

Position Statement on Racism, Anti-Immigration, and Linguistic Intolerance

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As writing center scholars, directors, and consultants interested in resisting racism and promoting human rights, we are deeply distressed by recent attacks on the rights and liberties of ethnic minorities and immigrant communities in the State of Arizona with the passage of SB 1070 and HB 2281. We note and are also distressed by the passage of a law declaring English the official language in the State of Oklahoma. We note a rising tide of implicit and explicit racism expressed as anti-immigration fervor and linguistic intolerance in many states that seem poised to follow the lead of Arizona and Oklahoma. Within our writing centers and our classrooms, we are made aware daily of the toll exacted by institutional racism on students and staff of color. We recognize these legislative initiatives as an extension and codification in law of multiple forms of racism (and a peculiar brand of nationalism) that have a long and ugly history in the United States: a history that must be told in order to be learned from and must be transformed if we are ever, as a nation, to realize our potential as a multi-racial democracy.

We do not believe that the coincidence of the Arizona Board of Education's decision to ban teachers of English with "ungrammatical" accents with these legislative actions, for example, is accidental. Rather, we believe that, taken together, these racist and anti-immigrant legislative initiatives and policies enact long-standing, often apparently willful misapprehensions about education, generally, and the teaching of English, in particular. As teachers and scholars who know the value of academic freedom to the production of new knowledge and the achievement of excellence in teaching and learning, who recognize the rights and responsibilities that attend academic freedom, we find the incursions of the state into the autonomy of scholars, teachers, and learners particularly distressing and worrisome.

The Arizona Board of Education's ban of "accented" English (as if there is any English that is "unaccented") flies in the face of the finest and most compelling scholarship in the field of Composition and Rhetoric. Such luminaries as Victor Villanueva, Mike Rose, Lisa Delpit, Patricia Bizzel, Vershawn Ashanti Young, Paul Matsuda, John Trimbur, and Min-Zhan Lu affirm that not only are all Englishes accented, but that the language is enriched and enlarged by the diversity of its speakers and writers. To restrict the influence of this diversity is to perpetuate and reproduce a white supremacist view of language and usage and, in fact, to codify that abhorrent worldview in public policy.

Taken together, Arizona's measures, in particular, and, indeed, such measures in other states as well, are an attempt to de-legitimize the voices, bodies, and epistemologies of people of color. The Arizona Board of Education has singled out teachers of English who have "ungrammatical" accents. Meanwhile, SB 1070 allows for racial profiling by marking people's bodies as "reasonably suspicious," and HB 2281 bans ethnic studies programs by making the false claim that these programs engender hatred and "ethnic chauvinism." When viewed as part of the larger dialogue of race and immigration status in the US, where one finds calls for English-only legislation, the whitewashing of history textbooks and curriculum, and legislators who forget to mention slavery as a cause of the Civil War, it is understandable that many people of color feel under siege.

As institutions committed to the democratization of education on university campuses, writing centers are invested in promoting social justice. With this legislation, our work becomes more difficult. We agree with Dr. Devon Peña, Chair of the National Association for Chicana and Chicano Studies, that these measures add up to an "ecology of fear." He describes this environment as one that "creates intolerance, fear, insecurity and hatred" for people who appear to be of color. This "ecology of fear" has wide-ranging, cumulative effects that can negatively impact access to, and success within, the university system.

As the International Writing Center Association's Special Interest Group on anti-racist activism, we condemn all such measures to restrict linguistic diversity and to limit academic freedom along racial lines for their legal sanction of systemic and institutional racism. As a counterweight to these measures and in resistance to them, we hope to foster conversations in writing centers everywhere about the implications of such new laws, wherever they may be proposed or passed and about racism and oppression more generally. In our capacity as advocates of one-with-one tutoring, we seek to move the discourse surrounding race and immigration status into a more honest and humane space, in our own writing centers and in our communities at large. We encourage U.S. lawmakers in every state to repeal these laws. We offer solidarity with those who struggle against such laws wherever they may be enacted.