

Whiteness in English Studies and Why HBCUs Cannot Fix the Field's Diversity Problem

Austin Anderson

AUSTIN ANDERSON is a graduate student in English at Howard University.

WE ARE IN THE long spiral of what Roopika Risam calls the “crisis of the humanities” (116), and the survival of English programs is a continually pressing question among English department chairs, faculty members, and students. With the declining undergraduate enrollment in English programs; the decreased funding for the humanities; the neoliberal academic landscape that prioritizes entrepreneurialism, STEM skills, and agility in the face of perceived scarcity over traditional humanities approaches; the staggering \$1.78 trillion student loan debt carried by millions (Ballentine et al.); the ongoing demand to justify the existence of literature and languages programs; and the reliance on exploited adjunct and graduate student labor to teach composition and literature survey courses, there is an urgent need to address the crises, manufactured and not, facing English, literature, and language programs. The *New Yorker* has sounded the death rattle for the English major (Heller), and it is difficult to be optimistic about the future of the field, particularly given the rising student loan debt among recipients of English PhDs and limited job opportunities for new graduates within academia and the private sector.

As an English PhD candidate at Howard University who hopes to enter academia, I have a vested interest in the institutional survival of our discipline, and I am concerned about the structural challenges facing English, language, and literary studies. I am also the cochair of the MLA Committee on the Status of Graduate Students in the Humanities, a role that has allowed me to speak with burgeoning humanities scholars at a variety of institutions. There is a justifiable culture of anxiety among humanities graduate students and recent graduates because of the many uncertainties regarding the future of our fields. This anxiety is supported by data from the National Science Foundation's 2020 Survey of Earned Doctorates (SED). The 2020 SED report and Jessica Taylor's corresponding analysis in this issue of the bulletin reveal the many challenges facing our discipline and reflect the precarious position in which new and soon-to-be PhD recipients find themselves. Particularly concerning is the pervasive lack of racial diversity in English programs, which is the focus of my response to Taylor's piece. I begin with a discussion of persistent whiteness within English studies, then look at the Supreme Court decision in *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard* to end affirmative action, and I examine how this decision may make it more difficult to diversify English PhD programs. I conclude by turning to the role of HBCUs in diversifying English and literary studies, wherein I argue that HBCUs cannot, and should not, be expected to fix the lack of racial diversity in the field; rather, our discipline must provide more institutional support for HBCUs and other minority-serving institutions (MSIs).

*Whiteness in English
Studies and Why HBCUs
Cannot Fix the Field's
Diversity Problem*
AUSTIN ANDERSON

English Studies and Whiteness

English and literary studies are profoundly white disciplines, and this whiteness is both demographic and methodological. The 2020 SED report provides an occasion to consider why whiteness is so pervasive in the field and how whiteness is institutionalized at the earliest levels. The SED report should be disheartening for anyone who works in English and literary studies; the racial diversity is abysmal and hardly improving. While over one thousand students received PhDs in English in 2020, 80% of these graduates identified as non-Hispanic white, while, as Taylor notes, “just 5% were Hispanic or Latino (of any race), 0.5% were American Indian or Alaska Native, 4% were Asian American, 4% were Black or African American, and 3% were more than one race”—a demographic makeup that is reflective neither of the racial makeup of the United States nor the country’s collective undergraduate student body.¹ Even more concerning: these numbers are a barely perceptible improvement from the discipline’s diversity in the 2010s.² University and college faculty members in English remain predominantly white, and the SED report implies that this demographic whiteness will remain unless college and university leadership take coordinated and robust action.³

