

Activating Design Action's Five Guiding Principles

By Design Action

an intergenerational coalition of Black, Indigenous, People of Color,¹
and white designers working in the North American Theatre

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¹ Henceforth referred to as "BIPOC."

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INTRODUCTION

We advocate for a radical shift in the landscape of North American theatre design. This document is a call to action to build a new North American theatre with anti-racism as a core value. The theatre is a venue for thought, change, justice, and action – it is a place where we must tell everyone's stories.

We call for a collaborative effort from the entire theatre ecosystem to transform our practice to align with the values of racial equity. We must re-evaluate everything from training and creative methodologies to working conditions and financial transparency.

We believe in creating work environments and policies that increase BIPOC representation and support a sustained investment in maintaining a healthy creative industry enriched by true diversity in voice and perspective. These engagements must go beyond the fulfillment of a diversity quota.

We acknowledge a history filled with inequity, injustice, and harm. This industry has historically favored white practitioners, and we commit to addressing the correlation between generational wealth and success. Hence, we must change traditional pathways of professional development.

We emphasize the experiences of our Indigenous colleagues who have existed on this land since time immemorial and all our other BIPOC colleagues who have come to be in this country due to the systems of white supremacy, slavery, and colonization.

We celebrate the significant contributions that Black, Indigenous, and other theatre makers of Color have made toward creating equity in our field.

We recognize that many BIPOC individuals exist at the intersection of multiple identities and face unique barriers, inequities, and forms of harm.

We aim to be comprehensive in our points of advocacy but recognize that this living document will never be exhaustive. Anti-racist actions must be implemented holistically and institutions must put equal effort into dismantling white supremacist structures as they do to increase representation.

We ask our colleagues to approach this work with sensitivity toward their privilege.

We advocate for awareness, change, and action.

ANTI-RACIST CODES OF CONDUCT

We advocate for all institutions to establish a comprehensive Code of Conduct that outlines institutional policy for harm reduction, anti-racist protocols, cultural competency, and equitable representation.

These codes should be drafted in consultation with BIPOC employees and Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion² experts. We expect these codes of conduct to be the bedrock terms of engagement at any institution. These codes of conduct should encompass all marginalized groups working in the North American theatre, with an awareness of intersectional identities. These codes must be communicated to all company, creative, and production personnel, made public, and easily accessible online.

In summary, we advocate for:

- The reduction of **Financial Harm**: End the ingrained harmful financial patterns, which favor the economically privileged.
- The reduction of **Personal Harm**: A clear and comprehensive system for reporting harmful incidents that provides a pathway for conflict resolution.
- A system in place to **Repair Harm**: A codified policy involving a third-party arbitrator and a list of steps to repair relationships when harm is caused.
- **Cultural Competency**: A high level of cultural competency among all of the production staff and the hiring of Cultural Consultants as necessary.
- **Equitable Representation**: An equitable hiring practice with a goal of reaching 50% BIPOC representation in all areas of our practice.
- **BIPOC Advocacy**: Establish equitable professional development paths for young and rising designers.
- A **Restructuring of Academia**: Commit to eliminating barriers in academia, decentering whiteness in curriculum, and developing an environment where BIPOC students can thrive.

In developing codes of conduct, we suggest:

- A system of accountability and transparency.
- A system and resources for allyship training, including guidelines for anti-racism.
- A system and calendar that details when to release and revise these codes of conduct.

² Henceforth referred to as "EDI."

HARM REDUCTION

We advocate for taking immediate action to eradicate racism and white supremacist power structures. Institutions must have a clear policy to prevent harm and mediate relationship repair when harm occurs.

BIPOC experience race-related harm in many forms: social, institutional, unconscious, overt, and retaliatory. This harm may be overt actions such as censure and dismissal or may take the form of covert racism, which leads to feelings of powerlessness, isolation, and ostracization. Harm takes different forms in education, design spaces, and other institutions. We acknowledge that harm can also be caused laterally from one person of Color to another. Establishing new structures will take both preventative harm reduction and restorative harm work.

Repairing and preventing harm is constant work. We acknowledge that harm has been done, and while future harm is never fully preventable we can reduce its fallout in the way it is addressed. Understand that there is no “clean slate” for those who have perpetrated harm.

