Toward More Sustainable Antiracist Practices

SHERRI CRAIG, BARCLAY BARRIOS, AND
JEFFREY GALIN

Inspired by the recent upheaval of their cities and institutions following the public, gruesome murder of George Floyd—a result of police violence—writing studies programs across the country have taken an increased interest in issuing statements on equity and inclusion and providing spaces in their courses and programs for antiracist and pro-Black assessment practices. Some institutions also have examined hiring practices, established equity and inclusion committees to review campus policies, and offered workshops and materials on addressing equity concerns on campuses. The national push to address these concerns through diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programming has led to significant backlash. An article on the CNN website, "DEI programs in universities are being cut across the country. What does this mean for higher education?," recently noted that "[m]ore than a dozen state legislatures have introduced or passed bills reining in DEI programs in colleges and universities, claiming the offices eat up valuable financial resources with little impact" (para. 4). The *Chronicle of Higher Education*'s "DEI Legislation Tracker" reports further that nineteen states have introduced forty bills to restrict DEI practices in higher education, and so far seven states have approved and enacted those laws, while twenty-nine bills have been tabled, failed to pass, or vetoed. The fact that so many states have been actively pursuing such bills suggests that diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts are under attack. They have become a favorite target for the political right in its fight against what Ron DeSantis calls the nation's "woke agenda." Noting the extensive backlash means that DEI programming has had an impact.

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Although hardly new to the conversation in 2020, antiracist assessment practices, which have served as one of the most concrete strategies implemented in engaging antiracist pedagogy, often appear to be the primary response of many institutions to systemic racism and its violence. These efforts towards antiracism have resulted in rubrics, workshops, and renewed commitments to inclusive

teaching and learning. However, most of these actions were not completed in concert with other departments and faculty on campus, resulting in isolated and, we suggest, ultimately unsustainable efforts.

We are, of course, aware that others have made similar arguments, as there are articles and chapters that address institutional change for antiracist practices outside of isolated spaces. Diab et al. note that we must "move toward a more systemic understanding of and action against oppression" and thereby "find ways to intervene and work with/against systems of power" (2). Diab, Ferrel, Godbee, and Simpkins understand that transformational change involves policy-making, coalition building, and long-term investment to change along with frequent renewal. In her short critique "Your Contract Grading Ain't It," Sherri Craig considers alternative antiracist assessment practices to be the "low hanging fruit" of actions that instructors can and should take at the university to enact lasting antiracist change (146).

Instead of considering individual classrooms and instructors, we build a case below that some of the current methods used to address these inequities, such as antiracist assessment practices, are typically constructed within the limited scope of the classroom or an isolated program. We advocate for a different approach to antiracist work that does not center on assessment practices; although antiracist work may include assessment. We look more broadly at the university as an complex adaptive system and consider ways to build a more sustainable approach. We argue that none of these methods takes into consideration the fact that as complex adaptive systems, universities warrant a systematic approach to such work over long periods of time in order to establish sustainable programs.

As far as we know, conversations around systemic change have been limited. For example, Welton et al.'s "Anti-Racist Change: A Conceptual Framework for Educational Institutions to Take Systemic Action" makes such an argument, but it relies on organizational change literature that is better suited for corporate cultures than academic institutions. We also note Ash et al.'s "Anti-Racism in Higher Education: A Model for Change," which deploys critical race theory, offering a seven-part ideological approach to confronting white supremacy in higher education. In both cases, the focus is limited primarily to teaching and leadership within strongly hierarchical systems, which are useful but not sufficient for promoting sustainable change in academic institutions, particularly higher education.

Universities that have been successful in developing university-wide antiracist and DEI initiatives have, more often than not, been developed beyond the scope of writing across the curriculum (WAC) programs. Notable examples of such programs at the University of Washington, University of Michigan, and Eastern Michigan University demonstrate university-wide initiatives that are based in an office of diversity, equity, and inclusion. These offices vary across universities in name as well as in scale

and scope of policies, practices, and programs supported, but most establish a mission, and set of goals and coordinate with the university's strategic plan. Two of these institutions have WAC programs, but those programs are not officially associated with the offices of DEI. For example, the University of Michigan's Sweetland Center for Writing oversees writing for the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts and houses the university's writing center. In 2019, the Sweetland Center received a grant from the Center for Research and Learning and Teaching (CRLT) to support their Anti-Racist Task Force. This task force read material from Kendi, Anoue, hooks, Brown, and others during their monthly meetings. Ultimately, this task force seems to have disbanded after the grant ended. Recently, Eastern Michigan began its antiracist initiative by imagining the development of a WAC program, but it broadened its focus to develop a university-wide DEI initiative without developing a WAC program at all.

Other institutions, such as Syracuse University and Appalachian State University, have DEI initiatives that directly inform WAC programs or were developed with WAC in mind. Syracuse is best known for its Antiracist WAC Toolkit, developed by Genevieve Garcia de Mueller, Ana Cortes, and Ezikio Lopez. This initiative was one of the earliest and most cited. Writing faculty from all disciplines work in a year-long fellows program after their initial workshop to develop DEI-informed syllabi. This program is also connected to a writing center, a writing symposium, and the Central New York Humanities Corridor Antiracist Writing Across the Curriculum Working Group. As one of the most comprehensive antiracist WAC programs in the country today, it has set a standard for antiracist WAC work in the field. It is heavily grounded in antiracist assessment and emphasizes language use, student diversity, and syllabus and assignment development with a DEI focus in mind.

Appalachian State's WAC program is housed within the University College and serves the first-year writing program and their writing center to support students on campus. WAC consultants work with faculty to support the teaching of writing, and writing in the disciplines (WID) faculty consultants serve as liaisons across disciplines and advise the program. Among the resources that the website provides, there is a range of antiracist materials provided that includes the following: an accessibility faculty guide, critical citations for antiracist pedagogy, antiracist teaching resources, and antiracist feedback practices. Programs like Appalachian State's that provide a range of WAC strategies, programs, and initiatives and provide resources for antiracist/DEI practices are more common than programs like Syracuse's dedicated antiracist WAC program.