The lack of racial diversity in English programs is a problem in itself, and other issues arise when colleges and universities fail to diversify their disciplines. Studies have indicated that the presence of Black professors improves educational outcomes for Black students (see Lindsay). Research has similarly suggested that the presence of Latinx faculty members “plays a critical role in academic excellence, mentorship and overall climate” for Hispanic college students (Contreras 223). While Asian American faculty members are the only non-white group that exceeds its demographic share of the general population, there may be a glass ceiling that limits the number of Asian American faculty members who are promoted to endowed chairs or deans (Freeman and Forthun).⁴ Indigenous Americans are least likely to attend college, and this demographic group has one of the lowest graduation rates; college unaffordability and a lack of Indigenous faculty members exacerbate the challenges Indigenous students face.⁵ There is similar homogeneity among college and university faculty members and graduate students with other positionalities of privilege, such as economic background and citizenship, which further minimizes the diversity of faculty, staff, and graduate students across English and related disciplines. Privileged homogeneity is especially concerning for English and literary studies since socially and politically active subfields like Black studies, queer theory, feminism, postcolonialism, and Marxism have historically had close relations with English programs, and the intellectual leaders of these programs have typically been led—to adapt the words of Paulo Freire—*by*, not *for*, the oppressed (48). If university leadership fails to support marginalized faculty members and graduate students, what will the future of these politically minded subdisciplines look like? A diverse faculty and graduate student body is imperative for the survival of our discipline and for the support of our increasingly diverse undergraduates, and our increasingly diverse world.

Addressing the demographic whiteness of English and literary studies should be relatively simple: admit more students of color, then provide them with adequate

*Whiteness in English
Studies and Why HBCUs
Cannot Fix the Field's
Diversity Problem*

AUSTIN ANDERSON

support to complete their degrees and enter the academic job market. English programs have allegedly tried to increase racial diversity among graduate students for years, but the SED data show that these efforts are not diversifying the discipline's graduating population. Why? Lack of financial support for English graduate students is one principal reason for the overwhelming demographic whiteness of English programs. In the infamous *New Yorker* piece entitled "The End of the English Major," a first-generation immigrant undergraduate student who never considered majoring in English is quoted as saying: "You have to be affluent in order to be able to take that on and state, 'Oh, I can pursue this, because I have the money to do whatever I want'" (Heller). The student is not wrong, particularly when it comes to the cost of being an English PhD student. It is increasingly hard to survive on an English PhD stipend alone, and those of us who do not have wealthy backgrounds or receive familial financial support are in precarious situations. In May 2012, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* proclaimed, "The PhD Now Comes with Food Stamps" (Patton). Over a decade later, the situation has only worsened. Even the most generous PhD stipends in the country offer far from a living wage, and some PhD stipends are near the federal poverty line.⁶

In my role as cochair of the MLA Committee on the Status of Graduate Students in the Humanities, I have spoken with many PhD students in literature and language who are frustrated about their financial situation and their uneasy job prospects. These conversations typically occur with students of color or students from impoverished backgrounds; unfortunately, many of these students decide to drop out of their English PhD program because of financial constraints. The graduate students who remain are increasingly likely to take out student loans; Taylor notes that this "debt burden appear[s] to fall heaviest on students from traditionally minoritized populations." Additionally, many graduate students work a second job or participate in time-consuming freelancing or gig-economy work; this work is typically done in the shadows, since most full-time PhD programs do not allow outside employment. Graduate students of color are in a particularly difficult situation because "Black and Hispanic families have considerably less wealth than White families" on average (Bhutta et al.). It is unsurprising that we see fewer graduating Black and Hispanic PhDs, since students from low-income backgrounds are less likely to have familial financial safety nets, and Black and Hispanic PhD students are more likely to come from low-income backgrounds because of the persistence of structural racism. Put another way, the biggest impediment to diversifying the profession is money. Universities must provide greater financial investments in all their English PhD students; doing so would likely improve the number of English PhDs from marginalized backgrounds, which would in turn lessen the overwhelming whiteness of English studies.

Another issue facing diversity in English is the discipline's commitment to methodological whiteness that privileges Eurocentric, Western modes of thinking that historically aligned with Enlightenment rationalism and currently correspond with assimilationism under the guise of neoliberal multiculturalism. As a discipline, English has long been associated with Eurocentrism, and in 2000 Timothy Barnett called attention to the foundational importance of whiteness in English in his essay "Reading 'Whiteness' in English Studies," where he argues that the discipline of

Whiteness in English Studies and Why HBCUs Cannot Fix the Field's Diversity Problem

AUSTIN ANDERSON

English appears “unable or unwilling to question ‘whiteness’” that informs how the discipline is practiced (10). Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o famously highlights the connection between British colonialism and English in his “On the Abolition of the English Department,” published in 1972; in their 2020 push to rename Cornell’s English Department, Carole Boyce Davies and Múkoma wa Ngũgĩ argue, “English departments, organized to advance the culture, literature and history of the British empire, still exist in American universities as they do all around the world where British colonialism has existed.” Whiteness, here serving as a broader signifier for Eurocentrism and so-called normative knowledge, has long been enmeshed with English programs, and Jodi Melamed persuasively suggests that postwar literary studies has served “as a cultural technology for generating and disseminating race-liberal order” to serve the American neocolonial agenda (xv).