We believe these two principles lay the foundation for all interpersonal relationships; individuals must:

1. Treat everyone with respect.
2. Be accountable for the impact of their actions and words regardless of intention.

HARM WITHIN HIRING PRACTICES

- We advocate for a holistic, transparent, and careful hiring process and equitable representation on the hiring committee.
- See BIPOC designers for the worth they bring to all shows, not just BIPOC stories.
- Examine your hiring patterns; BIPOC designers tend to be relegated to the “secondary spaces” at institutions that are smaller, less-resourced, and have lower pay.
- Create a culture that values new collaborations as highly as convenience, comfort, and “shorthand” between established creative relationships.

FINANCIAL HARM

Provide a living wage

- Establish fees that provide a living wage. Requiring designers to depend on external income to survive is particularly damaging to BIPOC artists.

- At minimum, designers should be paid at least \$1000 per production.
- At minimum, student and early-career designers working in staff positions should always be paid the livable wage³ of the city in which the producing entity is based.
 - This is particularly true for summerstock, festival, and regional repertory theatre which tend to be based in a consistent location with a referenceable livable wage.
- Any agreements should be clear on the expected hours of work required for the given fee and outline an overtime pay structure should these hours be exceeded.
- Designers must be paid promptly.
- Terms must be settled, contracts in place, and fees negotiated before work can commence.
- Provide pay transparency to ensure that BIPOC are paid equally.
- End the practice of paying more established designers additional monies for “studio expenses” when using the “favored nations” pay structure.

Understand and support the work required in the design process

- Acknowledge that associates and assistants are career theatre workers with skills and knowledge, not apprentices. This is full-time work that demands respect and wages that support their skills, time, and labor.
- Ensure mutual understanding and transparency between production managers, designers, and directors of the scope of the design, deadlines, and financial compensation. Financial compensation must reflect any changes in scope.
- Provide appropriate funds for design expenses. Designers should not absorb production costs in materials, supplies, assistant wages, and other expenses.
 - Normalize designers and assistants receiving “kit fees” (e.g. 5-10% of list price per week) for computers, software, and supplies necessary for design work (eg. Vectorworks, AutoCad, Adobe Creative Suite, QLab, Lightwright, Pro Tools, Cinema4D).
 - Provide designers and assistants access to institutional software licenses.
 - Provide design expenses when contracts are finalized. Avoid requiring designers to front personal funds.
 - When out-of-pocket expenditures are unavoidable, reimbursement must be prompt and hassle-free.
- Financial responsibility should be carried by producing entities.

³ [MIT Living Wage Calculator](#)

- In issues like lost receipts, inability to get vendors to accept tax-exempt forms, and going over budget, the burden should not fall on designers.

Note: Please see the [Financial section of Advocacy](#) for a more in-depth discussion of finances.

PERSONAL HARM

We recommend a clear and comprehensive system for reporting harmful incidents that provides a pathway for conflict resolution with a third-party arbitrator. We suggest an interventionist system of practice that does not place the onus of providing proof of harm on BIPOC who have been harmed, require their labor to educate the person who has engaged in harm, nor assume their active participation in repairing the harm. A thorough investigation of instances of harm should not cause further harm.

Comprehensive protocols for disrupting racist incidents and repairing harm must be normalized at an institutional level. Protocols must be initiated as soon as harm is identified irrespective of whether or not the harm was intentional as well as whether it was caused in an isolated incident or was the product of an accumulation of aggressions. It is paramount to protect and respect the privacy of individuals who call out acts of racism.

Allies must remain vigilant and confront acts of racism when they occur. Silence is complicit in upholding white supremacy. Since people who have engaged in harm tend to deflect, minimize, or play the victim when confronted with their racial biases, we advocate for allies to take responsibility and use their privilege to hold people within their community accountable.

We encourage the creation of production specific Full Company Community Agreements as each production has unique demands, participants, and the potential to cause different forms of harm.

Areas of Focus for Institutional Policy

- Institute mandatory training for all staff and freelancers to take harm reduction training (similar to sexual harassment training).
- Create communication guidelines that outline the discontinuance of charged and insensitive language and labels toward BIPOC individuals (e.g. a list of harmful words and phrases and alternate language choices).
- Ensure that there is a system in place for addressing harm when it occurs that does not cause further harm.
 - Create a shared language to identify and discuss harm when it occurs.

