



CHAPTER 1

“Dismantling the Machine”

A Case Study of Cross-campus, Multi-institutional Efforts to Address Systemic Racism

*Ava Brillat, Roxane Pickens, and Kelsa Bartley**

Introduction

Systemic racism is a machine that runs whether we pull the levers or not, and by just letting it be, we are responsible for what it produces. We have to actually dismantle the machine if we want to make change.

—Ijeoma Oluo, *So You Want to Talk About Race*¹

* This case study focuses on anti-racist work in the university setting. Possible factors affecting the reading of this work include the racial identity and lived experiences of the authors. At least one author identifies as an able-bodied, white, cisgender female, and the other two identify as Black, able-bodied, cisgender females. Additionally, two authors are foreign-born US citizens with the third born and raised in the US South. At the time of writing, all authors are early-to-mid-career faculty librarians working at the University of Miami.

Dismantling the machinery of systemic racism in educational spaces is necessarily done in community, and the possibility of change depends on understanding the pernicious mechanisms at work and implementing new ways of teaching that are more inclusive and transformational. The inequities illuminated by the global pandemic of 2020, combined with an intensified spotlight on the nation's long-standing racial injustices, have been a clarion call for higher education, particularly regarding social justice in academia. With heightened levels of civic action around racial injustices that impact students, an all-hands-on-deck scenario emerged, compelling all university units—including libraries—to collaborate on addressing systemic racism in the learning environment. This chapter highlights one academic library's cross-campus collaborations to facilitate racial justice discussions and actions. Focusing on a common reads program at University of Miami (UM) in Florida, this case study outlines key library and campus partnerships and steps taken to promote dialogue and spearhead anti-racist and critical pedagogy awareness for instructors of record.

Literature Review

Organizational change of any type is difficult to usher in, particularly at large academic institutions. While change management is a well-studied niche of organizational research, the intersection of social justice and organizational change is a developing field without much in the way of established best practices.

Unfortunately, equity-focused change through academic leadership is an emerging field, particularly regarding actively anti-racist organizational change.² While top-down approaches to change may still be developing, consciousness-raising and grassroots approaches to anti-racist work have a long historical precedent, particularly in the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s–1970s in the United States. The embodied performance of protest, referred to by activists as “direct action,” provided a citizen-level means by which to prompt political change regarding racial injustice,³ as can still be seen in the 2020 Black Lives Matter movements. Grassroots or group activism often informs the evolution of legal and political changes, and discourse is the means by which to disrupt injustice and influence applicative justice.⁴ Recent case studies, as outlined in Liera and Dowd, support the use of inquiry, discourse, and rhetoric to disrupt systemic racism.⁵ Data alone is not enough to drive change, particularly at decision-making levels; discussion and inquiry are necessary to cement and nurture systemic change.⁶ Engaging in discourse and inquiry, particularly for faculty, promotes and expands the knowledge and practice of anti-racist work through the act of boundary crossing that occurs when faculty of different disciplines and experiences purposefully engage with one another.⁷

Because of the historical precedent of direct action and the emerging case studies of the importance of inquiry and discussion to heighten the impact of anti-racist

work, UM’s One Book, One U program targeted instructors in order to create an environment for action. Through interdisciplinary discussion and the disruption of teaching silos, One Book, One U endeavored to promote grassroots consciousness-raising in order to support the long institutional evolution toward a more equitable academic environment.

Merging best practices for change management with anti-racist pedagogies, particularly in a way that empowers faculty members and provides sustained energy to diversity practices, is of particular importance if systemic racism is to be addressed in higher education. Change management focused on anti-racist action is still developing, particularly in regard to the development of best practices. The *Harvard Business Review* notes the need for vision and intent to bring about true anti-racist evolution in institutions.⁸ Although this case study focuses on academic libraries, dismantling systemic racism must be cross-disciplinary and across all bodies of the American university in order for true change to occur.

Additionally, there is a need for sharing case studies, including practical aspects of anti-racist work in higher education. Variables such as policy changes, change management, training, cultural change, and restorative justice in higher education, especially those focused on anti-racist pedagogies, are needed in order to inspire change and provide institutions with examples to inspire their own iterations of anti-racist work. As each academic institution is unique, so too should anti-racist work reflect the distinct needs of each institution. Larger institutions, for example, will have different needs and approaches to anti-racist pedagogy than will smaller institutions. As a result, it is only by having both practical and theoretical information that any institution can even begin to dismantle, in earnest, systemic racism.