Within the academy, however, many scholars have worked to dismantle the centrality of whiteness ideology within English and literary studies. Black studies, for instance, was institutionalized during the 1960s and 1970s with the explicit goal of centering a Black perspective in academia, when Black studies practitioners like June Jordan and Sylvia Wynter were advancing their pivotal work within English departments. Yet the original political goals of Black studies are institutionally devalued by the modern university system; in *Of Black Study*, Joshua Myers points out how the groupthink of the modern academy frames Black or Africana studies “as diversity and inclusion, as antiracism, or as a liberal project for pluralist democracy” (6). Likewise, Greg Carr argues, “[i]ncreasingly, the field and idea of Africana Studies is reduced—and expanded—to a subject-matter field (‘the study of Black stuff’) rather than a field of disciplinary contestation and the generation of normative theoretical space (the African study of phenomena and experience)” (179–80). These two examples from Black studies do not offer an exhaustive survey of the negative impact of limited racial diversity within humanities programs. Rather, they illustrate the limitations that whiteness-thinking places on humanities scholars, even in disciplines that are positioned as inherently diverse. I could just as easily cite Tara McPherson’s “Why Are the Digital Humanities So White?” and Kim Gallon’s “Making a Case for the Black Digital Humanities” as examples of the problems of whiteness-thinking in the digital humanities, and that is precisely the point. Methodological whiteness is pervasive in English and its related disciplines. So-called universal knowledge is a tool of imperial power that institutions wield to uphold systems of inequity, and the university system demands that scholars uphold these paradigms—which scholars often do, for their own economic survival. The repeated capitulation to white normative practices hinders any attempt at liberation. And so, the overwhelming methodological whiteness continues to subsume the discipline and is something all English scholars contend with. In the coming years, it will likely become more difficult to challenge the demographic and methodological whiteness in English and literary studies.

Affirmative Action Ban, Attacks on DEI, and What Next?

On 29 June 2023, the United States Supreme Court issued its decision in *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard*, ending race-conscious affirmative action programs

*Whiteness in English
Studies and Why HBCUs
Cannot Fix the Field's
Diversity Problem*

AUSTIN ANDERSON

for college admissions. It is unclear how this decision will impact racial diversity in graduate English programs, since the critical literature focuses on how affirmative action improves undergraduate admission rates for marginalized students of color. This research suggests that the ending of affirmative action will be devastating for the progress toward diversifying undergraduate student populations.⁷ A handful of studies have examined the impact that removing affirmative action has on graduate education, and the results are not promising for those of us who desire more racially diverse English programs. In 2012, the *Civil Rights Project* published a study by Liliana M. Garces examining “whether bans on affirmative action across four states—Texas (during *Hopwood v. State of Texas*), California (with Proposition 209), Washington (with Initiative 200), and Florida (with One Florida Initiative)—have reduced the enrollment rates of underrepresented students of color in graduate studies and in a cross-section of graduate field”; Garces found an “11.8-percent drop in the humanities” enrollment percentage of African American, Latinx, and Native American or Alaskan Native graduate students (4). If these numbers hold true as the nation navigates the fallout of affirmative action coming to an end, it is likely that English PhD programs will become even more white, which will in turn ensure that English and literary studies remain overwhelmingly white disciplines.