- Creating a “harm report” similar to an injury report on a production to document, and legitimize these events.
- Hire an EDI officer or employ a member of staff specifically assigned to mediate resolutions when instances of harm occur.
- We advocate for the creation of BIPOC affinity spaces in all areas of engagement as desired by the BIPOC company members.
- Provide transportation after late-night tech and rehearsals to ensure safe travel for those who request it.
- Be aware of intersectional identities when creating policy (LGBTQ+, gender, religion, people with disabilities, and other marginalized groups).

Forms of Personal Harm (a non-exhaustive list)

- Asking BIPOC designers to educate peers on issues of anti-racism.
- Asking BIPOC designers to speak on behalf of or in defense of BIPOC communities.
- BIPOC voices being dismissed rather than considered equal to white peers.
- Asking costume designers to shop with a company card in another’s name, which subjects them to possible legal danger when unable to provide identification.
- Blaming or ignoring BIPOC artists when they report harm and microaggressions.

HARM IN PROGRAMING

Institutions often cause unintended harm through their programming choices. We suggest:

- Producing entities program texts featuring BIPOC joy and complexity, not only shows about oppression and trauma.
- BIPOC characters must be complex three-dimensional humans – not stereotypes. Characters should encompass the messiness of reality: the beauty, the joy, and also the pain. However, they should never be reduced to solely their pain.
- When programming does feature trauma in marginalized groups, we suggest that the director and creative team share that identity – directors and creatives should not treat BIPOC pain as a commodity to take and profit from.

REPAIRING RELATIONSHIPS AFTER HARM HAS BEEN CAUSED

We advocate for a restorative process that protects BIPOC individuals. While harm repair is incident-specific, institutions should provide a framework with clear steps and a safe space for individuals who have received harm. This means:

- Conflict should be resolved through a third-party arbitrator trained in restorative practices and EDI work.

- Restorative practices must center the agency and sovereignty of the person who has been harmed.
- The process must be based on consent, where the terms of repair are set by the party which received harm and accepted by all parties involved.
 - Understand that the person who has received harm may prefer punitive action over a restorative process.
 - Understand that the person who has received harm may not want to engage with the person who has caused harm and that they should never be obligated to do so.

The Five R's of Restorative Practices⁴

We encourage organizations to develop restorative practices for harm repair that are specific to their institution and community. In developing these practices, institutions should keep in mind the five R's.

1. Relationship – the primary focus is restoring and maintaining strong relationships.
2. Respect – mutual respect keeps the process safe.
3. Responsibility – individuals take responsibility for the impact of their actions.
4. Repair – the goal is to repair the harm that was done instead of punishing the person who has caused the harm.
5. Reintegration – ideally, all parties will eventually move past the harm and will be reintegrated into the community rather than excluded.

We are products of our socialization. Understand that being called out for making a racist comment is not a moral judgment on the entirety of one's character. When confronted about racist behavior, avoid centering personal feelings that diminish the experience of the party who has received harm. One must take responsibility for the harm they have engaged in, learn from it, and try to repair the harm. Future instances of harm will occur if individuals who have caused harm avoid self-educating and engaging in comprehensive introspective labor.

Taking accountability when apologizing

1. Thank whoever has identified the harm, it takes courage to confront racism.
2. Acknowledge and take personal accountability for the harm that has been caused; refrain from shifting the blame onto the person who received harm by using phrasing such as, "I'm sorry you were offended."
3. Specifically state what was done and how it was harmful.

⁴ [The 5 R's of Restorative Practices Adapted by Longmont Community Justice Partnership](#)

4. Ask the person who was harmed if they are willing to engage in restorative practices, and ask what steps can be taken to repair the harm.
5. Make a commitment to self-educate and do better.

MICROAGGRESSIONS AND THEIR EFFECTS

The subcurrent of racism in the U.S. manifests itself in everyday microaggressions, which are a particularly pernicious form of harm that are often overlooked or not treated seriously. We encourage all of our colleagues to work to recognize microaggressions, take accountability, and confront this harm when perpetrated by others in the room (this should not be a burden that always falls on BIPOC members of staff).

