

# Don't Talk About It, Be About It: A Model of Material Support for Black Graduate Students

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Digital Black Lit and Composition (DBLAC)

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## Introduction: Being a Black Graduate Student

In this symposium, graduate students detail the importance of mentorship. Presswood and Schwarz (2020) of the Writing Program Administrators Graduate Organization (WPA-GO) discuss the value of learning from the “trials and successes” of a network of established scholars (Introduction). The range of experiences relevant to Black graduate students includes, in addition to those mentioned throughout this issue, navigating professional structures that not too long ago actively excluded us from participation. This essay details some specific challenges faced by Black graduate students and argues for the importance of mentorship for Black scholars. It then details how one education nonprofit, DBLAC (Digital Black Lit and Composition), provides both conventional modes of mentorship as well as material support in order to serve as a learning community and pipeline for self-identified Black scholars including high school students, advanced undergraduates, graduate students, and junior and senior faculty.

Dr. Cecilia Shelton<sup>1</sup>, in a talk at the 2019 Conference for College Composition and Communication, recalled data of an original survey which asked Black students in Rhetoric and Composition (Rhet-Comp) graduate programs about their work and experiences. Ninety percent of respondents reported that their research at least somewhat related to blackness. Given the impetus for the birth of our field—the maintenance and protection of the ruling class through language education—the lack of coursework that centers Black Studies in Rhet-Comp departments and the scarcity of Black scholars on core graduate syllabi is unsurprising. This means, though, that students have a difficult time getting exposed to scholarship in their specialties. And, with Black faculty comprising only 6% of the total professoriate in the United States, including graduate faculty, Black students doing Black research must do more for themselves than those with more mainstreamed interests (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Utilizing nexuses of graduate resources like faculty and coursework with intersecting interests is a professionally essential convention of graduate study that may prove an obstacle for students researching in Black scholarship. Exposure to Black faculty and scholarship is key, and many programs may be unable to provide that to their students.

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Shelton was a graduate student at East Carolina University at the time of this talk. She is now a faculty member at George Washington University.

Kynard (2015) details the suspicion, dismissal, hyper-surveillance and blatant disrespect that students and faculty of color face in the academy in one anecdote after another, including some of her own as a Black woman. Lazos (2012) considers the data from a number of studies about the relationship between race and gender and student evaluations and concludes that “minority professors must negotiate many more burdens than non-minority professors from the moment they walk into the classroom” (p. 183). The above finding is reflected in Shelton’s (2019) survey as well, illuminating one of the many links between Black graduate student experiences and those of Black faculty. Many students learn from both colleagues and faculty how to navigate institutional racism, an intellectual and emotional labor for all parties involved that ultimately lends itself to a more inclusive and equitable workplace.

Polk, Russell, and Sockwell (2020) in this symposium consider the value of mentorship regarding the navigation of the line between opportunity and exploitation, reminding us that opportunities for service, including diversity work, have the potential to exploit graduate student labor in ways we do not anticipate, and that faculty mentorship is crucial to helping graduate students develop healthy boundaries. Ahmed (2012) points to how institutions’ reliance on diversity practitioners’ labor can undermine the oft echoed purpose of a more equitable academy because the investment and labor are not shared by everyone. Black graduate students, whose sometimes singular presence is often universities’ answer to accusations of unfair admissions practices, sometimes perform this labor in order to foster a more welcoming and supportive environment in which to do their work, but as Ahmed explains, “becoming the race person . . . can allow others not to turn up” (5). The diversity labor to which Ahmed refers goes even further than the department. Many Black students feel obligations to their families and communities, who are often both direct and indirect beneficiaries of Black scholarship. They may also feel obligated to serve as an example and necessary resource to black undergraduates, high school students, and intellectuals unknown and unnamed who have never been afforded the access we have been granted. It is a heavy weight to carry on top of a rigorous course load.

Enter Digital Black Lit and Composition (DBLAC)(n.d.), “a digital network of Black graduate students” that “provides safe spaces for members to testify to, discuss with, and share support for each other” (“Welcome and Mission Statement”). The organization’s direct service model advances three “Signature Programs”: the Virtual Writing Group (VWG), an online writing space used for motivation and accountability, the Reading Series, which “supplement[s] the work of Black graduate students within [the] network” (“Signature Programs”), and the Writing Retreats, an opportunity for Black scholars to gather, think, and write in community under the guidance of a Scholar-in-Residence. By utilizing this model, DBLAC provides the direct and pragmatic intellectual and emotional nourishment required for scholar-activists to collectively face larger systemic and institutional issues. The remainder of this essay will outline the aforementioned Programs and their impacts on my own experience.