Admitting a diverse English graduate student population may become harder still. The majority opinion in *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard* did note, “Nothing prohibits universities from considering an applicant’s discussion of how race affected the applicant’s life, so long as that discussion is concretely tied to a quality of character or unique ability that the particular applicant can contribute to the university” (8). However, there is a recent push to ban diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) statements at colleges and universities, and several Republican-leaning states have already issued bans of DEI statements for faculty hiring and promotion. The Associated Press found “Republican lawmakers in at least a dozen states have proposed more than 30 bills [in 2023] targeting diversity, equity and inclusion efforts in higher education” (Lieb). Indeed, 2023 saw a coordinated attack on DEI initiatives among conservative activists aiming to “prohibit the consideration of identity characteristics in hiring or admissions, and end mandatory diversity training”; these efforts are indicative of a broader cultural war against academia (Lu). DEI statements and the offices that support DEI work are becoming the new battleground for conservative efforts to limit diversity efforts in academia. This issue will likely see the Supreme Court in the coming years, and universities may lose another tool that allows them to diversify their graduate student body.

Despite the many forthcoming challenges, it is an open question if the aftermath of 2020 will change the diversity of English PhD graduates and the profession, something the 2020 SED report is unable to account for since the earliest graduating class of students admitted in after summer 2020 is the class of 2025. I was applying to PhD programs in 2020 as the country was hurled into an alleged racial reckoning in response to the mass civic action of the Movement for Black Lives and associated global Black Lives Matter protests. During the application process, in summer 2020, I considered over thirty English PhD programs, and nearly all of them issued a statement about their unwavering commitment to racial equity and inclusion. There was

*Whiteness in English
Studies and Why HBCUs
Cannot Fix the Field's
Diversity Problem*

AUSTIN ANDERSON

a consensus that academia and English programs must do better to combat racial inequity in the profession and broader society. Many universities even advanced concrete action to redress racial inequality on their campuses, such as Cornell University's creation of a "senior diversity officer role in July of 2020 to address systemic racism on campus" (Roberts), New York University's 2020 BeTogether initiative to bolster DEI efforts (Coleman et al.), and Boston University's founding of the Committee for Diversity and Inclusion in the English Department "as an immediate response to the global protests against racism and police brutality" in the summer of 2020 (Lee et al.). The University of Chicago publicly declared it was only admitting English PhD students for the upcoming academic year who were interested in Black studies, citing the reason as "undoing persistent, recalcitrant anti-Blackness in our discipline and in our institutions must be the collective responsibility of all faculty, here and elsewhere" (qtd. in Flaherty). Some universities even established antiracism institutes in the immediate aftermath of the Black Lives Matter protests, such as the high-profile Center for Antiracist Research at Boston University, led by Ibram X. Kendi and launched in 2020, and Georgetown University's Racial Justice Institute, launched in 2021. These efforts were long overdue but a welcome addition to the fight for equity in academia. And while nearly every major university was already publicly committed to DEI before 2020 yet systemic change was far from realized, perhaps academia, and English and literary studies programs, were finally realizing a more just and equitable higher education.

Yet academia's collective commitment to achieving racial justice has been increasingly faltering since 2020. Many universities have already walked back their 2020 commitments to racial equity. For instance, Penn State University proudly announced its Center for Racial Justice as "just the beginning" of the institution's racial justice efforts in 2020 but canceled the initiative in 2022, citing financial issues. Likewise, Boston University's Center for Antiracist Research "laid off more than half its staff, 19 of 36 employees, on Sept. 13 [2023], prompting questions and accusations about mismanagement and spending" (Weissman). The University of Chicago has continued its themed admission cycle, yet incoming students interested in Black studies should look elsewhere; the most recent themes in the department have been pre-1900 literature, poetry and poetics, and media aesthetics. Of course, incoming PhD students at the University of Chicago can be interested in both Black studies and media aesthetics, but these admissions decisions were not accompanied by a public declaration of Chicago's commitment to redressing racial injustice, which the institution repeatedly emphasized in 2020. Temple University is one of the few success stories of institutional racial justice efforts in academia. Temple developed a plan for the Center for Anti-Racism in 2020, secured a million-dollar state grant, and launched the program in 2022 with a focus on "research, public education and community engagement," and the university has received significant positive press coverage for their continual commitment to transforming society (Bani). Yet Temple leadership also engaged in explicitly anti-labor practices when the university pulled tuition remission and health insurance coverage from striking graduate students in 2023—tactics that placed undue harm on some of the most vulnerable members of the Temple community (Quinn). Perhaps we should hold our unmitigated praise of

*Whiteness in English
Studies and Why HBCUs
Cannot Fix the Field's
Diversity Problem*

AUSTIN ANDERSON

Temple's institutional commitment to achieving racial equity. We should instead condemn these rollbacks and bad practices across academia while recognizing that these decisions will significantly decrease racial diversity and equity across English programs and the broader academic landscape.

