

Department of English at the University of Arkansas

DIVERSITY NEWSLETTER



Message from Committee Chair Padma Viswanathan

I became provisional chair of the English Dept. DEI Committee four years ago, and am not exactly sure when the provisional status was dropped, but here we are: we have a longstanding committee (which not every unit across the university had, until quite recently) and I'm chair. Before my time, the committee had been created to do a curricular reform (in which the department transitioned from annual assessments of individual courses' diversity content toward a number of course streams, each of which would have 100% diversity content). As that reform came to a conclusion, however, the committee started to talk about whether it might have a greater role and more long-range impact, especially given that English had come to be one of the most diverse units on campus.

At around that time, Fulbright College led the university as a whole to push for concerted, formal efforts toward diversity, equity and inclusion. As part of these efforts, Yajaira Padilla, Associate Professor of English and Director of Latinx and Latin-American Studies, was asked to assist in a university-wide effort to get every unit at the U of A to develop a DEI plan. In that capacity, Dr. Padilla, with considerable departmental input, developed a model plan for us. This was in part to have a model for other Fulbright units, but the huge advantage for English was that it gave us a plan!

It also gave our DEI committee a formal and ongoing brief. While many items in our DEI plan happen outside the committee's purview, the committee is a point of focus for these efforts and also has a number of tasks we are trying carry out. I have started this biannual newsletter as a way to let the department as a whole into our efforts. I hope that, as this year ticks forward, members of the department might contribute items of interest that they would like to see included. Note that I will be on research leave this spring; Sean Teuton will be Acting Chair in my absence.

The intention is to give a snapshot of recent initiatives, not only accomplishments but efforts, such that this history won't be lost with turnover, and particularly so that ongoing efforts can be better sustained.

This Year's Work

1. Membership expansion: A year ago, the committee was expanded to include representative members from every division within our department, one bullet point from our DEI plan. This is our membership as of Fall 2020:

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We will always be open to new members, so please get in touch if you are interested!

2. DEI statement for website: A year prior, several members of the committee had drafted a DEI statement to go on [our website](#). In January 2020, we finished and posted this.

DEPARTMENT STATEMENT ON DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

A knowledge of different literatures is the best way to free one's self from the tyranny of any of them.

--José Martí

We in the English Department of the University of Arkansas believe a respect for policies and practices that foster diverse voices and viewpoints, that protect all members of our community against discrimination, and that maintain appropriate professional boundaries is integral to the success of our students and our program.

We acknowledge that structures of historical oppression are still operational today, sometimes more visibly and sometimes less, and that efforts toward diversity and inclusion must permeate all levels of practice, from curriculum to teaching, from admissions to hiring, taking into account race and ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, disability, age, religion, neurodiversity, country of origin, citizenship status, socio-economic status, physical and mental health, and other factors that can divide and disadvantage.

Our department consists of three broad areas—literature, creative writing, and rhetoric and composition—within which our community of scholars fosters intellectual and aesthetic diversity. We try to continually reconsider what constitutes the center and the canon of our disciplines, and to renovate our departmental culture and teaching practices in response to evolving student, state, and national populations. With these conversations, we hope to provoke mutual reflection on how to respect one another's differences and build from the diversity of our communities.

We hope, above all, that if you come to us as a student, we can teach you to question, in large part by modeling our own engagement with the questions that drive us.

Reach down into that deep place of knowledge inside... and touch that terror and loathing of any difference that lives here. See whose face it wears. Then the personal as the political can begin to illuminate all our choices.

--Audre Lorde

3. Participation on Brown Chair

search: Members of the DEI committee participated in the search for our new Brown Chair in literacy, both on the committee and during the campus visit, and brought DEI reflections to the subsequent conversation and selection. The result of the search is that, in January, we will welcome Eric Darnell Pritchard into the department as our new Brown Chair in Literacy.