Case Study Background

The One Book, One U program at UM was founded in 2017 by an English and creative writing professor in the College of Arts and Sciences and a professor at the School of Law. Their goal was to help build campus-wide community through the shared reading of texts that deeply explore the human condition. The selection that year was Jennine Capó Cruet’s novel *Make Your Home among Strangers*, and in courses and events during spring 2018—including a keynote presentation by the author—students, faculty, and staff joined in conversations about topics related to the text’s main themes. The following years featured coursework, programming, and author keynotes for Patricia Engel’s novel *Veins of the Ocean* in 2019 and Edwidge Danticat’s memoir, *Brother, I’m Dying*, in 2020.

Always an interdisciplinary collaboration between academic and administrative units across the institution, the program is cosponsored by UM Libraries with increasing levels of librarian support. In the first two years, librarians served on

the selection committee, helped promote events, and provided access to the book selections. In the third year, along with selection, book access, and promotions, two librarians also served on the program's coordinating committee and developed a research and instructors' guide to help faculty more easily incorporate the text into their courses. Additionally, UM Libraries had the honor of hosting Edwidge Danticat in its premier event space, the Kislak Center, and supplied copies of her book to students attending an intimate conversation that was held in its learning commons.

The success of the program in its third year and growing opportunities for collaboration between UM Libraries and key program partners such as the College of Arts and Sciences and the Center for the Humanities helped set the stage for the libraries to become the administrative home for One Book, One U. As the program readied for a new year with another book fostering the principles of dialogue, diversity, and inclusion—work that was complicated by having to make plans during the COVID-19 pandemic—a more urgent need arose: that of responding to the overwhelming call for justice in the wake of George Floyd's murder by a Minneapolis police officer in 2020 and subsequent Black Lives Matter demonstrations in the US and around the world. The program's coordinating committee called on the selection committee to reconvene and select a new text that would specifically address racial injustice in the country. The committee chose Ijeoma Oluo's *So You Want to Talk About Race* for 2020–21, inviting students and the entire university to deeply consider race, racism, and the ways in which our communities can become more equitable and just.

Instructor Reading Groups

In addition to supporting the program as in the past with a resource and teaching guide, print and digital copies of the book, and planning for events including the author keynote, three UM librarians worked with two university colleagues to co-facilitate two instructor reading groups aimed at helping faculty and staff incorporate the themes of Oluo's book into learning spaces. Functioning in the style of faculty learning communities and committed to inclusion, these reading groups were open to full-time, part-time, and graduate student instructors as well as staff working in student-facing capacities. Out of eighty registrants from nine schools and colleges, a total of sixty-five participants met for two series of three small-group conversations about *So You Want to Talk About Race*. Participants in the faculty reading groups mirrored the racial diversity of the larger university faculty population. The university faculty, however, do not reflect the diversity of the Miami-Dade County. Still, a broad range of backgrounds, disciplines, and teaching experiences were represented.

At the first meeting, a set of community agreements were discussed and established in order to facilitate discussion by establishing a community mindset. These agreed-upon practices were used to create avenues for conversation and to provide guidance for

modeling openness and nonviolent communication. The presence of discussion facilitators, however, to actively support safe conversation, particularly for faculty members new to discussing issues of race, was key to enabling conversation to flow. The resulting conversations connected Oluo's text to such questions as "What are the systems of power that reinforce and reproduce racism in Miami? In Coral Gables? At UM? In our own classrooms?" and "How might we (or how do you already) affirm a commitment to classroom environments that promote and sustain diversity and acknowledge intersectionality? Any particular language you would include in your syllabi?"

Each of the facilitators, including the director of the Learning Innovation and Faculty Engagement instructional design team, the director of Special Projects in the Office of the Provost, an institutional culture consultant, and the three instructional librarians, had prior classroom teaching experience that emphasized equity, diversity, and inclusion. Thus, they were able to effectively lead discussions that prompted the group participants to new insights about how they might rethink their pedagogies. The reading groups helped build connections among a diverse community of colleagues—from anesthesiologists to biologists to law professors—in a novel way, and they prompted instructors and student-facing staff to collectively strategize about anti-racist engagement techniques. Additionally, participants explored ideas for engaging coworkers about race, racism, equity, and justice, even when work contexts (like clinical settings) could make these topics challenging to consider.