Staci M. Perryman-Clark writes in *The New Work of Writing Across the Curriculum: Diversity and Inclusion, Collaborative Partnerships, and Faculty Development* that her shift from serving as a writing program administrator to an academic administrator

"was necessary to develop sustainable diversity and inclusion programming beyond the first-year writing experience" (8). She recognizes that DEI work in writing programs is often limited and siloed; therefore, she advocates for partnerships with a broad array of initiatives at universities, particularly WAC programs and centers for teaching and learning. Many of the programs described here have dedicated time and resources to establishing the partnerships that Perryman-Clark describes.

Perryman-Clark argues for a broader focus of diversity and equity practices at universities, including broader collaborations and more interconnected planning across the university. Through a thorough description of her experiences as a WPA and a frequent partner of a center for teaching excellence, Perryman-Clark explains "that both faculty development and WAC need to make diversity and inclusion initiatives a priority for professional development, as both enhance student learning. Furthermore, these alliances can be strengthened by collaborating formally on diversity and inclusion programming" (10). While she argues that the focus for WAC programs has not historically been framed as support for DEI, it should be as long as it is not duplicating efforts and is partnering with other programs and initiatives across the institution to support those efforts. This book is an example of the focus we advocate for in the latter half of this article. While Perryman-Clark focuses on collaboration and affiliation with other units, we offer a systematic approach for engaging in this kind of work, which she does not offer. But before we can turn to a sustainable approach for diversity and equity in WAC work, we feel compelled to identify a few shortcomings of antiracist assessment work that has dominated most first-year writing efforts and a large number of WAC initiatives.

Building from the work of antiracist scholars such as Asao Inoue, we are particularly interested in Raymond William's discussion of emergent cultures and Michel Foucault's theory of a "micro-physics" of power to explain why current models of antiracist initiatives are aspirational but unsustainable. We also interweave narratives from our own experiences that have inspired us to address these issues. We then propose the whole systems approach for sustainable WAC programs to suggest ways of extending work that many scholars in the field have begun in individual classrooms to include broader contexts, strategies, and levels of the university (Cox et al.).

Discourse and Power

"Toward More Sustainable Antiracist Practices" was first conceived when Jeff began looking for ways to help the WAC Committee reconsider the university-wide assessment process that the WAC program at Florida Atlantic University has developed and utilized since 2007. He turned to Asao Inoue's *Labor-Based Grading Contracts,* but quickly realized that its underlying theoretical framework was flawed and warranted further discussion to understand why labor-based grading is not a sustainable

solution for antiracist WAC programs. At that point, Jeff decided to focus his sabbatical on this critique and a possible alternative solution. He invited Sherri and, later, Barclay to collaborate because they both brought personal experience with labor-based grading to the project.

While others have critiqued Anoue's work, none have identified the issues that lead to unsustainability. All three of us agree that "[g]rading, because it requires a single, dominant standard, is a racist and White supremacist practice" (5). However, this claim does not recognize additional correlative statements: all societies have a dominant culture; all dominant cultures have one or two dominant discourses; all societies impose on their students' standards of academic writing based on this dominant discourse; and all societies are complicit in racist practices. Since all cultures have dominant, residual, and emergent cultures (and discourses), these dominant discourses are embedded at all levels of the culture. In order for an emergent culture to ultimately challenge and be taken up by the dominant culture—thereby making the emergent culture sustainable—one cannot simply change a process in the classroom and expect it to change that society's entire network of relationships, patterns of behavior, and embedded dominant structures.

Williams explains in chapter 8 of *Marxism and Literature* that emergent culture can take the form of new and/or oppositional practices in a dominant culture—although there are "spheres of practice and meaning" that the dominant discourse is "unable in any real terms to recognize," may neglect, or intentionally exclude (126). So, not all emergent practices are ultimately incorporated. He notes further that dominant culture typically works to subsume emergent practices that it does recognize—think of rap music—but often only takes up "facsimiles of the genuinely emergent cultural practice" (126). Under such conditions, any significant emergence, beyond or against a dominant mode, is very difficult because of repeated confusions and tensions with the facsimiles and the novelties of the "incorporated phase" (126). Nonetheless, emergence does occur. But it does not happen quickly—think of the emergence of the middle class—and it is "never only a matter of immediate practice," like grading strategies. He says that emergent culture "depends crucially on finding new forms or adaptations of form," but "[a]gain and again what we have to observe is in effect a pre-emergence, active and pressing but not yet fully articulated, rather than the evident emergence which could be more confidently named" (126-27). Williams here is primarily talking about changes in class cultures, but not exclusively. Nonetheless, his argument that we mostly see a not fully articulated "pre-emergence" is essential to our conversation about antiracist culture and accompanying discourse because the majority of antiracist practices we currently see today in rhetoric and composition are pre-emergent forms—practical applications that are not yet capable of changing dominant culture because they are too limited in scope and impact. We

discuss further what we mean by this statement when we turn to chaos theory to better understand emergence in complex adaptive systems.

Before clarifying emergence further, however, we turn to Michel Foucault's explanation of how power is deployed within culture to provide a more nuanced understanding of creating cultural change at universities. We argue that Foucault, like Williams, understands that temporary inversions of power relations do not overthrow the complex network of relations that drive dominant culture. Therefore, shifts in grading practices, while useful pedagogically in some contexts, are not ever likely to shift dominant culture without "a constantly repeated, and always renewable, move beyond a phase of practical incorporation" (Williams 124-25).