There are still many individuals within academia who are aggressively pursuing a research and teaching agenda rooted in racial justice and the transformation of society, but the institutional support for these projects is increasingly lacking. While many hoped academia's 2020 commitments ushered in an earnest effort to address anti-Blackness and overwhelming whiteness in English programs and academia, the cancellation of many of these efforts does not foretell significant progress for racial diversity in the academy. Further, attacks on DEI initiatives in states like Florida and Texas have opened the floodgates for an assault on diversity efforts, and colleges like Texas State University and New College have responded by eliminating their DEI programs altogether. These assaults are likely to continue; higher education is the site of an intense culture war, and far-right politicians have recognized that attacking DEI within academia is a salient force for campaign funding and reelection. If universities and colleges respond to attacks against DEI and racial equity by rolling back their commitment to these efforts, English and literary studies programs will become even less diverse. Yet it is unclear if leadership at colleges and universities recognizes the failure to address racial inequality in higher education as a problem.

The Role of HBCUs in English Graduate Education

The Supreme Court's *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard* decision also gestures toward an increasingly popular line of argument in which the real success of HBCUs is used to excuse failing diversity efforts in predominantly white spaces. In one of its amicus briefs, Students for Fair Admissions—the conservative advocacy organization that successfully sued to end affirmative action—briefly cites the success of HBCUs as evidence that racially diverse institutions are not necessary for an excellent education, writing, “Harvard also has no answer to the historic success of HBCUs, which provide world-class educations despite lacking what Harvard would consider an adequate level of racial diversity” (Mortara and Strawbridge 10–11). Justice Clarence Thomas echoed this idea in his concurring opinion in *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard*, in which he cited the success of Black graduates from HBCUs at entering a variety of professions as proof that affirmative action is no longer necessary, writing that “because race-conscious college admissions are plainly not necessary to serve even the interests of blacks, there is no justification to compel such [affirmative action] programs more broadly” (58). While we might dismiss these arguments as yet more bad-faith attacks against diversity in higher education—where conservative activists are simply using HBCUs as a ploy for their political aims without actual investment in the success of Black students or HBCUs—these types of arguments around Black student success at HBCUs are morphing into a new argument about the alleged potential for HBCUs to diversify predominantly white spaces.

If we follow Justice Thomas's concurring opinion to its logical conclusion, then HBCUs might be an answer to the racial diversity woes of a variety of disciplines,

*Whiteness in English
Studies and Why HBCUs
Cannot Fix the Field's
Diversity Problem*

AUSTIN ANDERSON

including English and literary studies, and, indeed, various businesses and government agencies have begun advocating for hiring from HBCUs to diversify their industries. The US Department of Labor offers “HBCU recruitment strategies” to federal contractors looking to diversify their industries, and the Department of Labor encourages employers to “[t]arget and build strategic partnerships with HBCUs to boost your diversity recruiting return on investment (ROI).” Many employees in the tech industry are similarly partnering with HBCUs to provide a pipeline into the tech industry; Jon Marcus notes that some of the nation’s largest employers “are descending on HBCUs to recruit the workers they need to meet diversity promises or are expanding collaborations that already existed.” Large multinational banks have partnered with HBCUs to establish internships for HBCU students and graduates to diversify Wall Street (Vanegas). It is excellent that certain HBCU students and graduates are finding more opportunities for employment in a variety of industries, and it is imperative that this work continues, especially since HBCUs have been historically ignored by many industries. However, some of these efforts are positioning HBCUs as simply pipelines for diversifying predominantly white institutions.