Participants in the instructor reading groups came from various levels of comfort and experience with discussing racially sensitive topics. In many cases, a facilitator acted as a model for how to engage in difficult conversation with empathy. For participants with little to no experience discussing race, seeing facilitators address seemingly hidden bias in generalizations made during conversation served as an inflection point for further scrutiny and reflection on racial bias. These experiences were critical to developing skills needed for guiding sensitive conversations in the classroom. For more experienced participants, it could be frustrating to engage in conversation with participants who were not as skilled at addressing racial bias, particularly in regard to self-reflection. It is difficult to arrange conversation groups in a way that meets the objectives of every participant. However, it is important to persist and to continue to offer opportunities for conversation in order to upskill instructors on how to engage in difficult conversations.

Anti-racist and Critical Pedagogy Reading Group

Several faculty participants were so interested in revising their teaching to be more inclusive and antiracist that they prompted the facilitators to develop and host a subsequent anti-racist and critical pedagogy reading group. A deeper dive into

pedagogical theory and praxis, this reading group had fifty-five registrants who attended four sessions for discussions of essays by theorists such as bell hooks, Henry Giroux, Gloria Ladson-Billings, and Sara Ahmed. In an effort toward greater inclusion and collaborative potential, the facilitators opened participation to instructors from three South Florida institutions in addition to UM: Florida International University, Miami-Dade College, and Florida Atlantic University. This interinstitutional collaboration speaks to ACRL's *Roles and Strengths of Teaching Librarians*,⁹ revealing how instructional designers and librarians together can leverage partnerships to provide inclusive and diverse student learning spaces.

In this more focused reading group, we explored anti-racist and critical pedagogical frameworks and vocabulary, as well as the necessary interrogation that both instructors and students would need to bring to an open dialogue. For example, one session considered redefining the concept of the “safe space,” which implies an absence of productive discomfort, with a “brave space,” which gives students opportunities to exercise vulnerability, responsibility to others, and commitment to learning and growth. We also considered sites of overlap and intersections of practice from our different disciplines (participants came from all parts of the educational spectrum) and across our different institutions.

We reflected on how to help students find language to articulate where they are in the learning process and get them closer to “the learning edge,” or a space where they can encounter new material that may be discomfoting and yet necessary for growth. We discussed how to have these kinds of conversations when instruction contact time is low, like during a thirty-minute meeting or a single class session. We exchanged ideas for facilitating in-class discussions among students, taking care, for example, to request names and pronouns before meeting and modeling ways of apologizing and recovering after difficult exchanges. We also talked about working with silences in the classroom and ways that empathetic and active listening might be deployed. The impact of these conversations among instructors—both faculty and educator staff—has been generative as participants found conversation partners among their colleagues both on and across our diverse campuses. Additionally, the relationships led to invitations for further discussion at subsequently scheduled reading groups hosted at the other campuses.

The 2021 One Book One U program and the anti-racist and critical pedagogy reading groups are related not only by content, but also by intention, and they are platforms for UM Libraries to practice critical librarianship from an anti-racist, decolonial perspective. While neoliberalism in academia calls for treating students as customers, deemphasizing community and upholding capitalistic ideals, decolonialism calls for the creation of an inclusive community that is actively anti-racist. Inclusivity creates space for all learners, including students who are traditionally overlooked or specifically excluded. With a challenge to the presumed neutrality of library spaces, the collaborations and learning communities that University of

Miami Libraries supports through these projects demonstrate the critical role that academic libraries play in promoting justice and equality in the educational context.

Reflections and Future Directions

The efforts and attempts of academic institutions to dismantle systemic racism by any means is of particular importance to document and share in order to inspire continued change. A pernicious effect of institutional racism is that it continues to be an active influence in the work of the academy, meaning that one will encounter resistance and efforts to thwart anti-racist pedagogies simply because of the nature of the academic environment. However, with continued sustained engagement, it is impossible for change not to occur. Academic institutions everywhere are beholden to engage in the messy struggle that is dismantling institutional racism, and there are lessons to be learned from any attempt at anti-racist pedagogies. As a result, it is of key importance that these experiences, both successful and unsuccessful, continue to be shared. It is by reflecting on all efforts that the way forward can be determined.