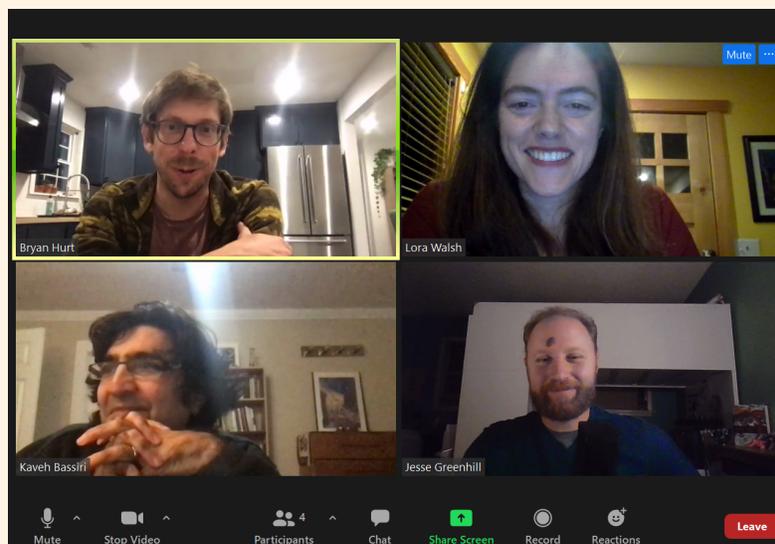


4. Statements in solidarity with BLM uprisings and in response to #blackatuark: This summer, the DEI committee was asked to write statements on behalf of the English department, expressing solidarity with the Black Lives Matter protesters and, subsequently, recognizing the validity of the U of Arkansas students describing their experiences on the Twitter thread #blackatuark. It was difficult and healthy: most of us on the DEI committee are more accustomed to speaking back at this institution rather than on behalf of it. How to write statements honestly acknowledging the histories of our department and our university, offering an accurate assessment of where we are now and also making realistic, actionable promises? We did our best, but working through those promises is still an ongoing and active process.

Some News and Information on DEI Initiatives, in English and Beyond

DEI office hours: Yvette Murphy-Erby, Vice Chancellor of the Division for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, offers office hours for questions, suggestions and discussion. Email her at ymurphy@uark.edu for an appointment.

Anti-racism reading group: At the graduate students' request, the department is running an anti-racism reading group. Lora Walsh held the first installment in October, which discussed Lucia Hulsether's article "The Grammar of Racism." Bryan Hurt led the second meeting in November, on an article by Matthew Salesses, "The Empathy Economy Is a Sham. The Protest Movement Is Real." Padma Viswanathan will close out the semester with a discussion of Aruni Kashyap's "Living in Translation, or Why I Love Daffodils, an Unpopular Postcolonial Flower," Mukoma Wa Ngugi's "What Decolonizing the Mind Means Today," and two other articles regarding North American indigenous cultures and languages.



Grad students working for a fair wage: Graduate students across disciplines are organizing for a \$20,000 minimum stipend. GAs first sent a letter to the Chancellor's office on July 1 about the dire situation many graduate students face, including severe food insecurity. The University's response to the letter was to propose (with no time table attached) a pay rate of \$1,250 per month, which is slightly less money than most GAs already make. Since then, the #FairPayUARK movement received some media coverage, and GAs held a protest on the first day of the semester. But the University has yet to respond in a significant way to help struggling students. If you would like to get involved in the #FairPayUARK movement, please email fairpay4gradstudents@gmail.com.

Rhetoric and Composition Program rolls out new initiative, Foregrounding

Diverse Perspectives (update from Director Adam Pope): In each unit of all writing courses offered by the Department of English, students will have their first course content reading paired with a reading that enables discussion of the unit's subject matter from a distinctly diverse point of view, one that they wouldn't perhaps encounter in a traditional textbook on the subject.

The goal of the initiative is to fundamentally change the way that we teach in our courses. When we think about adding diversity to our readings, we often tack it on a slate of existing readings. What we hope to do by starting each unit with such a reading is to reframe the conversation by starting with diversity. We believe that where a conversation starts has an oversized impact on where it goes, and our aim with this new initiative is, again, to fundamentally change the ways we teach and the conversations that take place in our writing courses.

The screenshot shows the AER website interface. At the top left is the AER logo and the text 'Arkansas English Resource, A service of the Department of English at the U of A'. On the top right, there is a search bar, a 'Log In' button, and links for 'Recent Changes', 'Media Manager', and 'Sitemap'. Below the header, a breadcrumb trail reads 'Trace: • start • foregrounding_diverse_perspectives'. The main content area features the title 'Foregrounding Diverse Perspectives' and a sub-section 'Syllabus Statement'. Under this, it says 'Foregrounding Diverse Perspectives' and provides a paragraph: 'In this course, we're going to push to open ourselves up to new ways of seeing the world and its people. Each unit will be begin with an outside reading that will help us center the current unit's conversation from a perspective that you might not otherwise encounter in a standard textbook. Our goal in doing this is to encourage you to think outside of your normal approach to problems, issues, and culture, and to help us all understand the value that diversity and diverse perspectives bring to our work and lives.' On the right side of the page, there is a 'Table of Contents' sidebar with a list of links: 'Foregrounding Diverse Perspectives', 'Syllabus Statement', 'Suggested Reading Ideas', 'Readings and Context', 'Readers', 'Prose', 'Poetry', 'Short Stories', 'Videos', and 'Technical Writing Texts'. A vertical toolbar on the far right contains icons for home, back, forward, and search.

