

Communication Centers and Their Role in Student Empowerment: The Necessity of Antiracism in Higher Education

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Often when thinking of racism or being prejudiced, we think of specific and explosive incidents between individuals, but we tend to overlook expressions of prejudice that can result in different opportunities in education, housing, job opportunities, correctional services, and essentially every institution within our country. Ultimately this creates environments where expressions of prejudice are not only tolerated but they become so commonplace that we are now at a critical point for intervention and the higher education system is no exception (Anderson & Fischer, 2020). The purpose of this research is to exhibit the connection between academic support centers, in this case communication centers, and their potential role in pushing universities closer to fully embracing antiracist values, specifically looking at North Carolina colleges and universities with centers as a sample. Due to lack of official statistics on specifically North Carolina communication centers, points of focus will include information gathered from university webpages and social media presence in response to the current changes needing to take place in our society.

Since the late 1980's when communication centers first began to appear on college campuses, they have served both students and faculty as an academic resource in building strong communication skills, speaking confidence, and working towards larger missions of the institutions they are a part of. As time has progressed, their role in

higher education institutions has evolved into a resource that can not only assist students and faculty members individually, but has also become a source of empowerment and working towards overcoming the institutionalized barriers of a traditional classroom setting (Yook, 2013).

Currently in North Carolina there are 12 higher education institutions that have communication centers, 10 of them being predominately white institutions (PWIs), one being a minority serving institution (MSI), and one of them being a historically Black college (HBCU). It is also relevant to note that in this sample there are four private and seven public universities alongside one community college (NACC, 2020). Of these institutions, over half of them have provided valuable student support resources as well as antiracism educational resources on their webpages and social media platforms. Meanwhile over 75% released statements claiming support of antiracism efforts. While helping others build communication skills and build self-confidence will always be the heart of communication centers, there is still much more that can be done to support antiracist efforts, make these centers more diverse and inclusive, and engage with the communities it supports (Glenn, 2020). One of the main goals of communication centers is the empowerment of the student voice and it is crucial that Black voices are included and represented in obtaining that goal. This not only gives individuals

opportunities to practice skills that can be translated into success in other areas, but it allows them to play an important role in their own learning process and that contributes to the confidence of the student voice in a tremendous way (Yook, 2013). Empowerment in these centers combined with active support of the Black community is crucial in creating brave space environments in higher education institutions (Richards, 2019). Brave spaces are different from safe spaces in the way that they are cross-racial spaces where “students can create authentic and sustained interracial interactions, while being provided with the tools and support to do so.”

Conversations cannot begin if we don’t know where to start, therefore providing educational resources that emphasize the necessity and importance of antiracism in academic and professional atmospheres is a necessary and important step. Along with providing educational resources, centers should be providing specific training on how to discuss race effectively, reevaluating and being aware of our own biases, and actively confronting and challenging racism. It is not enough to quietly observe racist and harmful incidents to then tell the person who was discriminated against later in private how wrong it was that they were treated that way, we need to speak up in the moment and actively call out racism when we see it every single time without fail. In addition to providing resources and training regarding discussions of race, another necessary concrete step that communication centers can take is implementing strict zero tolerance policies against racism and discrimination. Zero tolerance policies not only ensure that the victim of the racist incident will be protected and supported at the first instance of harmful discrimination but it will create an environment that

encourages surrounding bystanders to actively confront racism both inside and outside of the center. Calling out racism and discrimination should never result in a loss of opportunity or negative consequences, but acting out in racist ways should, every time.

By no means is this arguing that communication centers are the answer to racism in higher education, but they can act as a driving force of implementing antiracist values in higher education systems and be places of support on campuses for Black students and faculty, especially at PWIs. They can act as examples of success in providing effective communication assistance that can be translated to academic/professional development as well as student empowerment and the active support and upliftment of Black voices within the higher education system. With every small step towards change there is progress and it is within reach that communication centers could act as strong forces towards the adoption of antiracism in higher education. In the words of late honored civil rights activist John Lewis, “When historians pick up their pens to write the story of the 21st century, let them say that it was your generation who laid down the heavy burdens of hate at last and that peace finally triumphed over violence, aggression and war. So I say to you, walk with the wind, brothers and sisters, and let the spirit of peace and the power of everlasting love be your guide,” (Lewis, 2020).

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