Inoue's own engagement with Foucault's explanation of "docile bodies" in chapter 1, after he introduces Bourdieu's *habitus*, is a pivotal moment in his overall theoretical framework. In the section "Determined Problematics of Docile Bodies," he uses Foucault to explain that "[o]ur classroom assessment ecologies discipline our students in determined ways, ways that are constrained yet still have some degree of choice in them" (*Labor-Based* 37). In making this claim, Inoue sets up his project: to identify how the management of docile bodies in our classes serves dominant discourse, but also to illustrate how the degree of choice in these classrooms makes room for instructors to change the tactics and techniques used to measure student success. He has rightfully identified that Foucault is concerned with "the political technology of the body." Foucault explains that this "technology is diffuse, rarely formulated in continuous, systematic discourse," is made up of "bits and pieces," and "implements a disparate set of tools or methods" (*Discipline and Punish* 26). Importantly, Foucault adds that it "cannot be localized in a particular type of institution or state apparatus" because these institutions actually have access to it in the form of what he calls "a micro-physics of power" (27). Any study of this micro-physics of power that is "exercised on the body" is conceived of as a strategy: "its effects of domination are attributed not to 'appropriation', but to dispositions, maneuvers, tactics, techniques, functionings" that are to be deciphered as a "network of relations, constantly in tension, in activity, rather than a privilege that one might possess." Ultimately, he notes that "power is exercised rather than possessed; it is not the 'privilege', acquired or preserved, of the dominant class, but the overall effect of its strategic positions—an effect that is manifested and sometimes extended by the position of those who are dominated" (26-27). Inoue rightfully recognizes that writing assessment practices are precisely the kind of tactics, techniques, and functionings that Foucault was talking about, a kind of micro-physics of power that does not reside in larger state apparatuses but is embedded in day-to-day functionings of the classroom. Inoue explains that "classroom assessment spaces discipline our students by constraining and pressuring them" (*Labor-Based* 37). To say this is to "say that our assessment ecologies,

which loosely is everything we do around student writing, is a determined docile-making ecological place" (38). But we mustn't limit the management of student bodies to specific classrooms and specific teaching practices. Indeed, several scholars have begun to discuss faculty training, WAC programs, institutional centers, hiring practices, etc. as long-term, sustainable efforts towards building antiracist institutions, but the vast majority of writing and WAC studies scholars, like Inoue, focus their efforts on classroom assessment practices, whether singular or programmatic. The extent to which antiracist efforts have been explored through institution-wide efforts and WAC scholarship is minimal. Such efforts would demand incredible resources and labor that, in light of Covid-19, enrollment crises, and ongoing attacks on DEI programming on many campuses, are difficult to navigate. As a result, most of us are forced to neglect broader institutional structures at other scales of the institution and beyond that perpetuate white supremacist practices like assessment.

This individualized state of affairs is the kind of paradox Inoue identifies in his own work that is important but not resolvable: faculty can make a difference, but mostly in their own classrooms and sometimes in the classrooms of others under the guidance of an administrator or director of WAC. He is right. We can exercise our authority to determine what kind of grading goes on in our classrooms to help address inequities created by the expectations of dominant discourse. Even more importantly, he imagines the possibilities of departments deciding to implement some form of contract or ungrading across their local programs. However, once students leave the writing classroom, the micro-physics of power that governs their bodies (i.e., the Western, white supremacist structure of the university) gets harder and harder to impact or change. Foucault notes that strategic relations of power are not "univocal": "They define innumerable points of confrontation," all of which are potential focuses of instability with their "own risks of conflict or struggles." Across the system, students face diverse challenges. And even though there is the possibility of at least a temporary inversion of power relations in a given classroom or program, Foucault declares that the "overthrow of these 'micro-powers' does not, then, obey the law of all or nothing; it is not acquired once and for all by a new control of the situation" (*Discipline and Punish* 27). That is to say that a single, temporary action cannot create lasting change to eradicate racism and inequality in our universities. As many scholars have already conceded, the changing of grading practices cannot by itself overthrow these innumerable culturally embedded micro-powers unless it induces changes "on the entire network in which it is caught up" (27). Efforts to rethink departments', universities', and even disciplinary organizations' assessment practices and language, such as the "WPA Outcomes Statement" and the "Frameworks for Success in Postsecondary Writing," spark important conversations that will lead to change but still do not represent a broad cultural shift.

Foucault more specifically addresses the relationship between networks of power and the possibility of resistance in *The History of Sexuality*. "Where there is power," he notes, "there is resistance" (95). Since power is always relational, it depends on "a multiplicity of points of resistance: these play the role of adversary, target, support, or handle" (95). Thus, we might question practices like labor-based grading as simply oppositional to the power of white supremacy. If pursued without careful reflection, such practices may end up "mobile and transitory" (96). For Foucault, change does not result from some "great Refusal," "soul of revolt," or "great radical ruptures" but instead from "the strategic codification of these points of resistance . . . somewhat similar to the way in which the state relies on the institutional integration of power relationships" (96). Just as white supremacy has been integrated into the institutions of higher education, in part through the grading practices that Inoue and others examine, so too any resistance to that power needs to be codified across multiple points, networked together into a new institutional integration. If we take Foucault's most immediate example, the birth of the new species "homosexual," the formulation of a "reverse discourse" arguing for the naturalness of homosexuality in the same scientific language of the sexologists did very little to change the status of queer peoples until the Stonewall riots. In the aftermath of the riots, LGBTQ activists formed an organized resistance, in part by borrowing the codified practices of feminist, antiwar, and civil rights movements. In the same way, isolated classrooms of resistant grading practices can have little effect without a strategic codification—a larger, coherent narrative that, much like the power of the state, manifests in resistances across registers of power, both locally and at larger scales. Practices in a bubble can too easily remain isolated. Only when these practices are coupled with larger strategies can resistance fracture existing relations of power and reshape them.

Power and the Classroom

Barclay confronted some of these issues through his own implementation of labor-based grading. During a graduate seminar on teaching that he taught during the pandemic, in summer 2021, he became persuaded by Inoue's *Antiracist Writing Assessment Ecologies: Teaching and Assessing Writing for a Socially Just Future* and decided for the first time to implement a labor-based grading contract schema for his fall class, an upper-division writing course in the English department. What he found was that labor-based grading contracts are complex to implement, are difficult to track, and shift significant labor back onto the instructor in ways that reminded him troublingly of emotional labor expectations for teachers in general. He also noted that the impact on students was decidedly uneven. In the end, though he valued the goals Inoue articulated with regard to labor-based grading contracts, he

was not sure that his implementation of them met those goals. Moreover, his work in this one class did nothing to change the department's approach to grading as a whole.