**Brief Interview with a Department Member: Yajaira Padilla,
Associate Professor of English and Head of LAST**

What sort of DEI objectives did you have when you entered this department and how have those shifted?

When I was first hired at the University of Arkansas in 2013, most of my DEI objectives were centered on initiatives that aligned with my research and teaching expertise in U.S. Latinx and Latin American cultural studies as well as my former administrative work as chair of the Latina/o Studies minor at the University of Kansas. Indeed, one of the more appealing aspects for me about being hired here was that I would hold a joint appointment in English and the Latin American and Latino Studies program. I was excited about the prospects of adding to the standing ethnic/theoretical perspectives and curriculum within English as well as of helping to grow LALS. These goals continue to be primary pursuits for me. Our campus, along with the broader NWA region, has a significant and increasing Latinx population and yet there is a notable lack of knowledge regarding the long-standing history and struggles for civil rights of Latinx peoples in the United States.

That said, my time here has also shown me that there is an equally important need for more broadly defined initiatives related to DEI that underscore the links and possibilities for coalition building among different underrepresented groups and advocates. I think that such initiatives are fundamental to any effort invested in changing the university culture or climate in terms of DEI, and are also necessary because, in my opinion, current notions of what and who constitute “diversity” on this campus are too narrow (not so much in theory, but in practice). Being faculty in English has allowed me to reflect on the critical need for these initiatives as well as their possibilities. We have many individuals (among faculty, staff, and students) who are DEI leaders in their own right and are collectively working to make DEI a core value and asset for our department.

Can you describe the work you did on the Department of English’s DEI plan?

In 2017, I was invited to be part of the Diversity and Inclusion Core Team established by the Office of Diversity and Inclusion. One of my primary tasks was assisting in the development of a campus-wide D&I Strategic Initiative Planning Process. I worked on a smaller team developing guides and rubrics to help each unit on campus produce their own D&I Strategic Plan. Given what I knew about the different DEI efforts that had already been undertaken by faculty in the department and those in-process, I offered to work on an English DEI plan that



could serve as a model for other departments. Indeed, this initial plan was included in the information the Office of Diversity and Inclusion sent to all units. After meeting with the entire department twice and consulting with individual faculty regarding initiatives they were working on, myself and Padma Viswanathan, in her capacity as DEI committee chair, drafted our current and more detailed plan. The plan aligns our current and future DEI efforts (related to faculty, staff, and students) with specific goals and outcomes. It also establishes potential funding resources and individuals responsible for carrying out said objectives. Having reviewed other unit plans, I know that our DEI plan is by far one of the most robust.

How would you describe English's DEI trajectory: hopes you might have and obstacles you see?

I cannot speak to what the trajectory of English may have been in the past with regard to DEI, but since I have been here, I do think that the department has made necessary and significant progress. Two key examples being, the changes to the MA curriculum and, more recently, the undergraduate major aimed at focalizing the diversity of all that is our department (its intellectual breadth, differing approaches to teaching, debates about what English literatures and composition is and could be, its people, etc.) that we have undertaken in the last few years. Our successful efforts to recruit and hire diverse faculty for the position of the Brown Chair are also noteworthy.

As for my hopes, I would very much like English to prove that embracing DEI as a core value can lead to greater success for units as a whole. I also hope that as a department we continue to renew our commitment to these efforts and do not lose all of the momentum we seem to have at the moment. Yes, we have a strong DEI plan and we have initiated some difficult conversations, but we have so much more work to do and so many more conversations need to be had. Plus, we are part of a broader campus community and region of the country that has moved at a much slower pace when it comes to DEI. Indeed, the latter is one of the larger obstacles we face moving forward. As is, the fact that while the upper administration (at the College-level and beyond) have voiced support for DEI efforts and departments that champion them, administrators have yet to really translate that stated support into actionable policies and adequate resources. For example, we know that the humanities and humanities-facing social sciences are key to DEI efforts for a variety reasons and, yet, on this campus (as within the U.S.) they are increasingly undervalued and assumed to be over resourced. Shifting this perspective, while continuing to cultivate the DEI consciousness of the department/campus, is no easy task.