HBCUs were not created to, nor do they currently exist to, address the diversity woes of predominantly white spaces. According to the Higher Education Act of 1965, an HBCU is “any historically black college or university that was established before 1964, whose principal mission was, and is, the education of black Americans” (“What Is an HBCU?”). Today, HBCUs undoubtedly contribute to Black student success, and HBCUs consistently produce successful African American college graduates. HBCUs make up 3% of colleges and universities in the United States, but they are responsible for enrolling “10% of all African American students and produce almost 20% of all African American graduates” (“Numbers Don’t Lie”). As Justice Thomas points out in his concurring opinion, “HBCUs have produced 40% of all Black engineers” and “account for 80% of Black judges, 50% of Black doctors, and 50% of Black lawyers” (56). This success has been achieved even though “HBCUs are chronically underfunded due to state underinvestment, lower alumni contributions (related to lower Black incomes and Black wealth), and lower endowments” (Perry and Barr). At their best, HBCUs are institutions of cultural empowerment that advocate for Black liberation and racial equity while producing academic excellence of the highest order. This is the work of HBCUs today, and it does not involve diversifying predominately white spaces, even if many HBCU graduates will undoubtedly work at these companies or universities. The amicus brief in *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard* on behalf of HBCU leadership made this point, writing, “redressing other institutions’ lack of diversity should not be HBCUs’ responsibility” (Paul et al. 35). While we should welcome any initiatives that promote HBCU graduates and provide these graduates with employment or other advancement opportunities, we must simultaneously condemn any expectation that HBCUs and their graduates carry the burden of diversifying predominantly white spaces.

Yet, even if HBCUs wanted to address the pervasive lack of diversity in English and literary studies, could they? Many HBCUs have maintained consistent English undergraduate enrollment since 2010, even as non-HBCUs have struggled to fill English classrooms.⁸ Further, HBCU English graduate programs are uniquely

*Whiteness in English
Studies and Why HBCUs
Cannot Fix the Field's
Diversity Problem*

AUSTIN ANDERSON

positioned to produce emerging scholars who are deeply invested in racial justice and who hold a firm background in Black studies, critical race theory, and Black feminism—a background all the more important given our political climate. These successes are nothing to balk at, and it is reasonable to wonder if HBCUs could lead to similar improvements in racial diversity and thinking across English and literary studies. Unfortunately, the answer is a resounding no; given the small number of English PhD slots at HBCUs, funding issues within these programs, and the systemic devaluation of HBCUs across academia, HBCUs cannot lead the way to diversity across the field.

There are English PhD programs at only two HBCUs: Howard University and Morgan State University. Even if both programs doubled their enrollment and graduated every student, the increased racial diversity among English PhD graduates would be minimal. Additionally, HBCUs face unique challenges, particularly related to limited funding. While there have been several high-profile donations at the most prominent HBCUs in the wake of 2020, few of these resources have been allocated to English graduate student support. Given perpetual underinvestment in both the humanities and HBCUs, neither Howard nor Morgan State offers five years of guaranteed full funding to their English PhD students—though both programs do offer competitive applications for yearly funding through a variety of internal sources, and many students, including me, are able to obtain funding through these yearly applications. With only limited funding opportunities, many HBCU English PhD students end up taking out student loans, working second jobs, or dropping out of the program altogether. The uncertainty around funding contributes to student anxiety and causes some prospective students to remove Howard and Morgan State from their PhD application lists entirely. Without larger financial investments both within and outside these institutions, it is unlikely that Howard or Morgan State could expand their English PhD programs, despite the pivotal role these programs should have in shaping the future of English studies.

Most troublingly, HBCU English programs are systematically devalued by an academic apparatus that remains committed to demographic and methodological whiteness. For many years, HBCUs, in general, were intentionally framed as fundamentally flawed institutions with dysfunctional leadership and widespread financial mismanagement, despite decades of intentional underfunding of HBCUs across the country.⁹ Writing about the public perception of HBCUs for *The Chronicle of Higher Education* in 2022, Oyin Adedoyin points out how “[u]nflattering media attention perpetuated a public perception that had a cyclical, compounding effect: Negative coverage of financial trouble led to fewer philanthropic contributions and lower enrollment, which led to more financial trouble.” Yet public perception of HBCUs has allegedly shifted in recent years with positive headlines, Mackenzie Scott’s high-profile donations to Howard, and the Biden-Harris administration’s many research and development grants for various HBCUs.¹⁰ Adedoyin’s 2022 article was even subtitled “For decades, Black colleges have been portrayed as deficient. What changed?” Despite financial investment and positive headlines, I question if there has been significant improvement in the perception of HBCU English departments and PhD programs among the rest of the English and literary studies discipline.