Examples of microaggressions and their effects

- Being talked over in design meetings devalues BIPOC team members.
- Using white-centered reference images for research boards causes the erasure of BIPOC individuals and culture.
- Describing someone as “acting like an angry Black woman”⁵ or using other racist stereotypes creates harmful assumptions.
- Confusing BIPOC colleagues with one another is dehumanizing.
- Shortening, replacing, or mispronouncing non-Western names, which others BIPOC. Learn the names of your peers; it is the bare minimum respect afforded to any individual.
- Designers treating BIPOC performers as the problem when design issues arise as a result of their lack of cultural competency or gaps in their training. This upholds white as default and shifts the burden of the designer’s bias onto the performer.
 - Lighting designers making insensitive comments about “exposure challenges” when lighting performers with deeper pigmented skin tones.
- Complimenting BIPOC on their English articulation or poise is a backhanded compliment because it is othering and assumes that the individual is unable to speak or act in a way that conforms to white standards.⁶

⁵ J. Celeste Walley-Jean “Debunking the Myth of the ‘Angry Black Woman’: An Exploration of Anger in Young African American Women

⁶ Lecia Michelle “White People, when you call me “well-spoken,” this is what you’re actually saying”

CULTURAL COMPETENCY

We advocate for everyone working in the North American theatre industry to evaluate how they can improve the specificity of their cultural awareness on all levels. Cultural competency⁷ comes in many different forms: interpersonal, institutional, and show-specific.

We advocate that producing entities and their representatives become competent on the cultural markers in the specific shows they produce, the methodologies employed, and the artists they have invited. This should apply to all artists, resident staff, and crews throughout the entire production process. We suggest creating a production-specific list of clearly stated values and principles, demonstrable behaviors, attitudes, policies, and structures that enable company members to effectively work cross-culturally. We acknowledge that while cultural competency is show-specific it also requires a long-term plan as it is a skill to be developed.

For institutions, we recommend a plan for anti-racist training for all members of staff.

IN DESIGN

We advocate for the following steps:

- A designer's choices must not be made in a vacuum or based on the assumption of white as default. Designers must be malleable and willing to adjust their habitual choices and process to best serve the production.
- Within the costume designer's purview, any discussion about BIPOC hair and bodies must be anti-racist in tone, done with expertise, and allow both the designer and actor absolute agency over the creative choices.
- Ensure proper engagement with culturally specific props, costumes, and regalia and their procurement or reproduction.
- End the practice of grouping all nonwhite items in an "Ethnic Section" in costume and props stock areas.
 - Allocate resources toward expanding stock to meet the needs of diverse programming.
- End the practice of blackface, brownface, yellowface, redface, and crippface. No designer should be forced or allowed to make a performer look like they belong to another race or exaggerate an actors' features to meet a harmful stereotype.

⁷ **Cultural competence** – loosely defined as the ability to understand, appreciate and interact with people from **cultures** or belief systems different from one's own.

From: <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2015/03/cultural-competence>

- Avoid design choices which exoticize non-western cultures, play into colonial power constructs, or contain elements of primitivist fetishization and romanticization with racist undertones. For example:
 - Design choices in line with the “white man going native” trope.
 - Sampling “ethnic” sound snippets without appropriate cultural competency or research.
 - Inaccurate “western gaze” depictions of homes and architecture in particular foreign countries as significantly less advanced than they are in reality.

ON LANGUAGE

We advocate for the following steps:

- Use culturally appropriate language and terms to refer to people.
 - Do not use pejoratives or offensive terms.
 - Honor how individual people identify their heritage.
- Educate all company members on practices and jargon that may be offensive and harmful to BIPOC. For example:
 - Use “meeting” instead of “pow-wow.”
 - Use “install black colored soft goods” instead of “hang blacks.”
 - Use “lead” instead of “spearhead.”
 - Use “main and understudy” or “primary and secondary” instead of “slave and master” for mics, video servers, and lighting equipment.
 - Use “community” instead of “tribe.”
 - Use “head” or “lead” instead of “master carpenter” or “master electrician.”
- Ensure proper pronunciation and spelling of BIPOC names as well as of foreign languages and dialects in consultation with native speakers and, if necessary, language experts.
- Affirm each person's gender identity, life, and experience; understand that people exist at the intersection of multiple identities and that these identities are not separable.
 - Acknowledge how people identify their gender and the pronouns they use.
 - Understand that some gender identities are linked to culture and are not separable from that culture nor completely explainable within a western context.
- We recommend management and early creative team members recognize racialized words and harmful language within the production's text and take steps to mitigate potential harm prior to the first table reading or casual conversations about the production.

