White supremacy was built into the foundational structures of our country, structures that persist today in our culture and in our institutions, including the institution of the UW School of Drama. Racism is not news, but many of us who are white are seeing with fresh eyes the ways that our white-centeredness, manifested as complacency, prioritization of our own comfort, and an unwillingness to confront our own racism, has caused harm—up to and including death—to our Black colleagues, students, friends, loved ones, and fellow Americans.

For eighty years, the UW School of Drama has permitted racism and white supremacist culture in our classrooms and on our stages. This is not new information to the many Black, Indigenous, and Person of Color (BIPOC) students, faculty, and staff who have attempted, over the course of decades, to bring about change by bravely sharing their experiences, only to be silenced, dismissed, or placated and then ignored.

The school’s goal, as stated in our recently revised statement of mission, vision, values, and commitments, is to support and nurture the artistry and scholarship of every student, honoring their identities, perspectives, and traditions. But it is glaringly apparent that our school is not always an open and welcoming space for BIPOC students, faculty, and staff. We are failing to live out our stated values, and the work of pointing that out to us has once again fallen primarily on our Black students, faculty, staff, and alumni. This is unacceptable. We must do better.

We must all, individually, collectively, and institutionally, turn toward our own biases, our own blindspots, our own racism, and actively work to dismantle them.

Committing ourselves to anti-racist practices is integral to accomplishing our mission of training artists and scholars poised to be the creative leaders of tomorrow. This work must be embedded in everything we do, from teaching and mentoring, to hiring and budgeting, to planning curriculum and producing plays. Meaningful, substantive change will require all of us—faculty, staff, and students—to interrogate our priorities and be willing to shift and reorganize around our stated values in ways that may feel deeply uncomfortable to those of us who are accustomed to having our needs, preferences, sensibilities, and stories centered.

This type of transformation takes resources and it takes time. But our students, faculty, and staff should not be asked to wait any longer for change that they can see and feel. We must do everything that we can do right away. Simultaneously, we must lay the foundation for the systemic change required to produce a future in which our school can be a place where every student is actually free to embody the artistic and scholarly life they envision for themselves.

We have identified seven action areas where we will begin immediate work as a school. This list is neither comprehensive nor complete—these action items will continue to evolve and gain specificity, including specific budgetary commitments. But we recognize that our community needs to hear from us now about how we plan to begin.

In addition to the items described below, each of our graduate and undergraduate discipline areas—acting, directing, design, theatre history and theory, and production—will develop discipline-specific strategies.
This plan was created in collaboration with the full school leadership, including Interim Executive Director Lynn M. Thomas, Interim Associate Director Geoff Korf, Head of Acting Jeffrey Fracé, Head of Directing Valerie Curtis-Newton, Head of Design Deborah Trout, Head of Theatre History and Theory Odai Johnson, co-Heads of Undergraduate Studies L. Zane Jones and Scott Magelssen, Director of Engagement Holly Arsenault, Production Manager Ryan Gastelum, and school Administrator Tina Swenson.

1. Acknowledge and accept the racism in our school's history and present

You cannot fix what you will not see. Before the School of Drama can repair itself, it must reckon with itself.

This work has already begun, thanks to the emotional labor of Black staff, students, and alumni who have spoken out and shared their experiences of racism in our school. These are messages of heartbreak, anguish, and grief. We acknowledge the bravery and generosity of these communications, and we honor that bravery by refusing to look away from the hard truths contained in these messages.

But, we cannot and should not place the burden of showing us who we are on our BIPOC students, staff, and alumni. If we are truly committed to change, those of us who are white must be willing to step into this work deliberately and unflinchingly. We must pledge ourselves to the necessary work of reckoning, work that we hope will ensure that future members of the community do not have to endure these same types of painful experiences.

2. Fortify transparency and accountability

We recognize that we need a more comprehensive structure for students, staff, and faculty of all identities to voice complaints, solicit support, seek clarification, and bring concerns to effective resolution.

We are committed to ensuring that, in the future, all students, faculty, and staff know exactly what resources are available to provide feedback or complain. Following the example of our colleagues in the UW Department of Dance, we will create a comprehensive guide for how to voice a concern, file a complaint or report, make suggestions, and offer solutions. We will also institute protocols for responding to these concerns, and ensure that every student, faculty, and staff member knows where to turn for assistance in addressing their own racism and bias. Lastly, we will ensure that there is a clear process for escalation of concerns when it is necessary.

In service of transparency and shared decision-making, we will continue the process begun this year of including graduate student representatives in faculty and staff meetings and, whenever possible, adding them to standing committees. We will also continue to include students on the Season Selection Committee and will invite undergraduate student representatives to join the Undergraduate Studies Committee.

The School of Drama will continue to invest resources in the work of the Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Access (EDIA) Task Force, and endeavor to center the recommendations of that Task Force in decision-making.

As part of our commitment to prioritize racial equity in our production processes, we will fortify our practice of post-production reflection sessions, which will serve as opportunities to interrogate the process and product of art-making and engage in cross-disciplinary discussions.