In a class of around thirty students, he intuitively sensed that the use of a grading contract empowered only one student while disadvantaging at least one other. In a reflective course evaluation at the end of the semester, one student wrote, "I have issues getting to class on time some days because of personal issues with myself so making it to class at all was a success for me. Some days, if I knew I was going to be a little late I would panic and get myself worked up to the point where I just couldn't calm down and get myself there" (Atwater). When instructors center labor, students who struggle with chronic health conditions or other disabilities can be disadvantaged, as their conditions impact their ability to perform the same *quantity* of labor as others (Carillo 20). Even students without such challenges noted the ways in which the grading contract failed them by giving them the option to not do their best: "With my crazy busy schedule this semester I didn't feel as if I took advantage of that. Instead, I just wrote my [rough-draft and final] papers a day before class and I didn't think much of them because if I turned them in, my grade would be fine" (Lanctot).

Many other students appreciated the labor-based grading approach, but largely because it offered them the freedom to take risks in their writing, to be more creative and experimental. In this, they echoed earlier calls for this practice by theorists such as Peter Elbow, who suggested that taking grades off the table empowered students to locate their writing voice and take risks (8).

Only one student, who did not identify as a student of color, acknowledged its antiracist goals, writing, "I loved that this class tried to eliminate elitist biases that actively hurt some students in college. I understand that I am a person that often benefits from those biases, but I believe that college should be as accessible as possible, as everyone should have the opportunity to take the same classes" (Dunn). More troubling, perhaps, is the way in which this approach fueled prevailing white conceptions of success in America: "The grading contract was like a test of one's drive. It shows that a grade is not given but earned through overcoming challenges that are thrown at us. In a way, this method is preparing students for real life situations. You need to work hard for what you want" (Reilly). This statement echoes prevailing white narratives of the American dream, which suggest that anyone can make it if they work hard enough. It is disappointing but not surprising that white narratives would overlay the project because that is often how students are trained to make sense of the world. Ironically, then, in centering labor, the grading contract also recentered a white mythology often deployed to obscure the structural racism that guarantees that some people, mostly people of color, do not get what they want—no matter how hard they work—because the system is rigged against them. It also centered a specifically capitalist conception of work and the American dream, which

promises upward mobility but too often delivers low wages in dead-end jobs, shifting this failure from the system to the individual.

Expanding Antiracist, Linguistic Justice, CLA, and Other DEI Initiatives Beyond the Classroom

How we strive to be antiracist needs to vary depending on the rhetorical situation. In some cases, it means being vocal, direct, and even confrontational with our colleagues. In other cases, it needs to be a more subtle approach. In every case, we need to work in ways that empower us to be heard and not shut down by the politics of opposition found throughout higher education. As Foucault suggested, we need a range of tactics and maneuvers. By this we mean a rhetorical register and direct engagement with dominant discourse grounded in student and faculty self-reflection, but not less of a focus on changing institutional policy, practices, and structures.

For these and other reasons, we agree with Staci Perryman-Clark that contract grading, ungrading, specification grading, and the like are starting places. However, to become sustainable, antiracist, linguistic justice, and other DEI initiatives in higher education need to be much more highly integrated into institutional practices and policies than even WAC programs. We are not suggesting that individual classroom practices and changes stop or be removed. Nor are we suggesting that the emergent areas of antiracism, decolonization, linguistic justice, translingualism, labor-based grading, and other liberatory practices and pedagogies are collapsible into a single category of "diversity." Rather, we posit that assessment is a likely area where we can initiate change, but so are students' capacities to anticipate the range of possible actions to take in a given context, take action, understand contexts, and evaluate the outcomes of their actions (Shapiro et al. 33). Yet these decisions cannot be only limited to classrooms either. Helping students "notice and utilize particular rhetorical and linguistic practices" in a given classroom does not necessarily transfer to other contexts and enable students to "make informed choices about their academic lives" or beyond (33). We encourage a focus on holistic, emergent moves at the university level that support all our diversity goals across the institution.

This last statement means that sustainable antiracist culture, discourse, and accompanying practices will require constant effort, across all levels of the university and beyond, including persistent self-awareness, which we discuss further below. Furthermore, not all of this work should be oppositional, and most of it will need to be outside of the classroom, including greater opportunities for collaboration—as Perryman-Clark recommends—but also more systematic work beyond that; and whatever work is done in the classroom needs to transfer to other levels of the institution. We need to acknowledge and work within dominant practices, not just name them, as we push back against them to shift policies, practices, and expectations.

Ibram Kendi quotes Audre Lorde about how we have been programmed to respond to human differences and contends that being an antiracist "is a radical choice in the face of this history, requiring a radical reorientation of our consciousness" (23). This reorientation has begun mostly with academics but can become short-circuited when faculty think that labor-based, contract, criterion-referenced, and specification grading, ungrading, and student self-reflection fully satisfy the need for antiracist practices and look no further. Furthermore, antiracist practices, like many of the earlier calls for such change, are being met with political responses from the right that would have labeled this work "political correctness" in the 1970s and again in the 1990s, and has now been inappropriately labeled "critical race theory" as a catch-all for everything the political right hates about the antiracist movement. The complexity of this political moment deserves a more carefully integrated, systematic, and nuanced approach to antiracism beyond a narrow focus on assessment strategies.

Sustainable Approach

In order to envision how antiracist practices can continue developing in ways that will enable transformative curricular and social change, we turn to the whole systems approach (WSA) that Cox, Galin, and Melzer developed in *Sustainable WAC: A Whole Systems Approach to Launching and Developing Writing Across the Curriculum Programs*, which provides a theoretical framework, sets of principles and strategies, a methodology, and a wide range of tactics for building long-lasting curricular change programs.[1] We are not suggesting that the WSA provides a definitive solution, but rather it opens new kinds of discussions about antiracist, linguistic justice, critical language awareness, and other practices that pay attention to how we can implement change at universities, which are themselves complex systems. Such a lens provides a more nuanced and systematic approach.