- If working with a dated script, consider updating or changing it if amenable to the playwright.
- We suggest a check-in process for collaborators and actors to speak out on any concerns.
- Clear guidelines of appropriate stand-in words for racialized language spoken outside of a performance context. Stand-in words should always be used by all company members speaking *in reference* to the text.

CULTURAL PRACTICES AND LAND STEWARDSHIP

We advocate for the following steps:

- Establish a codified land acknowledgment practice that affirms the history, the present, and the future of the land upon which the particular theatre stands and honors the original Indigenous stewards of the land (e.g. in show programs, pre-show announcements, or on placards mounted in areas of heavy foot traffic).
- Commit to actively engage in anti-colonization practices and efforts on a local level. Understand what your local theatres can do for your local Indigenous community. The following are some guiding questions:
 - In programming, are you telling Indigenous stories or only the experiences of settlers in the Americas? Are you telling stories that present a white-washed version of history?
 - How do you frame the history of your theatre and theatre in the Americas?
 - Is the language you use decolonial? Do you acknowledge that you occupy Indigenous land?
 - Are you in active communication with your local Indigenous community leaders?
 - Do you employ Indigenous artisans to fabricate relevant properties and costume items?
- Consider colleagues who observe holidays outside of the Christian calendar and make time in daily schedules for religious and cultural practices as necessary.

WHEN ENGAGING IN CULTURAL OR INTERCULTURAL PERFORMANCE

We advocate for the following steps:

- Provide audiences with cultural context as needed.
- Conduct thorough research and train company members when engaging in any programming outside of the cultural norm of the institution.
- Hire Cultural Consultants and BIPOC dramaturgs to provide cultural competency training for the entire production staff. Budgets must consider and support these consultants.

- It should never fall on the BIPOC collaborators to perform this education and the additional emotional and cultural labor involved without agreed-upon compensation.
- Institute a multi-pronged cultural competency approach tailored to each specific production. We identify at least three forms of Cultural Competency Consultants, which should be hired as needed:
 1. Experts with substantial academic research experience.
 2. Activists with extensive work in the relevant field.
 3. People with lived experience.
- These roles may be performed by the production dramaturg if they have the necessary qualification or by one or more external consultants if they do not.
- Consultants with lived experience should be hired from the group of people that they are consulting on; avoid a one-size-fits-all approach that erases the specificity of BIPOC identities (e.g. employ a Diné consultant for a show that takes place on Diné land and which includes Indigenous characters, not a consultant from another tribe).
- Engage cultural experts at key points in the creative process to oversee choices and mitigate potential missteps. For example:
 - Invite cultural experts to workshops, share initial design renderings with them, and invite them to previews.

EQUITABLE REPRESENTATION

We advocate for an equitable hiring practice with a goal of reaching a minimum of 50% BIPOC representation in all areas of our practice.

We call on producing entities and institutions to create temporary inclusion initiatives⁸ tailored to increase the representation of underrepresented people where it is lacking. We center the work of increasing representation by reforming hiring practices over any numerical goal (e.g. a rigid diversity quota). Focus on actionable goals like doubling the number of BIPOC collaborators interviewed for key positions every season until the equity goal is met.

While we aspire for 50% representation, we also acknowledge the imperfection and potential harm of quantifying and categorizing laborers based on race. Candidates should be hired based on the quality of their work, not their identity. A tokenizing push to increase representation will only objectify and further harm BIPOC individuals.

As institutions diversify their workforce, they must prioritize developing policy in harm reduction and cultural competency. Increasing representation alone without protecting BIPOC artists simply results in more harm and poor retention rates. Likewise, in creating more seats at the table, institutions should not cause undue harm (e.g. firing) to existing collaborators and members of staff, particularly those from other marginalized groups.