Related to anti-racist pedagogy work, research on the intersection of institutional change, anti-racism, and faculty empowerment must continue to expand. Best practices are sorely needed to guide and evaluate efforts and to usher in true systemic change. Although the road to shared understanding of best practices is long, academic institutions must continue to pursue anti-racist work with the same fervor as research into best educational practices. The more that educational goals and anti-racist work are aligned, the closer institutions can get to changing the inherently racist paradigm of higher education.

What we learned from both the One Book, One U instructor reading groups and the subsequent interinstitutional antiracist and critical pedagogy reading group is that instructors are eager for contexts in which they can reconsider their teaching with attention to inclusive, equitable, and specifically anti-racist practices in order to heighten the learning experiences of all their students. Because of the connections that instructional librarians already have with a diverse range of faculty, they stand to be natural collaborators with instructional designers and like-minded colleagues to host and facilitate teaching-related conversations and strategies.

We have also learned that instructors are on a spectrum in terms of implementation of anti-racist and critical pedagogy into their curriculums. Many instructors are ready to move beyond just talking and learning about systemic racism and are eager to start incorporating what they learned from both reading groups into their classroom activities. Some are even looking for better ways to improve or accelerate activities they have already been doing in their classrooms and beyond. At the

other end of the spectrum, many instructors are either just beginning to engage in anti-racist work or are still continuing their learning journeys. Regardless of where they were in the process, at the end of reading groups, participants overwhelmingly called for advice and conversation on what the next steps should be for continuing the momentum of change. This encouragement from our colleagues has given us the impetus to continue growing our cross-campus and interinstitutional collaborations for dismantling the machine of institutional racism at University of Miami and other college campuses across the Miami community. We believe these community-led conversations that continue into our classrooms can have a broad impact in our goal of an anti-racist, inclusive, and equitable future for our students and the communities they will eventually lead.

Suggested Readings

The following readings are meant to be a blueprint for introductory-level readings on anti-racist pedagogies; however, any list of resources can quickly become outdated. Regardless, anti-racist work requires that one be active in seeking out new information and professional development opportunities. Consider searching for local diversity conferences, training, and discussion groups in order to develop and continue to finesse the skills of discussing racism and practicing anti-racist principles, both inside and outside of the classroom. One possible best practice may be to empower discussion group members to seek out anti-racist readings for discussion. What follows comes from the antiracist and critical pedagogy reading group reading list and can serve as a starting point for discussion.

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Notes

1. Oluo, Ijeoma, *So You Want to Talk About Race* (New York: Seal Press, 2019), 30.
2. Decoteau J. Irby, Coby V. Meyers, and Jason D. Salisbury, "Improving Schools by Strategically Connecting Equity Leadership and Organizational Improvement Perspectives: Introduction to Special Issue," *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk* 25, no. 2 (2020): 102, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10824669.2019.1704628>, ProQuest.
3. Randolph Hohle, *Black Citizenship and Authenticity in the Civil Rights Movement*, Routledge Research in Race and Ethnicity (New York: Routledge, 2013), 60.
4. Naomi Zack, *Applicative Justice* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 66–67.
5. Román Liera and Alicia C. Dowd, "Faculty Learning at Boundaries to Broker Racial Equity," *Journal of Higher Education* 90, no. 3 (2019): 473–76, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2018.1512805>.
6. Alicia C. Dowd and Román Liera, "Sustaining Change towards Racial Equity through Cycles of Inquiry," *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 26 (May 21, 2018): 6, <https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.26.3274>, ProQuest.
7. Amy R. Kline, "Faculty Motivation in Academic Program Assessment: An Instrumental Case Study on the Impact of an Inquiry-Based Process" (EdD diss, Northeastern University, 2020), 42–43, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global: Social Sciences (2393063509).
8. Evelyn R. Carter, "Restructure Your Organization to Actually Advance Racial Justice," *Harvard Business Review*, June 22, 2020, para. 4, <https://hbr.org/2020/06/restructure-your-organization-to-actually-advance-racial-justice>.
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