We suggest that WAC programs and antiracist initiatives have similar goals and seek similar outcomes. Both are meant to provide support for communication across disciplines, for writing, speaking, and other forms of communication that transfer across a student's college experience and beyond. Like WAC programs that were started in the 1970s, current antiracist initiatives are often grassroots efforts, promoted by a few vested colleagues, and implemented in ways in which some faculty have most control and impact in their classrooms. While early WAC programs were typically built around the notions of writing to learn, writing as a process, and decentered classrooms with lots of peer review and discussion of student work, most

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1. A theoretical overview of the WSA is provided in ""Building Sustainable WAC Programs: A Whole Systems Approach." For a more complete discussion, we encourage you to read chapters 2 and 3 of *Sustainable WAC: A Whole Systems Approach to Launching and Developing Writing Across the Curriculum Programs*. Chapters 4–7 provide a full discussion of each stage of the WSA.

current antiracist initiatives in first year composition (FYC) programs are being developed around alternative grading strategies. These models often involve different forms of contract grading or ungrading, with a significant amount of student self-reflection, discussions of student agency, and an emphasis on linguistic justice because standard grading practices are white supremacist and unethical. Many initiatives have begun this way because the scholars who have researched and promoted antiracist teaching are keenly aware that grading practices are a key leverage point in writing programs that can inspire change. Doing so, however, will cause such initiatives to face the same kinds of sustainability challenges that most WAC programs face (historically, over fifty percent of WAC programs fail over time), which is why we are drawing on the WSA to address this problem (Cox et al. 1).

Complex Adaptive Systems

Before we introduce the WSA methodology, we offer a brief explanation of universities as complex adaptive systems to illustrate our rationale for approaching the problems facing institutional change initiatives. We also return here to the notion of emergence that we drew from Raymond Williams. As is the case for creating sustainable, transformative change in any complex adaptive system like a university, it is primarily a matter of introducing self-monitoring negative feedback loops at different scales within the system. In *Sustainable WAC*, Cox, Galin, and Melzer explain that

> When scientists talk about complex adaptive systems, they often refer to ecosystems or examples such as flocking birds that make minute adjustments in their own flight in relationship only to the birds immediately next to them. These decentralized decisions among individual birds are driven by feedback loops that either magnify a small action across the system or keep it in check. A flock of starlings, for example, can appear in such numbers that they seem to fill the sky as a swarming tornado of movement. As one watches these large groups, one sees how the micro relationships among individuals can result in a flowing mass that sometimes splinters off but often forms and reforms amoebic shapes in the sky. Complex systems science works to understand the emergence of coordinated macro behaviors, how local rule-following activity leads to these behaviors, how the system remains identifiable as a distinct system, and how it maintains its relative internal stability. (26)

The focus on assessment practices is a well-intentioned attempt by antiracist practitioners to intervene in a key feedback loop of the university. Notice, however, that the interactions among the flocking starlings described above control the actions of the entire flock because the rule-following activity is distributed across all individual

birds. This distributed behavior is a function of the nonlinearity of such systems, caused by the "interactions of a large number of actors, components, and subsystems" (30). There is no single figure or authority that controls all the behaviors of individuals across the system.

Classrooms and writing programs are not complex systems, but universities are. The rule-following behavior of all faculty at an institution is governed by a wide range of individual interactions, policies, promotion and tenure guidelines, financial concerns, learning goals, and social expectations—the very micro-physics of power that Foucault identified. Emergence, in this case, might change over time in teaching practices, programs, outcomes, and expectations across all levels of the institution that would grow out of a culture of change. Williams intimates this notion but does not explain the mechanisms of change. Both in complex systems and William's emergent cultures, such change cannot be directed by an individual or mandate because culture does not change in this way. This is not to say that we can't build programs that facilitate such a change in culture, but we need to be realistic about what it means to change *culture* and not classrooms. Large-scale emergence can be fostered, even though not fully engineered, by leveraging multiple points across scales within the entire complex system that is the target of change. Understanding how the micro-physics of power functions enables us to identify the most productive leverage points throughout the system (the university, in this case) that can alter the feedback loops that govern policies, practices, outcomes, and goals. These shifts in what are called negative feedback loops make the complex system an adaptive one, and, over time, can lead to a new stable and sustainable state.

After all, for a complex system to work most actors in a system need to be acting out of the same local (micro-adjustment) rule-following activity for coordinated macro-behaviors to emerge. This means that faculty in all departments and programs would have to take up the same types of assessment strategies, work from collaboratively built equity and diversity policies, and coordinate faculty support across university initiatives, but not as a result of a top-down mandate since complex systems do not function by executive control. Rather, they would all have to perceive the need for, and elect to engage in, these practices because they determined for themselves that such shifts were warranted. While local rule-following activity is generally unconscious, it can be managed, monitored, and even motivated to some degree through negative feedback loops that govern micro-relationships within the system. Think of kids talking in their friend groups: their behaviors are governed by invisible social rules that are informed by so many different factors that it is hard to identify them all. Yet these clusters of influences lead them to somewhat predictable, coordinated macro-behaviors.

Since no single feedback loop will change the complex adaptive system unless, like the flocking birds, the interactions of all the individuals are governed by the same set of rule-following activity, changes that are created at the classroom level need to be part of the negative feedback loops of the departments, colleges, and university as a whole. Furthermore, resilience thinking suggests that systems work within what it calls a "band of equilibrium," a sweet spot within system ecologies that enables them to remain stable and sustainable. There are indicators within systems that can be tracked to determine the lower and upper limit of sustainable activity.[2] While a discussion of tracking sustainability indicators is beyond the scope of this paper, there are two other key features of resilience thinking that are pertinent here. First, this band of equilibrium that marks the boundaries of a stable system can ultimately shift at a tipping point, when the system itself loses integrity and slips into a new steady state that is marked by new boundaries. These shifts are often not desirable. Second, dynamic systems change over time and can be significantly impacted by "deliberate transformational change" orchestrated through social action (Folke et al. para. 17). This second point, combined with the preceding comments concerning emergence, micro-physics of power, negative feedback loops, and complex adaptive systems, provides a more nuanced understanding of how deliberate transformational change can be fostered at universities. The remainder of this article addresses how such deliberate antiracist change can be made without being trapped in isolated bubbles of social action.

