

The Road to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion: White Anti-Racist Caucus

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Affinity groups are an important part of the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusivity work that we do at Taft. We typically think of affinity groups as being for people of traditionally marginalized groups because they provide places of comfort and support in communities that can be difficult to navigate. However, groups for people of privilege that facilitate better understanding of privilege in order to dismantle it are necessary to creating a more just community. The newly created Taft White Anti-Racist Caucus is one such group in our community. WARC functions in support of Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) members of the community, though it works independently toward this end. The article that follows was written by members of WARC.

The genesis of the White Anti-Racist Caucus

One thing was certain: Something had to change.

In the aftermath of the murders of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, white members of the Taft faculty found themselves looking inward. While Louisville and Minneapolis were miles away from Watertown, Connecticut, the reverberations of this social justice movement and moment were felt across campus and throughout our remote community. Days later, a group of Taft alumni sent a letter demanding change. Days after that, the Instagram account Black@Taft was formed, detailing the trauma and discrimination BIPOC students have faced on campus for decades. (Similar Instagram accounts emerged at other schools, colleges, and universities representing a national "Black@" movement adjacent to and informed by the Black Lives Matter movement.) For white faculty at a primarily white institution, it was a sobering moment of self-reflection: We had failed. We had failed our BIPOC students. We had failed to create and maintain an equitable institution. We had failed to create a country in the ways that educators contribute to the ethos of a country that valued Black bodies and Black lives. Our intent had not matched our impact, the institution needed to change, and in that, white faculty needed to change.

In the early weeks of June, individual and disparate white faculty members connected in order to help catalyze Taft's evolution and growth as an actively anti-racist institution — especially in light of the most recent feedback from students and alumni on Instagram (Black@Taft). These brave, shared personal experiences from students' time at Taft revealed trauma and illustrated the ways white faculty in particular were falling short in our goals with regard to BIPOC students. White faculty realized that they needed a space to learn, process, and grow that would not burden BIPOC faculty and students. We needed to educate ourselves, hold each other accountable, and learn from each other. We needed to provide models for our white students in the ways we spoke about our own whiteness and role in white supremacy and systemic racism. Finally, the formal group would serve as an important signal to the Taft community that Taft is serious about anti-racism; a formal group also allows information to be shared more easily and gives folks a sense of where to go for support and guidance.

After a few meetings, we decided to formalize our group and mission. What originally started as a white affinity group evolved to a white educators group, which eventually evolved into WARC.

Why WARC?

The White Anti-Racist Caucus.

White: We wanted to acknowledge our whiteness because that identity is essential to our place and purpose in anti-racist work.

Anti-Racist: While we are interested in being activists in support of all marginalized members of our communities, at the time of our group's formation, race was front and center in our minds and needed the most attention from the school. Plus, as Ibram X. Kendi and others have argued, you can't be anti-racist unless you are also anti-sexist, etc.

Caucus: We chose not to use "educators" because we wanted to include staff who did not necessarily identify as educators, and we wanted to use "caucus" because it implied activism.

Carrying out our work

This summer, the mission of the steering committee was two-pronged: to educate white faculty and staff through interactive and engaging lesson plans, and to offer space to white community members to begin to understand their whiteness, unpack their privilege, and educate themselves on more socially just forms of community to implement at Taft in the fall. In addition to building a website to share resources and sending educational emails listing activities each week, WARC began hosting three summer sessions, one per month. The topics were:

- June: Exploring Whiteness: identifying whiteness/white behaviors that uphold supremacy
- July: Relearning History: Filling in the holes in our understanding of history
- August: Listening to BIPOC Voices: Diversifying media consumption

In total, 90 white faculty and staff have joined the group. The group intends to move forward, slightly shifting the model for the school year as students and teachers implement practices stemming from the various school-wide diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) trainings conducted this summer. Our future sessions will work to help white faculty and staff reflect on interactions they've had on campus, pass a critical eye over curriculum, question institutional structures, and strive to involve more white students in anti-racism work.

The socio-ethical focus of WARC

We need action. We need change.

Dr. Beverly Daniel Tatum, author of the 1997 book, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*, in which she addresses the problem of passive inaction, writes, *"I sometimes visualize the ongoing cycle of racism as a moving walkway at the airport. Active racist behavior is equivalent to walking fast on the conveyor belt. The person engaged in active racist behavior has identified with the ideology of White supremacy and is moving with it. Passive racist behavior is equivalent to standing still on the walkway. No overt effort is being made, but the conveyor belt moves the bystanders along to the same destination as those who are actively walking. Some of the bystanders may feel the motion of the conveyor belt, see the active racists ahead of them, and choose to turn around, unwilling to go to the same destination as the White supremacists. But unless they are walking actively in the opposite direction at a speed faster than the conveyor belt—unless they are actively antiracist—they will find themselves carried along with the others."*

The members of WARC are working to draw sustained attention to this troubling moving walkway of racism as described by Dr. Tatum. Knowing the nature of this system, how it was created, and how it affects both BIPOC and white people were strategic goals that inspired the formation of the three topics presented by WARC in Zoom meetings this summer. We hope that dissemination of knowledge in support of anti-racism will encourage and inspire attendees to plan for their personal growth and to take action in implementing change within the larger Taft community, even if it is a small action conducted within one's sphere of influence, which could consist of one's office or department.

Taft's community is diverse and multifaceted. Some Tafties may think these efforts are too bold, controversial, or political. Some may even think this is all unnecessary. Of course, race and racism have become central political issues in this election year. Political disagreements about local and national policies are commonplace and learning to listen to, understand, and respond to each other in a civil manner is a time-honored process in learning institutions and the hallmark of a democracy. When political discourse becomes deeply polarized and national politicians express beliefs and ideas that are contrary to the mission of The Taft School and inconsistent with Taft's Portrait of a Graduate, it requires bold and decisive action to counter and correct discourse occurring with our community that is offensive to our students and to basic human rights.

To learn more about Taft's ongoing diversity, equity, and inclusion work, visit www.taftschoo.org/dei