*Whiteness in English
Studies and Why HBCUs
Cannot Fix the Field's
Diversity Problem*

AUSTIN ANDERSON

College rankings provide an instructive example. While we should be skeptical about the efficacy of college rankings, these rankings do confer prestige and increase the likelihood of graduating students receiving a job offer in their preferred field. According to *US News and World Report's* ranking of English PhD programs, Howard is ranked number 62, a shockingly low ranking for a program that includes some of the leading scholars in the field, particularly in African American, African diasporic, and Caribbean literatures. Morgan State is ranked number 147 ("Best English Programs"). It is difficult not to assume that these relatively low rankings are not steeped in anti-HBCU bias. My purpose in discussing the *US News* rankings is not to pick a fight over prestige conferred by a media organization. Rather, these rankings speak to the overall devaluing of HBCU English programs that also occur in various spaces within academia.

As a white PhD candidate at Howard, I have been shocked by some of the derogatory remarks levied at HBCUs in a variety of academic spaces. When I was admitted to Howard, a professor at my MA institution jokingly declared that I must have received a minority scholarship and that I would be the token white guy in the program. At academic conferences, people from various stages of academic careers have reacted with shock that I, a white person, would be attending Howard, saying, "I thought that was a Black school," "Why would you want to attend there?," "HBCUs tend to have lower admissions standards, right?," and "Pretty strange for a white person to go there." My position of relative privilege as a white person ensures that I have not experienced the abhorrent behavior that my colleagues of color have described from students and faculty members at all levels of academia in English studies; yet the fact that I have experienced these interactions from my position of privilege is precisely the point. Howard's English PhD program is excellent and rigorous, but these interactions, while apocryphal, do not reflect a broad understanding among our peers that Howard is one of the exemplary programs in English and literary studies. While I can only authoritatively speak of my personal experiences, many of my peers at HBCUs have shared similar experiences reflecting that the English profession still has a long way to go in eliminating the systemic devaluation of HBCU English programs.

Despite these experiences, I want to acknowledge and celebrate those within HBCUs, and outside them, who are consciously advocating for the elimination of biases against HBCUs and other MSIs. At the 2024 MLA convention, the Committee on the Status of Graduate Students in the Humanities organized a panel called "The Burden and Privilege of HBCU Graduate Students in the Anti-CRT Era," which used Howard University's English PhD program as a case study for the unique position of HBCU graduate students while also highlighting the vital academic work that is coming out of these spaces—work that is too often institutionally underappreciated by the broader academic sphere. I joined four brilliant rising graduate students from Howard—Sabrina Bramwell, Cecily A. Duffie, Alexandra Omogbadegun, and Paola Yuli—to initiate a discussion about challenges within HBCUs while advocating for the importance of the academic work that is coming out of HBCUs and MSIs. While our audience was relatively small, I was inspired by the collaborative spirit of the conversation among our panelists and the audience; we

*Whiteness in English
Studies and Why HBCUs
Cannot Fix the Field's
Diversity Problem*

AUSTIN ANDERSON

discussed strategies that libraries can take to attract HBCU PhD candidates to their fellowship opportunities, the potential for HBCUs to work together across institutions while advocating for their collective needs, and the changes that could be made to address the systemic underfunding of HBCU graduate programs. We discussed real, concrete action that would better the profession. While we should not rely on HBCUs to diversify predominantly white institutions, students and faculty members from these programs should have a central voice in addressing the most pressing issues facing our field. I am hopeful that more institutions like the MLA will make space for these discussions and more individuals within and outside HBCUs will continue advocating for HBCUs and other MSIs.