Whole Systems Approach

As an early-career faculty member at a public institution with a high BIPOC student population, Sherri was confronted with the complexities of resisting her department's call for labor-based grading practices. Her time as a student was filled with academic challenges, particularly in writing and English courses. In an effort to compose according to the standards required of her, Sherri spent innumerable hours reading, writing, and revising her assignments. She ultimately attended graduate school and earned a doctorate in composition and rhetoric, with special attention to first-year writing programs and instructor support. Her rejection of labor-based grading in 2020 was received as irrational by senior white faculty in the department. She was shocked that this very individualized pedagogical decision was perceived as wrong and potentially racist. Sherri wanted to give students the same opportunity she was provided to improve her writing skills and meet the standard demanded by her future employers, professors, and herself. Rejecting labor-based grading in her classrooms was less about the desire to reinforce inequitable conditions and more

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2. See "Resilience Thinking" in chapter 2 of *Sustainable WAC* for further discussion (37–41).

of a recognition that such inequities were unavoidable within the current systems in place. When discussing the possibility of adopting labor-based grading with her students, who were diverse in race and experience, one responded vehemently with "that won't help me get a job, Dr. Craig." In this unfortunate consumer satisfaction model of the institution, they had a point. Would her individual class, where they had a singular antiracist assessment experience, help them in their careers? Probably not. Did they understand that they were the victims of a white supremacist system? Probably not. Did Sherri know better than them? Probably not. Was she being asked to alter her traditional grading practices in an effort to provide pseudo-equity in an inequitable system? Probably. Sherri wanted to retain her autonomy as the instructor of her courses, and this included choosing her own assessment practices. To be clear, it is not that she did not support others' decision to choose alternative grading, but rather as someone who was more likely to receive lower scores in student evaluations of her teaching, Sherri did not want to add weight to the already imbalanced scale used to consider her tenure and promotion (Chávez and Mitchell 273). While some might argue that alternative grading could improve her scores and the experiences of her students, she did not believe it was worth the risk.

Additionally, when Sherri inquired about challenging the assessment practices of all the courses in the department and not only the first-year writing courses, there was great resistance. When reviewing the inequitable hiring practices that allowed for more BIPOC scholars to be hired in the department as adjuncts and not full-time or along tenurable lines, she noticed that the responses used silencing language like "policy," "protocol," and "budget." Sherri was skeptical of individual antiracist approaches that did not consider the entire system. A more system-wide approach enables a more sophisticated and nuanced set of strategies across different levels of the institution, much in the same way that WAC programming is constructed.

Sherri's experience demonstrates why top-down mandates for curricular control in the classroom do not often lead to the desired results. Her rule-following behaviors differed significantly from those of her white colleagues because they were not subject to the same kinds of pressures that she, an untenured Black faculty member, was subject to. And her efforts to point out the need for more systematic approaches to the desired antiracist practices failed because the rule-following behaviors that governed change in the composition program were not shared by the department or university at large.

These types of failures are familiar to anyone who has been empowered to direct curricular change at universities, particularly those who have served as WAC program administrators. WAC programs fail for a wide range of reasons, but most commonly because they are grassroots initiatives that are not systematically developed, widely distributed, integrated into their institutions, and broadly supported. Cox,

Galin, and Melzer developed the figure below to represent the four typical stages of developing sustainable programs, based on a figure developed by Environment Canada entitled "Federal Sustainable Development Strategy for Canada" (53). We offer a brief overview below.
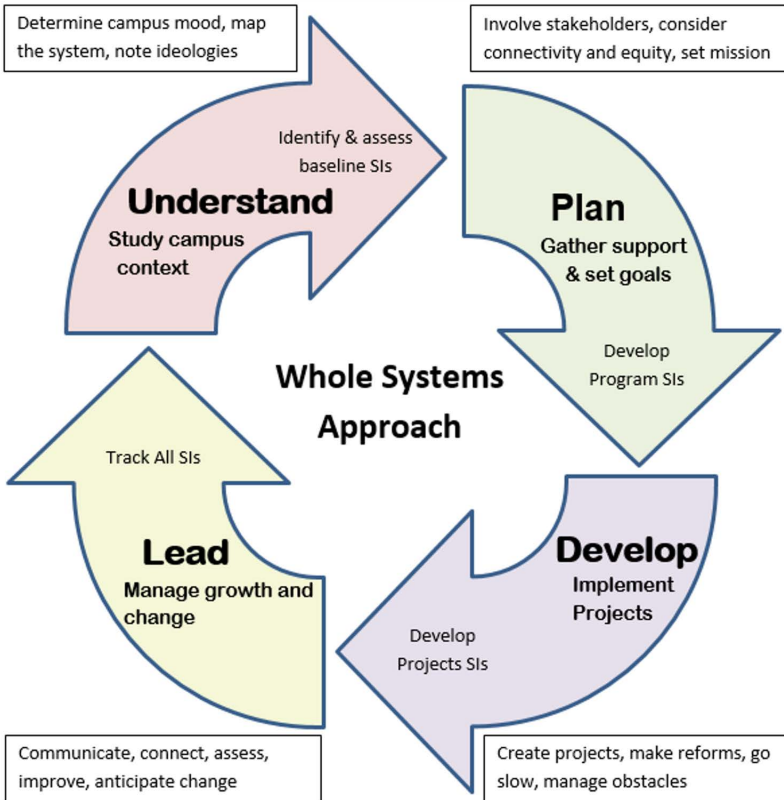

Figure 1. The whole systems methodology for transformative change (Cox et al. 55).

The four stages are not necessarily linear, even though most of the time we typically do move through these four stages when building university-wide programs for curricular change. Frequently, two or more are compressed together, or we may return to an earlier stage while we are working on projects in later stages. When possible, it is important to take the time necessary to understand the campus mood, map out where program allies are located, identify a clear need, develop a funding model, and note possible roadblocks, as well as to assess faculty, student, and administrator perceptions and expectations before planning changes. Often, this means slowing down the process, even taking several years to develop a program that has

been carefully conceived and vetted through multiple levels of the university, and has a chance of making an impact beyond a few selective classrooms. At other times, it means building quickly and then stepping back to foster support and develop initiatives. When antiracist and diversity and equity work is integrated into WAC work, WAC administrators and stakeholders are likely to develop lasting programs if they work through all of the stages mentioned above.

