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## Dismantling Systemic Racism in Learning Support: The Time is Now!

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I vividly remember the first time I ever sought academic assistance, in the midst of my undergraduate career at Southern University and at the tail end of the Civil Rights Movement. During the 1968-69 academic year I was attending UC Berkeley on a Crown Zellerbach Scholarship that had been established because the company had been found guilty of environmental racism – massively polluting Alsen, Louisiana, the small Black community just north of Baton Rouge in which Crown Zellerbach was operating a huge plant.

I was enrolled in four science courses during my one-year stint at UCB, and I was having trouble with inorganic chemistry. I was so grateful that the Black graduate students in chemistry had established a free tutoring program. I knew that I could get help from someone who looked like me, and who would not automatically assume that, because I was Black, I wasn't capable of mastering the concepts. So, two years later, when I was a graduate student at Cornell, I assumed the same role – tutoring and mentoring African American students who were considered not to be as smart as others and only there because of preferential admission (see [this article](#) for evidence that this attitude still exists today). There were no formalized academic support centers then, so tutoring support for these bright but unprepared students was not easily obtained. They thrived under my tutelage, a haven in a relatively hostile university environment.

Now it is 2020, and there are over 1500 learning support centers in the United States. However, the chance that Black or Brown students at most institutions will encounter a tutor, SI Leader, or center administrator who looks like them, knows their experience, and can be an example of academic excellence is slim.

I believe that this lack of diversity among us is a manifestation of systemic racism. Systemic racism exists not because *individuals* are racist, but because the policies and practices of an organization result in the marginalization of a group, based on race. It is these policies and practices that have resulted in the systemic racism that exists in our field. To begin to dismantle it, I would like to suggest the following actions:

1. **Change the way we recruit and hire tutors and SI leaders so that our academic support team more closely reflects the diversity of our student body.** For example, we could go to campus African American organizations, including sororities and fraternities (which have academic excellence committees), to recruit. We can work with departments of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion to help ensure our hiring practices reduce implicit biases and become more inclusive. As long we continue to rely on referrals from faculty and/or our current staff, we are not likely

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to increase numbers of underrepresented students. We can make sure that our hiring focuses more on “screening in” rather “screening out” potential hires.

2. **Provide an opportunity within our centers for students of color to gather and talk about issues that affect them.** Talking with students who have had similar experiences can relieve much of the anxiety experienced by a pre-med student who has just come from a biology professor’s office and been told that “A grade of C is a good grade for you. Why aren’t you happy with that?” (Yes, this DOES happen!).
3. **Meet regularly with Black, Latinx, Native American and Asian student staff to hear about their issues and concerns.** Now is the time to really *listen*, with compassion, and take actions such as reviewing policies, modifying procedures, and addressing student experiences with biased faculty and staff. You may be shocked by some of the indignities experienced by these students.
4. **Educate ourselves and our student staff about privilege and its impacts.**
  - Books: *Whistling Vivaldi* and *So You Want to Talk About Race*
  - Articles: “[Violence Never Works? Really?](#)” and the Peggy McIntosh essay, “[White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack.](#)”
  - Scores of other resources are readily available online.
5. **Continue to hold our student workers and visitors accountable.** Publicly articulate that you have a welcoming and inclusive learning environment that does not tolerate speech or actions that disrupt that. Include such language in your learning center mission and vision statements or overall descriptions. Include diversity topics in your tutor trainings.

I know firsthand, having been a member of this wonderful community for over 20 years, that you are people with huge hearts full of love for all students. But now is the time to become explicitly anti-racist. Taking the concrete steps described here to dismantle the systemic racism in our field would be meaningful action in that direction. As a result, the lives of all of our students, no matter their background, would be improved and enriched, as would our nation.