

# ANTI-RACIST RESOLUTIONS FOR THE CLASSROOM

By Amy Leonard



## ARE YOU LOOKING TO RESHAPE YOUR CLASSROOM OR TRY A NEW GRADING STRATEGY FOR THE NEXT SCHOOL YEAR?

During the 2022–23 school year, as the classroom environment started to achieve a level of normalcy, a number of faculty are re-examining their pedagogy and andragogy to create a more equitable classroom and incorporate the larger lessons learned from the pandemic. Incorporating a touch of humanity into their syllabi, grading, and classroom policies, as well as being “woke” enough to audit classes for racist and scarcity-based assignments and rubrics, are just a few examples.

To give a little background on why all faculty should make a new resolution to adopt some anti-racist pedagogy and andragogy into their classrooms in 2023, the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges asserted in *Decolonizing Your Syllabus*, an Anti-Racist Guide for Your College that “Academic institutions should all have a call to action to address racial inequities and to be accountable to meet the transformational change that society needs.” This sen-

timent is hammered home by the stark realities about which CalMatters higher education reporter Mikhail Zinshteyn wrote in an article titled “‘We’re not going to close the equity gaps’: Despite progress, California Community Colleges won’t reach Newsom’s aspirational goals.” That article, which Cal Matters published on Oct. 13, 2022, concluded that “The system [had] virtually no shot of reaching its most audacious academic goals of narrowing by 40% the graduation rate gap among its Black, Latino, and white students in five years. Nor [was] the system on track to narrow the graduation-rate gaps across regions, such as between the Bay Area and the poorer Inland Empire.” The quotation in the article’s headline is a statement by Pamela Haynes, president of the California Community Colleges Board of Governors.

Likewise, the Public Policy Institute of California found that “The pandemic increased challenges for low-income students and students of color, and many delayed their studies or dropped out of college.” With the dire news on the state of community college educational success for BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People

of Color) students, determination of how to tackle the problem can seem overwhelming, but, fortunately, brave faculty already have begun adopting a few of the strategies that others may want to consider as they eye the 2023–24 year. These strategies fall under the umbrella of anti-racist pedagogy and provide suggestions for where to start and for reports on how it is working in their classrooms.

A simple place to start in our journey to create a more equitable space for your students is to decolonize our syllabus. According to Ishiyama et al., when syllabi contain a disciplinary tone in the language, students won’t seek an instructor for academic help (2002). Hence, the suggested start would be for faculty to revise their syllabi polices and language to see how punitive it sounds versus warm and welcoming.

Another few tips from the Academic Senate’s *Decolonizing Your Syllabus*...might be to ask ourselves:

- Does my syllabus contain links or information about housing insecurity help and food pantries?

- Do your course syllabus and Canvas site include positive messages and affirmations to further validate and provide a greater sense of belonging for BIPOC students in the course?
- Do the images and videos in the course showcase diversity and representation of the students?

This adjustment can have a lasting impact on our BIPOC students’ success and their ability to find our classes a more welcoming space.

Once we have tackled the syllabi, we can begin to look more deeply into the success rates and interrogate how our department and campus curriculum connect to the success of your BIPOC students. As the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges asserted, “Dismantling racist structures requires a review of the history that created those structures. It requires understanding the history of the construct of race as a culture, the white supremacy ideology, the centuries of laws intended to maintain positions of power for whites, and the ways in which the equity and diversity efforts

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within California's community colleges have fallen short." This means if we are using a department rubric that has not been re-evaluated for racist or oppressive structures, revisit it as a department after bringing in some professional development on anti-racist pedagogy. Likewise, the statewide Academic Senate asserts: "[Faculty can] enact culturally responsive curricular redesign within disciplines, courses, and programs and with curriculum committees." At this larger level, faculty can look at how department student-learning-outcomes and texts are used to create more welcoming spaces for learning. That means, for example, making sure we have texts, images, and perspectives that represent the diversity of the student body, and that we advocate for inclusion of diversity not only in our own course but all courses regardless of modality.

The reports from the teaching trenches of faculty members who have started incorporating anti-racist pedagogy into their classes point to interesting needs to shift perspective. Math instructor Patrick Morriss at Foothill College in Los Altos Hills asserts that after adopting anti-racist grading techniques, "People tend to pass my classes with much less racial predictability of outcomes. I should note that many faculty view those results as failures. They say they can only imagine seeing results like those in their own classes by abandoning academic standards and mathematical rigor. I see two truths in that view. The first concerns imagination. Lower standards don't help anyone. Any anti-racist assessment policy must be academically rigorous. The problem is that academic culture confuses rigor with difficulty and/or with volume. It takes imagination to find a way through that confusion. The second truth concerns systemic perpetuation of racially predictable outcomes, as enacted through a gatekeeper mindset. In that realm, I strive to fail."

Foothill College English instructor Hilda Fernandez uses contract grading to make the expectations of the assignment and grading explicitly clear and found that "Overall, students expressed feeling less stressed about the work they are producing since completing all the assignments in a timely manner, and as each assignment required, would result in a 'B' grade. They could then dedicate quality time and brainstorming on areas they would like to improve or explore further—

content and research, skill areas, cross-disciplinary connections—about which they were excited to learn as a class because sharing additional labor projects is a requirement. The required sharing with the class builds a sense of community amongst the class, which was an additional plus."

English instructor Sarah Lisha of De Anza College in Cupertino also found positive reviews from students after changing her grading rubric language and humanizing her rubrics and syllabi. She said, "They find the grading much more transparent, and I find them more willing to come to office hours to discuss things because they know my role is to help them improve."

Finally, as with all changes to a course, faculty are finding what benefits the students also benefits them.

Hilda Fernandez noted, "As faculty, I don't have to work extra hours creating ways students who fall behind can catch up with the class. Instead, it's up to the individual to reach out and decide what additional labor project interests them. This is great and exciting as faculty." Sarah Lisha suggested that faculty should "Give it a try! It's hard to re-do and re-examine what we've been doing, but it's beneficial and humbling to see how tiny tweaks can make all the difference for student success."

So, as we faculty members begin to acclimate to the new normal of teaching, it is imperative that we take the time to shed the systemic structures of oppression that were status quo in pre-pandemic times, and instead, heed the advice of Foothill College's Patrick Morriss for colleagues thinking about adopting anti-racist pedagogy into their classroom: "Do it. Do it now. Every delay means more students are experiencing systemic injustice. Don't wait another term." ■

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