It is essential to engage a broad range of stakeholders in the planning stages of a university-wide curricular change program by mapping the network of relationships that currently support the initiative, those individuals who are already vested in similar work, and those who would likely be interested in supporting it in the future. In the case of antiracist practices, equity is baked into the stated goals, as it is one of the ten primary principles of the WSA. In addition to the need for more equitable assessment practices and more self-reflection, equity in this planning stage also means considering the effects of new mandates on all students, particularly students of color, in- and outside of the classroom; the impact on their prospects for academic work and beyond; and the impact on faculty who engage in such work. This latter issue has particular implications for GTAs, adjuncts, instructors, and pre-tenure faculty, who are less institutionally secure and may face expectations from students that do not match the pedagogy the instructor has chosen.

Institutional context has significant influence on the feasibility of instituting antiracist practices across the system. Working conditions across institutions vary dramatically. In states like Michigan, Washington, and New York, there are strong university-wide initiatives for diversity, equity, and inclusion, which provide resources and opportunities for building equity-focused WAC programs. In states like Florida, West Virginia, and Texas, politicians are passing laws to censor materials and teaching practices that they deem too far left for their tastes. While it is not impossible to build WAC programs with equity and diversity as primary objectives, it will be much more difficult to build and sustain them without institutional support across all scales of the system. We are not arguing here that faculty, especially in these states, should not pursue antiracist practices but that they must undertake that work more deliberately and systematically.

Whether these faculty work locally to form coalitions across their universities and in their communities to create safe and sustainable strategies for implementing their equality goals or they create grassroots, underground movements to challenge curricular design, recruitment, and assessment, their actions should be done in concert with other faculty and across units. All these local concerns, coupled with the explicit

goals of an antiracist initiative, need to inform the mission statement that the broad program stakeholder group would formulate together.[3]

Any given program will likely have multiple initiatives, such as assessment practices, resource collections, recognition ceremonies, faculty training, presentations, etc. At any given point in an antiracist program's development, individual projects are likely to be at different stages of implementation. Each distinct project can move through the WSA cycle separately; however, it is beneficial for the program overall to move through the full cycle, even if individual projects are moving through at different times. The development phase is all about these projects. Each iteration warrants its own sustainability assessment with sustainability indicators to identify and implement changes and manage challenges.

And, finally, management of each project would benefit from clear communication of intentions, outcomes, and successes. This would entail outward-facing forms of assessment beyond the inward-facing SIs, as well as ongoing outreach to expand and connect more broadly through the university, to improve all projects and to anticipate change as projects become institutionally embedded.

Using the whole systems approach for developing antiracist WAC programs assumes that such work will not be shut down by state officials as visibility of the program grows. If, after studying the mood concerning writing outcomes, diversity, and equity at a given institution, gaining a clear understanding of institutional context, and determining the predominant ideologies about writing on campus, the stakeholders determine that the timing for developing a prominent antiracist or equity-based program is not feasible, the WSA would suggest that less direct and arguably less sustainable initiatives should be undertaken until conditions become more favorable. Such an outcome demonstrates that the sustainability of antiracist programs is not just dependent on local practices, institutional collaborations, and a systematic approach but also on the institutional context at all scales, from the classroom to the state senate.

Anytime that such cross-curricular reform initiatives are developed in isolated or unsystematic ways, they are more likely to fail than persist. This abbreviated introduction to the WSA is meant as a lens for considering how to build more sustainable antiracist programs across universities and at higher levels than the classroom; how networks of policies, practices, and programs can be reevaluated; how we might identify indicators of success and distress to determine long-term viability of a given project; how we can better publicize goals and outcomes of such work; and how to engage faculty in thoughtful conversations about making changes across the university.

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3. See chapter 5 of *Sustainable WAC* for an extensive discussion of formulating program goals with stakeholder input.

Points of Leverage

To imagine a systematic approach for sustainable antiracist programs at universities, we provide examples of programs that extend across campuses and offer several tactics for identifying leverage points at a university. While first-year writing is perceived as the most logical place for teachers of writing to attempt change, it is not the most logical place to institute cultural and institutional change. Rather, practices and programs like WAC, multilingual student support, writing centers, graduate support centers, centers for teaching and learning, hiring and promotion, undergraduate student research, admissions, faculty training, and centers for antiracist research and practice are much more likely candidates. FYC has an important institutional footprint, but all of these other practices and programs are more far-reaching, more integrated across the university, more valued, and often have much more campus-wide visibility than FYC. We are not arguing that FYC should not be a site for antiracist/cultural change. It, too, can play a role. But alone, it is a bubble of practice that does not touch (or barely touches) these other institutional hubs of policy and practice.

Whether institutions develop offices of DEI around which they build programs and initiatives, or whether there are collaborative efforts across units and programs, WAC can play a lead role, even at institutions where DEI efforts have been denounced and defunded. Ideally, an institution would develop and support a DEI office and stakeholder committee that could review existing policies and practices as well as oversee the development of new university policies. This office would work through the stages of the whole systems approach, reviewing the principles, strategies, methodology, and tactics that would best apply to antiracist and DEI efforts. Even with the establishment of such offices, universities may lack meaningful commitments to supporting inclusion initiatives, as seen in Texas A&M's recent controversial treatment of Kathleen McElroy. If DEI initiatives are not yet viable at a given institution, then WAC could serve as a primary site of such work through its relationships with units and constituents inside and outside the university. It would behoove program administrators to map existing institutional relationships across the university and identify additional potential relationships that could be formed and strengthened so that there is continuous coalitional work toward lasting antiracism. Promotion practices, grant opportunities, and research collaboratives can be revised/and/or developed to leverage change. By partnering with teaching excellence centers to craft faculty development programming for linguistic justice and other inclusive, equitable teaching practices, English and writing studies faculty invested in antiracism—and labor-based grading practices as a reflection of that investment—can share their theories and strategies with faculty across the university. And centers like Boston University's Center for Antiracist Research can inform, build programs,

challenge university policies, and even harness big data across institutions to help foster and advocate for systemic change.