Conclusion

The 2020 SED report gives every English and literary studies academic and student the opportunity to reflect on some salient issues facing our profession. As higher education is increasingly a culture war battleground, universities and English programs must proactively address many challenges, particularly the persistent lack of racial equity and diversity in our profession. The overwhelming whiteness in English is a crisis that may worsen given the demise of affirmative action, and we must recognize how dire the situation is. Addressing racial inequity and lack of diversity in English programs should be a central priority for anyone working in academia, particularly since the rise of anti-critical-race-theory and anti-DEI initiatives seek to restrict the teaching of race, gender, and sexuality concepts at colleges and universities. Voices from marginalized backgrounds have been central to the development of English and literary studies, but the broader discipline is not doing enough to support the next generation of diverse English scholars. While HBCUs and MSIs should be properly respected and valued within academia, we must also refuse to reduce HBCUs and MSIs to a diversity pipeline for predominantly white institutions. Our discipline has a moral imperative to do better—not just for the survival of English programs but for the future of our nation.

Notes

1. According to a 2021 *Best College* survey: “Around 40% of undergraduates are students of color” (Nam).

2. The 2009–10 SED report and corresponding analysis by Doug Steward examined the demographics of English and language PhDs in 2010; Steward writes, “In English (here aggregated as ‘letters’), 81.2% were white, 4.9% black, 4.7% Hispanic, and 4.3% Asian” (4).

3. The Pew Research Center analyzed racial and ethnic diversity in 2019 and found: “Racial and ethnic diversity has increased among college faculty in the United States over the past two decades, but faculty are still much more likely than students to be white” (Davis and Fry). Similarly, a 2017 Brookings study found that nearly 80% of English faculty members at top public universities were white (Koedel). The 2022 report from the National Center for Education Statistics reveals an even larger bias for white professors among tenure-track faculty positions.

4. A 2020 study found that “[c]ompared to other students of other races, Asian/PI students were the least likely to enter college aspiring to major in the humanities” (Singer et al.).

5. Nadra Nittle reports: “A national study on college affordability for Indigenous students found that financial barriers often dictate where Native Americans apply for college and whether they graduate, once they enroll.”

Whiteness in English Studies and Why HBCUs Cannot Fix the Field's Diversity Problem

AUSTIN ANDERSON

6. The 2023 federal poverty line for individuals was \$14,580 (“Federal Poverty Level”). As a random example, the University of Oklahoma’s stipend for PhDs in English is \$14,608 (“Awards and Funding”). According to Eric Weiskott’s review of PhD stipends for *Profession* in 2022, the most generous PhD English stipend is Columbia University’s stipend of \$41,520. The MIT *Living Wage Calculator* lists the minimum living wage for a single adult living in New York at \$46,826 annually before tax (“Living Wage Calculation”). Weiskott also offers a response to Taylor’s report in this issue of the bulletin.

7. Vanesha McGee reports: “Affirmative action has played a critical role in diversifying higher education.” McGee provides statistical evidence that ending affirmative action will decrease the enrollment of Black and Hispanic students.

8. The National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics has data on undergraduate English majors at eighty-two major HBCUs from fiscal year 2020. *IPEDS* data from a custom query by Natalia Lusin show that the overall numbers have dropped from 771 graduating English majors in 2010 to 489 graduating English majors in 2020. However, the enrollment numbers vary from school to school. Some schools, like Mississippi Valley State University and Savannah State University, have maintained consistent English undergraduate enrollment since 2010, with around ten to fifteen graduating English majors per year. Some HBCUs have seen sizable drops in their English enrollment, with Spelman College dropping from fifty-two graduating English undergraduates in 2010 to thirty-two in 2020. Most notably, several schools have seen increases in English undergraduates, with Alabama A&M University going from two graduating English majors in 2010 to ten in 2020, and Bowie State University going from five English majors in 2010 to seventeen in 2020.

9. In 2023, the US government told “16 states that they’ve been underfunding their Historically Black Colleges and Universities by some \$12 billion” (Marshall). These systemic underfunding efforts are likely just the tip of the iceberg for the lack of federal and state support for HBCUs throughout American history.

10. In December 2023, the Biden-Harris administration announced “\$93 million in grant awards to 20 colleges and universities to support research and development at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Tribally Controlled Colleges and Universities (TCCUs), and Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs), and to improve completion rates for underserved students” (“Biden-Harris Administration”).

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Whiteness in English Studies and Why HBCUs Cannot Fix the Field's Diversity Problem

AUSTIN ANDERSON

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*Whiteness in English
Studies and Why HBCUs
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AUSTIN ANDERSON

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