Reviews: Desegregation State: College Writing Programs after the Civil Rights Movement

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Deconstructing histories of desegregation shows the complex ways in which anti-Black racism and college writing programs have become intertwined in American higher education. Predominantly White presumptions of direct linkages between cultural deprivation and segregation, standardized test scores and college readiness, and vernacular English and writing skills continue to provide harsh barriers to college access for Black students. A well-documented, critical historical analysis of the development of college writing programs in the University System of Georgia (USG), Annie S. Mendenhall's *Desegregation State: College Writing Programs after the Civil Rights Movement* (2022) demonstrates one of the primary lessons of desegregation for Writing Program Administration (WPA) at colleges: "race-evasive policies, white institutional norms, and a failure to consider past racial oppression" in higher education "allow racial injustice to persist or worsen" (152). This four-chapter book is bookended by a very clear introduction and a prescriptive coda. The historical sequencing of the chapters shows the changes in college admissions, placement requirements, and writing programs and Mendenhall's assessment that these processes, nonetheless, continued to reinforce anti-Black linguistic racism, particularly at specific colleges in Savannah, Georgia.

Several of the chapters underscore the foundations upon which anti-Black racism in the USG system was based. The introduction lays out the book's central claim: "literacy requirements for admissions, placement, retention, and graduation" became White resistance to the "enforcement of postsecondary education desegregation in [White-controlled] university systems" (7). Chapters 1 and 2 illustrate how desegregation efforts manifested as remediation programs, writing placement, and assessment in USG colleges. In the early 1970s, White assumptions about cultural deprivation —that isolation and lack of stimuli were at the root of the segregation of people of color— made remediation programs the way desegregation was implemented in the USG (37–38). In practice, remediation became one tool to perpetuate anti-Black racism and segregation by holding "a standard English dialect" (one that was White and middle-class) as "the correct or predominant one" that college students had to "master to be educated" (43). It did not matter that there was scholarly research to show that the financial need of Black students rather than the isolation of their communities or the lack of linguistic skills was the actual primary reason for not attending college. The information in these chapters can be of use in faculty and administrative staff efforts to be more aware of and to deconstruct the enduring ways in which structural racism and bias are embedded in the collection and processing of data for student admission, retention, and attrition.

Chapters 3 and 4 strengthen Mendenhall's critical analysis of anti-Black racism in higher education. The late-1970s in Georgia saw increases in state oversight of desegregation. Academic standards came to be central to institutional reputation, a characteristic important to students' choice of college. However, White pushback to state desegregation enforcement limited remedial instruction at White colleges. Remedial programs came to be associated with lower academic quality and reinforced the assumption that remedial classes only be offered to students having the "potential to integrate" into "college standards" (84). In addition, growing doubts about standardized testing as the best method to assess student writing for college admissions and the subjectivity and bias of writing assessment against racial "minorities" led composition faculty and scholars to "shift toward essay exams" as a means of student writing assessment (92–93). Yet standardized testing remained a major tool of assessment for college admissions. Standardized tests served to support "anti-Black linguistic racism" in "defining college-level writing ability" (102). For two-year colleges, these chapters demonstrate that efforts like AB705 and AB1705 for California's community colleges underscore the struggles to accommodate students who need remediation while still keeping college goals like equity and inclusion in mind.

With Mendenhall's detailed scrutiny of White college administrators', staff's, and faculty's tendency to blame individual students' cultural deficiencies for issues such as attrition and retention in college, it is possible to see the continuation of anti-Black racial ideologies in the scapegoating of "minority" students' functional illiteracy for the perceived reduction quality of academic standards in higher education (116). In the 1980s, basic writing instruction became folded into mainstream writing classes and writing centers reinvented themselves as spaces for integrated writing to have a

safer, sustainable future. Both writing centers and Writing Across the Curriculum programs purported to offer equal opportunities to all students to improve their writing based on individual help, yet these developments still left race and racism unexamined. The controversy over racial bias in the subjective grading of the Regents' Test in Georgia that arose in the 1980s showed that the racist ideologies and assumptions operating in placement and assessment practices of higher education from the 1970s had not diminished. Literacy, as defined by White middle-class norms, continued to play a strong role in defining academic standards at White colleges and for politicians. Anti-Black linguistic racism continued to reinforce disparities between Black and White colleges, including the locating of reinvigorated remediation programs at Black colleges. Resistance was possible, but significant discrepancies between White and Black colleges remained. These chapters remind us that at the course level in two-year colleges' writing programs, faculty would be well served to consider the manifestation of similar biases that blame individual students' perceived deficiencies for lack of class attendance, poor assignment performance, and discipline issues rather than possible instructor-created lack of access, equity, and inclusiveness.

Mendenhall prefaces her coda by noting that the field of literature, composition, and rhetoric (LCR) still has work to do in order to diminish the racial discrepancies in higher education. She reiterates her conclusion that the development of writing programs has contributed to racial injustice through the admissions and retention policies that were supported. Mendenhall also notes the continued power of White supremacy in the institutionalized "white norms" of higher education and their ability to define standards, control resources, and act as gatekeepers for college access (145). Yet she highlights the key takeaway of her delving into the archives of historical documents on desegregation in the 1970s and 1980s in USG: it is only institutional transformation that will fully address the "complex legacies of racism and segregation" (145). To this end, she points out that efforts have been made to involve students in self-placement decisions for basic writing courses, yet the problem of negative White perceptions of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) remains unexamined. According to LCR research, integrating a focus on "Black language and rhetoric in writing programs" can enhance student achievement and the "range of communication knowledge students learn" (151). However, placing HBCUs at the center of writing program practices and policies is very important, as is a critical, visible examination of the ways in which anti-Black linguistic racism and racist ideologies have continued to operate through the policing and surveillance of Black students in higher education. Faculty and administrators at two-year colleges can learn from HBCUs such as Savannah State University, where Black scholars and faculty have resisted racism through their literacy pedagogies' focus on social justice (152). Directly confronting the racist ideologies of the past and the present in higher education can be accomplished through changes such as incorporating "the knowledge of multiple Englishes" into core courses, having students critically consider racial privilege in writing assignments, and asking writing program administrators to reconsider the presumed "race-neutral" policies and practices of

writing programs (152). Not only composition scholars and writing faculty, but all those concerned with working to dismantle the racist ideologies that continue to operate in U.S. higher education will benefit from these concrete suggestions for institutional transformation offered by Mendenhall after her own examination of desegregation in USG during the 1970s and 1980s.

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