Change can also come from existing centers that systematically reevaluate their policies and practices, even in states that are openly hostile to antiracist efforts. Florida Atlantic University (FAU) has run its writing center and WAC program for twenty-one and sixteen years respectively, but its administrators have only recently begun to think about how antiracist, linguistic justice, critical language awareness, and other such practices could be integrated. The writing center supports all students, faculty, and staff, yet it has rarely provided consultants whose specialty is second-language acquisition. More importantly, the staff have only begun to consider how working with nonnative English speakers should change policies to better accommodate these learners. Similarly, the WAC program has run a university-wide WAC assessment process for the past fifteen years, but it has not updated its rubric (which has only been slightly modified) over the course of those years, nor has it provided faculty workshops on ways to address the impact of Standard American English (SAE) on students. This past year, FAU's WAC program developed a Professional English Language Support (PELS) program that is built on social agency and critical language awareness theory to provide services to graduate and undergraduate students. Such initiatives and programs would mostly impact students of color at an institution that prides itself as having the most diverse student population in the Florida state system. These types of efforts serve as starting places for leveraging change. They are by no means sustainable without larger commitments from university partners at various levels, but they can lay the groundwork for the future.

Each of these initiatives should target different policies and practices university-wide to leverage change significantly beyond, or at least in addition to, work on grading practices. While each of these programs may not engage all students at the university, one can easily see how, together, they begin to identify critical leverage points. By reaching students at multiple contact points—especially points of potential cultural conflict—they can help shift rule-following behaviors of faculty across the university. Furthermore, these three programs at FAU are directed by a single person, which makes coordination among them more likely, more feasible, and more sustainable. Yet there are so many other leverage points across the institution that should be identified as sites for additional change, including those listed above but also areas such as career planning, business presentations, international student recruitment, diversity programs in student affairs, capstone courses, and honors programs that target all students at the university, regardless of their race, orientation, ethnicity, gender, class, age, or ability status. Even if one or more of these projects does not gain traction or fails to survive over time, the more nodes in the system where relationships can be

secured and policies coordinated, the more likely an antiracist/diversity and equity program will persist.

Mapping institutional programs and resources that could impact linguistic diversity on campus is perhaps the most important tactic a program director could undertake. Cox, Galin, and Melzer discuss mapping at length in *Sustainable WAC*, so we will not do so here (90-96). Although many individuals and programs at universities have begun to do the hard work of building emergent culture at their institutions, few, if any, have attempted to identify all the points of contact and leverage that could help foster an emergent culture of linguistic diversity and social justice. Building such a network map of relations could enable all participants working at points of contact to share resources that foster change. It would open new doors for collaboration—for as yet unimagined projects—and build a critical mass of practices across campus that could tap into and inform work that FYC programs want to accomplish.

As we noted earlier, complex systems do not have central controllers but are rather distributed systems. No one can tell faculty what or how to teach in their classrooms, but faculty can choose to change their practices if they perceive the value and need for doing so. As more and more highly visible, cross-disciplinary programs, initiatives, and projects implement changes; as more and more workshops, policies, and resources become available; as more and more encounters with ethical writing practices happen across the university, more and more faculty would begin to follow the local rule-following activities of their colleagues, which would shift the steady state of multiple negative feedback loops across and beyond individuals (and individual campuses) to maintain engagement in antiracist practices. Ultimately, such work would have to become even more public. It would have to impact the political forces outside of academia that currently push back on antiracist practices in order to shift public perception of such change from intrusion to the norm.

Concluding Thoughts

We have only begun to lay out in this article the ways in which building antiracist programs in higher education might be developed to achieve sustainable, transformative change. Our aim from the start was not simply to challenge or critique existing strategies but to point out that most current approaches to alternative grading strategies cannot by themselves create the kind of change that most antiracist scholars and practitioners value. We would do well to consider more carefully the work of scholars like Shawna Shapiro, who are helping us to see that critical language awareness may have more impact on fostering emergent change than more oppositional methods—which, though they may feel right and valuable, have less chance of convincing faculty to alter their rule-following behaviors. Furthermore, WAC studies needs to think more broadly about the kind of work we do, our fields of influence,

and strategies for promoting emergent change. This is the heart of our discussion. We are committed to the goals of resisting prevailing relations of power by building equitable classrooms and acknowledging that many students of color are disadvantaged when asked to write academic discourse. We argue that the systems of power that function at all levels of society need changing in order to change the system—to overthrow current dominant discourse—so that we can accomplish more and better progress than the single teacher (or small group of teachers).

No doubt, some will argue that such an approach is problematic, diluted, too bureaucratic or unethical, that any practice that does not fully refute practices and policies that promote dominant discourse is unacceptable. As we note above, such claims do not take into consideration the lived reality of instituting sustainable change within an complex adaptive system like a university. Establishing such cultures of change is always messy and imperfect. Yet resilience theory helps us realize that institutional change rarely succeeds by working only at the lowest scales within the institution. We have not provided here the kind of fine-grain discussion of developing the antiracist projects necessary to implement a comprehensive program at any given university—but we offer a start. Such a discussion would entail studying programs currently in place; understanding their strengths and challenges; recognizing where isolated practices need more extensive networks of connection to hubs and nodes across the university; and facilitating a broad conversation about the limitations of current, theoretically underdeveloped models in implementing antiracist programs at universities and colleges.

We would love to provide specific strategies and practices to reach our collectively desired outcomes around antiracist teaching and learning; however, part of our argument is that any such *a priori* practices have limited chances of creating more systemic change, which requires the inclusion of multiple stakeholders embedded in the local context of the institution and its current rule-following feedback loops. Thus, it behooves us to consider what individualized antiracist statements and practices mean in WAC and composition training, writing centers, behavior policies, promotion practices, and publication venues. Our field has begun to consider these contexts recently, but not nearly enough. The complexity of this political moment deserves a more carefully integrated, systematic, and nuanced approach to antiracism in order to usher in sustainable, transformative change. We are just not there yet.

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