deal with them in my classes. However, I will work hard to provide course materials and assignments that engage with what means to be alive in the United States in 2020 – and the racial, gender, class, sexuality and other aspects of identity that this entails – and I will provide a space in which white experience is not the default and Black experience is ignored. I will provide opportunities for them to articulate, if they are willing, their experience and I will provide assignments and course materials that reflect, acknowledge and engage racial and gender diversity.

We must also recognize our institution's passive acceptance of racial injustice as a starting point. The status quo of performative allyship and relegating care, concern and complaints related to "diversity" to one department on the institutional level cannot continue. This work is everyone's responsibility. It is not solely the work of an associate vice president, their office or a diversity committee. It must be embedded in the mission, the systems and the expectations of the organizations, otherwise they will fail. It is also creating more opportunities for reporting bias or discrimination, but it goes beyond that. We are developing substantive and ongoing learning opportunities to ensure that everyone understand that it is the impact not the intent that matters, especially when it comes to reporting and responding. With the leadership of Grace and our vice president for academic affairs, I (Cole) am on a faculty/administration committee working toward the creation of inclusive hiring practices that foster diversity. These are necessary steps for institutional, rather than individual efforts for racial justice.

As a senior administrator charged with ensuring an equitable and inclusive campus climate, I (Grace) am working to create systems and processes that value Black lives. This includes improving our demographic data and allowing more opportunities for community members to self-identify beyond the categorizations required by the government. With a fuller picture of the racial and ethnic diversity of our community, we can identify where we are undervaluing Black lives and drive resources and support where they should be. We never want a Black student to be counseled against speaking up, pointing out injustice or put in doubt that their lived experience is not reality. It is also working to make sure that Black student success is the measure by which we determine the success of the institution. We are working to provide program-level retention data by race, ethnicity and gender to help understand where and how we are exacerbating or maintaining inequality. When the entire institution is galvanized into action, then listening and believing the experiences of Black people becomes the expectation and not something that only happens when Black people are in the room, screaming to be heard.

As a program director, I (Cole) am collaborating with the faculty in my program in order to enact a commitment to racial justice in all that we do. From (Grace), we have been offered optional language to include in our syllabi that underscores our commitment to inclusive excellence in our teaching and learning space, whether in person or online. In talking with my white faculty members about this, I was heartened that all of them chose to adopt this language in their syllabi without my having to ask or mandate it.

We are in the midst of creating a student media outlet led by a Black woman student, with the express effort of drawing on and out the experiences of those students who have been unheard and marginalized. In one of our classes, our students are working the Center for Inclusive Excellence to create professional and engaging communication for their work to both internal and external publics. We are inviting our young alumnx of color into our classes to speak with students about their experiences at our institution and in their careers. And with the help of our university archivist, we are finally documenting the lived experiences of our Black students and alumnx and ensuring that the history of our university encompasses the histories of all of our students. All of these reflect a specific, concerted effort to support and center Black lives in our institution. It is an imperfect and incomplete project, but it is an ongoing process in which we see the participation and support of more faculty and staff than ever before, both in terms of audible and visible support and in willingness to participate.

In closing, as we continue to see both the pandemic and police brutality – as well as the resistance to these – continue to grow, it is urgent that we use this time as an opportunity to solidify what we know to be true and necessary for Black lives to matter in higher education. Diversity, equity and inclusion must be muscular, robust and essential. They must be a strategic priority of the institution and the community members who are a part of it.

As an untenured faculty member, I (Cole) was told by colleagues and administrators to leave “that race stuff” until I had tenure. I knew that I would not be willing to work at any institution that would not tenure me for the urgent, necessary work of better serving our students, particularly the Black and Brown students who have found higher education a place of alienation and harm rather than uplift and empowerment. I was both impudent and impassioned enough to continue in this work, undeterred precisely because I knew that my students and our institution needed faculty to use our voices and institutional power to demonstrate the absolute imperative of equity and inclusion. I was tenured and promoted with this commitment and attention to race and racial injustice as a significant component of my dossier. As members of higher education, we have a key role to play in organizing efforts to undo systemic racism (Hrabowski *et al.*, 2020). We must demand that combating white supremacy and pursuing racial justice receive the same attention and accountability as other areas of strategic importance within our colleges and universities.

We count our success not just in terms of numbers – our retention, graduation and promotion rates – but in the creation of an atmosphere that fosters and supports the success of our Black students, faculty and staff, the power and positions they serve within our institution. Ultimately, the numbers that count are the ways in which we fulfill our university’s mission only by doing better to serve, support, and safeguard Black lives in our teaching, research, and service.

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