

Commitment to Racial Healing, Equity, and Inclusion

Otterbein University Department of Theatre and Dance September 30, 2020

This document grew out of an invitation from a group of our Black Alumni to engage in a forum of listening, where Faculty and Staff could hear firsthand the experiences of those Black Alumni. We met online with a group of Black alumni representing classes from pre-2014 through 2019. The Black Alumni present shared their love for Otterbein and the Department of Theatre and Dance and expressed both appreciation and a strong desire to help the department improve. We were given insight into Black student experiences at Otterbein and were able to see our program through the lens of our Black students. We thank our Black Alumni for seeking to help the Department, for being forward-thinking and generous in their perspective, and for being honest and straightforward with us.

This document is an outgrowth of this process; an initial step, one part of a constant cycle of reflection, education, and action.

Accountability:

As a department, we acknowledge:

- The pain of our students of color and the experiences described by our Black Alumni. Many students in our department have been deeply hurt. It was heartbreaking to hear their stories and sobering to realize that their stories testify to the systemic, ongoing ways in which BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Color) artists have encountered stereotyping, microaggressions, and other forms of racism. We offer our heartfelt apology to all those who have experienced pain within our department.
- That we, as a department, have unconsciously allowed the systemic racism that permeates our country and culture to continue.
- That the very real and personal impact of representation, or the lack thereof, takes precedence over any theory of acting, and over preserving the current theatre canon.

Our Pledge and Action Plan

We, as a department, commit to the following:

- To communicate more thoroughly and transparently with our students.
 - The key to many of our challenges lies in improving communication with our students and becoming more transparent. This will include building a culture where students feel free to ask questions and communicate freely.
 - We will continue our dialogue with our Black Alumni
 - We will begin an active campaign of listening and dialogue with our students of color

- One aspect of this will be a series of Chair meetings, an anonymous comment/suggestion system, and other channels as built with the collaboration of our students of color.
 - Another aspect is building the aforementioned culture of openness where multidirectional communication is fostered among our faculty and students.
- We commit to learning more about implicit bias, how privilege manifests itself, and how to recast our work from an anti-racist perspective.
 - We are partnering with the Office of Social Justice & Activism and have engaged them for education and training on an ongoing basis.
 - We will be co-sponsoring an annual diversity professional development event which will tap both internal and external resources to provide a variety of perspectives and approaches.
 - Anti-racism training will be a part of the new-hire process moving forward
 - We will explore and utilize the resources of Otterbein’s new Truth, Racial Healing and Transformation Campus Center
- We commit to examine ourselves and our curriculum through the lens of the BIPOC communities to identify and remedy bias, microaggressions, and inequity.
 - Each point in this pledge is a vehicle to root out bias and remedy microaggressions and inequity.
- We commit to engaging our BIPOC students as individuals in a way that provides a safe space, is supportive of their ethnic identities, and which prepares them for entry into the theatre business specifically as persons of color.
 - We will continue and increase our efforts to engage with our students in discussion of performance material for projects and public production and collaborate with our students of color to determine pieces that are useful for them in the current professional market, are appropriate to each person as an individual, and are most suitable for their theatre education.
- We commit to exploring what it means to shift from a “color-blind” approach to a “color-conscious” approach to teaching, casting, and producing. This “color-conscious” approach is based upon the fact that the experience of an oppressed minority population is *intrinsically different* than the experience of the majority population, and that representation is critical. Aspects of this include, but are not necessarily limited to the following:
 - We will engage our students, alumni, and industry/community resources to help us determine what a color-conscious approach means within educational theatre, and how it can be implemented in a department that is early in the journey to greater diversity.
 - We will examine representation holistically, looking at representation within each individual production, across the season as a whole, and as a total experience for each student over their four years at Otterbein.
 - We will find avenues for producing work by playwrights of color, plays that address the range of BIPOC experiences, and plays that provide significant roles for our students of color
 - This may manifest in class projects, workshops, advanced directing projects, Festival, and/or our mainstage season

- We will consult with our students, alumni, and industry/community resources to determine how to do this respectfully within a largely White Faculty/Staff--and how to avoid engaging in cultural appropriation in the process.
 - We will adjust our casting practices to allow greater freedom to choose plays with significant roles for people of color and will communicate with our students of color to avoid tokenism or the appearance of tokenism in our casting choices.
 - We will provide, within the financial constraints of the University, appropriate role models of color in all areas.
- We commit to updating our curriculum to embrace diversity, recognize all students, reflect history more accurately and inclusively, and address people of diversity with more sensitivity and knowledge, especially in the teaching of history and design.
 - We will examine our curriculum for White-centric bias
 - We will broaden our students' experience of plays beyond the traditional white canon.
 - We will encourage students and faculty to utilize our newly purchased access to the New Play Exchange, as recommended by Alumni
 - We will survey the plays being taught across our curriculum and adjust as needed to ensure that they represent a diversity of playwrights.
- We commit to continuing to develop recruiting strategies to make Otterbein more available to all students and to broaden our pool of BIPOC candidates.
 - We will continue to speak with prospective students of color that choose to go elsewhere to determine what factors would have led them to choose Otterbein, and will build this into a more formal, actionable process.
 - We will explore audition and interview options including, but not limited to, online options which remove the financial barriers to application for all students.
 - We will work with the Office of Social Justice & Activism to seek untapped recruitment locations and strategies to increase our availability to prospective students of color.
- We commit to continuing to advocate for our individual students in financial aid matters.
 - We currently do this on a regular basis and will continue to advocate loudly for increases in the University limits to financial aid/scholarships to make Otterbein more accessible.
- We commit to working with the Office of Social Justice & Activism to determine how best to hold a dialogue with all our students to:
 - Articulate the Department's stance on diversity
 - Encourage understanding and support of our diversity efforts
 - Encourage understanding and recognition of implicit bias and privilege
 - Encourage understanding of the experiences of BIPOC and other marginalized individuals at Otterbein and in society at large
 - Help eliminate the incidents of racist statements and behaviors among the student body
 - We commit to handling any racist incidents with empathy and accountability.
- We commit to diversifying the faculty/staff to enrich the University and curriculum with a diversity of viewpoints and experience, to improve representation of the spectrum of diversity in our world, and to provide our students with role models of color.
 - As soon as economic conditions permit us to hire full-time faculty/staff again:
 - We commit to seeking out candidates of color
 - We commit to seeking diversity in the faculty

- Until we can hire full-time faculty/staff again:
 - We will build upon and increase our efforts to find opportunities to bring in PT Faculty and guest artists/speakers of color, within the financial constraints of the University.

This moment in History is specifically about Black experiences in America. While this document focuses specifically on our Black community, we also simultaneously acknowledge that these same issues of systemic discrimination pervade the experience of all our marginalized communities. The Department of Theatre and Dance will include the full spectrum of diversity in our efforts towards healing, inclusion, and equity.

As the Faculty and Staff of the Otterbein University Department of Theatre and Dance, we thank the Black Alumni, especially Morgan Anita Wood and Jared Howelton, for providing us with the listening forum that inspired this departmental commitment. Your generosity of spirit, your honesty about your experiences, and your constructive suggestions are deeply appreciated. They will help us improve the experience for our current students and students yet to come.

This policy has been approved by The Otterbein University Department of Theatre and Dance
September 30, 2020.