## DBLAC Programs

The VWG is a virtual writing space “open to all writers across disciplines and communities” via web portal facilitated and utilized by members that encourages attendees to check in with their specific goals for that session and check in periodically with encouraging and affirming thoughts for one another, facilitating cross-cultural community and writing accountability (DBLAC Virtual Writing Group, n.d.). The open nature of these sessions encourages the kind of coalition building not only between Black scholars but other scholars of color and white scholars that is essential to equitable futures. VWGs are the most frequent of the Signature Programs—they met 41 times over the 2019 summer months; there are now 60 sessions each academic term. There are early, mid-day, and late sessions that last either four or six hours, and participants are welcome to enter and exit the group as their schedules allow. The accountability and flexibility of VWGs have personally served to relieve me of the pressure of working every minute of the session; I feel accountable to the tasks I’ve shared with the other participants and work in a more concentrated way, affording myself less guilty breaks from my work. VWGs also encourage students to be conscious of work stamina and expectations of productivity, which is essential for graduate students, particularly those of us grappling with imposter syndrome exacerbated by cultural alienation (Sales, 2020). Encouragement from Black graduate students is a powerful negation of the academy’s dismissal of our perspectives and concerns. The representatives of nextGEN (Kumari, Baniya, & Larson, 2020) discuss reactions to these concerns by professional bodies; there are countless anecdotes of Black students that speak to this as well. The community fostered in the VWG’s has been invaluable in building crucial confidence in my skills that provides the stamina I need to finish my program successfully and contribute to a necessary and growing professoriate.

The DBLAC Reading Series is the most direct exposure to Black scholarship. A book is chosen by founders Drs. Khirsten Scott and Lou Maraj, now both faculty at the University of Pittsburgh, who coordinate with organization members a book giveaway, a Twitter chat, and a webinar-style discussion of the book open to the public on the organization’s Twitter feed. The author participates in the chat, a crucial component of the program’s benefit to Black graduate students specifically. Not only are students in contact with the scholarship and each other, but with the author as well—a Black scholar in the field. These reading series also provide community in a space where my perspective as a Black student is not dismissed or tokenized—as can happen in predominantly white classrooms—but respected, considered, and constructively critiqued.

The most comprehensive of the three initiatives is hosted by the founders. The Writing Retreat gathers Black graduate students “in any field related to the study of Black people” and one Scholar-in-Residence (“Signature Programs”). Completely funded by DBLAC (food, lodging, a travel budget, even travel grants

for scholars who are coming from far away), the weekend is filled with professional development, networking, and writing groups with guidance from supportive faculty. Perhaps most importantly, the Writing Retreat provides a space for Black graduate students to be their entire selves outside of the academic space. This immersion in an academic environment that both welcomes and mirrors Black graduate students—particularly regarding our investment in our communities—is invaluable.

### **DBLAC's Impact**

DBLAC's Signature Programs provide direct and immediately beneficial service to Black graduate students. This work, which offers both material and immaterial resources, has helped me develop emotional insulation made of affirmation by way of being reflected in the digital and in-person communities of the organization. The network members develop diverse frames of reference which serve as a resource when difficulties navigating the academy as a Black person arise. As a result of that support, students develop higher capacities to promote and advocate for diversity and equity at our home universities, as illustrated by my experience with the #NotAgainSU movement. In the wake of varied instances of racist violence, the Syracuse University administration responded by minimizing the safety concerns of Black students. As a Black person, and as an educator, my responsibility was clear, even as my concern for students, colleagues, and faculty of color took me away from my work in the last weeks of the semester. DBLAC actively and materially shared this responsibility with us, not only spreading awareness and providing emotional support, but also fundraising almost \$1000 to buy food for protesters and to help students buy transportation home. Sharing this responsibility helps us do our work so that we can complete our degrees and continue serving as a resource to rising Black scholars.

Ahmed's (2012) words about the unequal distribution of diversity labor come back to mind. The presence of Black-centered fellowships and research grants developed by institutions over the last half decade indicate an effort on the part of higher education to diversify the scholarship being produced by their graduate programs. Harper and Simmons (2019), however, reveal that many universities have difficulty graduating their Black undergraduates. Shelton's (2019) survey responses lend themselves to a possible source of withdrawal rates amongst Black graduate students as well. Organizations that center Black experiences like DBLAC address students' concerns and needs in ways that their departments and even other graduate student organizations are currently unable or even unwilling to do. DBLAC's mission statement articulates our commitment to "the academic retention and success of Black graduate students" across disciplines ("Welcome and Mission Statement"); it is aware of and responsive to the interdisciplinary nature of our field. Among us are historians, anthropologists, theologians, sociologists, and creators of countless other knowledges.

Finally, not being drained by the emotional labor of simply existing as a Black graduate student means cultivating a life outside of the graduate school environment—oft-given advice to first-year graduate students. DBLAC’s material and immaterial support—the multiple levels of community, the exposure to Black scholarship, the advantages of a broad professional network—all works to take into account the unique challenges of being a Black graduate student in Rhet-Comp programs and responds with pragmatic solutions.

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