3. Address structural racism in hiring

The School of Drama's faculty and staff is mostly white. This is in spite of years of conversation and stated commitments around diversity in hiring and retention. We recognize that there is a wide gulf between the school's intentions in this area, and reality. The problem is structural.
To address the systemic barriers, structural racism, and systems of oppression that underlie our lack of faculty and staff diversity, we will pursue multiple strategies for increasing the diversity of candidate pools and new hires, and retaining faculty and staff of color, including:

- Continuing to require unconscious-bias training, specific to hiring processes, of every member of a hiring committee
- Continuing to pursue and adopt best practices that are statistically proven to reduce the impact of bias in all hiring processes
- Continuing to require EDIA statements in faculty applicant materials and expanding this requirement to staff applications
- Requiring that every faculty hiring committee include broader representation, including one graduate representative
- Designating a member of each faculty and staff hiring committee to monitor the process for adhesion to EDIA best practices
- Practicing—and investing funds in—proactive recruitment of BIPOC candidates
- Building a more equitable structure for the inclusion of BIPOC artist/teachers in our part-time hiring process
- Acknowledging the racial demographics of our city and university, and proactively connecting BIPOC candidates and new hires with resources they can use to build and maintain their own professional communities outside of the school
- When candidate pools lack diversity, revising search schedules to allow for additional diversity recruitment efforts

4. Support students, faculty, and staff now

In the fall of 2020, we will be following through on the recommendation of the School's Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Access Holding Group (the predecessor to the current Task Force) to implement affinity groups in the school. These groups will permit students, faculty, and staff to gather around shared aspects of their identity for the purposes of learning, community, and support. It is important to note that, while this document focuses on racial equity, affinity groups will be co-created with our community to serve community needs, and will reflect the many intersecting identities that exist in the School of Drama.

One piece of feedback that has been consistently heard is that BIPOC students need access to mentors of color who can help them navigate our school and the wider theatre community. We recognize that this problem is exacerbated by the overwhelming whiteness of our faculty and staff. Next year, to address this, we will build a mentorship program that will match interested graduate and undergraduate students of color with internal or external mentors.

We will also engage professional support to address the need for dedicated time and space for reflection and healing among BIPOC faculty, staff, and students.

5. Decenter whiteness in curriculum and production

We will decenter whiteness in our teaching of history, theory, criticism, design, directing, and performance.

We will interrogate the history of these disciplines and how we have taught them. We will consider the multiple perspectives from which they could be taught. We will divorce ourselves from “the way things have always been,” and implement systems that do not center European, white history and practice. We will recenter the curriculum around global practice, decentering whiteness in the plays and playwrights that are discussed in our classrooms.

We will be clear that when we say we value tradition, we mean that we value the long tradition of theatrical storytelling from all cultures, and that we do not value the traditions of exclusion, marginalization, and colonialism.

We will integrate the practice and culture of BIPOC artists into our curriculum.

We will prioritize the recruiting of a more racially diverse student body by fostering an environment that values their voices, scholarship, and artistry.

Because decentering whiteness in our training and in our production laboratories is integral to achieving excellence in our art making, we will find strategies to better balance the need for production opportunities that reflect the identities of our students with the need...
for representation of BIPOC both on stage and as lead artists (e.g. directors and playwrights). As we work to shift our programming, we will build bridges to communities who have not seen opportunities for themselves on our stages, and we will support our white students in recognizing and accepting the role that they have to play in creating space on our stages for students of color.

We will seek out a greater network of BIPOC guest artists and visiting teachers, and we will hire them, and not solely for culturally-specific work.

6. Deepen our understanding and practice of anti-racism

The School of Drama will institute ongoing, regular training on becoming actively anti-racist for all faculty, staff, and teaching students. In organizing these trainings, every effort will be made to minimize the emotional burden placed on non-white-identifying faculty, staff, and students. Where possible, non-teaching students will also have opportunities to connect with this work. We will be working over the summer to identify a professional support structure for this work.

7. Combat erasure in our history

In the coming year, the School of Drama will undertake a project to revise its recorded history to combat erasure and acknowledge when our school’s actions have created obstacles to equity and justice. This document will also aim to better highlight the contributions and experiences of BIPOC members of our school community, which have for too long gone overlooked and unrecorded in the story of our school. This history will be public. We hope that its publication will be a signpost pointing toward a new era of transparency and accountability in the school.

Again, this list is not comprehensive, and it is not frozen. It will necessarily continue to evolve and grow. But we offer it today as a starting place and invitation.

Our art form relies on relationships. We are interdependent. None of us can do this alone. To implement the changes described in this document will require mutual support, attention, courage, stamina, and, for many of us, sacrifice. The Black, Indigenous, and Person of Color members of our community have borne the burden of sacrifice on behalf of this school for too long. It is time for those of us who are white to do the heavy lifting, and our BIPOC colleagues are right to expect us to hold ourselves accountable for both the spirit and the specifics of the plans in this document.

We welcome feedback and engagement around what we have stated here today. Please email your feedback to dramafeedback@uw.edu or to Geoff Korf at gkorf@uw.edu. If you prefer an anonymous means of providing feedback, please use this form.

RELATED LINKS:

- UW School of Drama BIPOC student mentorship program
- UW School of Drama Process for Voicing Concerns

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