We recommend taking the following steps

- Establish a goal of hiring (or electing) 50% or more BIPOC:
 - Lead designers in every design discipline in the North American theatre. This includes, but is not limited to Broadway, Off-Broadway, New York, Regional, Opera, Dance, Academic, and other commercial venues.
 - Associates and assistants in every design discipline, including interns and off-site assistants.
 - Staff in all production departments, shops, and running crews.
 - Educators and administrators in all training programs.
 - Union representatives in the United Scenic Artists Local 829⁹ (the designers' union) and International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees¹⁰ locals.

⁸ [ACLU Inclusion Targets](#)

⁹ Henceforth referred to as "USA Local 829."

¹⁰ Henceforth referred to as "IATSE."

- Create an independent Equity Assurance Steward, who will oversee inclusive hiring, transparency, and accountability.
- Understand that equity is not a matter of displacement, it is about adding more seats to the table.
- Incorporate inclusion riders in designer contracts.
- Provide full credit in show programs to all design and studio associates and assistants.
- Establish an MFA Equivalency standard based on career experience for the hiring of all academic positions and eliminate any educational requirements for all non-instructional production positions.
- Explore the idea of requiring a threshold of BIPOC representation on crews and creative teams to be considered for award recognition (e.g. 30%).

BIPOC ADVOCACY

We advocate for changing traditional pathways of professional development. We believe that supporting rising and early-career BIPOC designers and technicians is paramount to changing existing power structures and inequities in this industry.

We believe that long-standing traditions of hiring practices, educational requirements, training programs, financial inequity, paternalism, tokenism, and a lack of meaningful engagement have shut many BIPOC artists out of the practice of theatre design. Educators, directors, producers, and our own design community must expand our vision of the ideal design candidate.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

We advocate for an intergenerational effort to foster relationships that promote openness, mentorship, and the sharing of knowledge.

We must end the harmful gatekeeping that creates professional barriers under the guise of marginalized collaborators “needing more experience.” Due to systemic inequalities, there is a pervasive pattern of privileged colleagues being hired to design “big” shows while colleagues of color are considered unqualified. While we do not disregard the value of professional experience, diversity is also important; we encourage those in power to take equal leaps of faith when hiring someone.

For Designers (Mentorships/Internships)

- End unpaid internships. This includes summer stock internships, apprenticeships, and the practice of unpaid internships for school credit.
- We encourage established designers to introduce mentees to their network and share their knowledge.
- Guide rising designers on the business side of their careers: financial and business literacy, industry-standard rates, contract negotiations, the basics of USA Local 829, and how to work with IATSE Union crews.
- Be transparent with mentees on production budget information.
- Encourage your interns, assistants, and associates’ career ambitions. Do not hold them back.
- Allow students to shadow your design and tech process. Promote the opportunity on your website, social media platforms, or both so it is easily accessible and available to less-connected students.

- Connect with students on a local level. Speak at nearby high schools with diverse student bodies and encourage students to make a career in design.

For Institutions/Producers

- We encourage producers to direct resources toward creating more “seats at the table,” particularly to allow for established designers to co-design with early-career designers without it impacting their fees.
- Establish a BIPOC Early Career Support Fund to allow financially underprivileged young designers to build a body of work.
- Re-imagine the freelance approach to staffing design positions.
 - Create design residencies for emerging BIPOC designers to allow space for concept development and presence throughout the rehearsal process.
 - Put your creative and design team on a yearly salary.¹¹
- Organize professional socials and events to foster an inclusive community between early-career designers and other collaborators.

FINANCIAL

We advocate for the elimination of financial barriers that disproportionately discourage the success of BIPOC designers. The financial and personal instability freelance designers must endure makes it nearly impossible for all but the wealthiest designers to survive and sustain long, prosperous careers. This promotes favoritism toward people with generational wealth, which disproportionately favors white designers.

A lack of adequate wages at most levels of the industry fosters a culture of scarcity and fierce competition between designers. This competition exists not only between designers in a field but also between designers and their associates and assistants. True and generous advocacy will only thrive when designers, associates, and assistants are adequately compensated with a living wage and the culture of scarcity has been eliminated.

Financial Advocacy

- We acknowledge that interns, apprentices, assistants, and associates are jobs that require different levels of experience that should be compensated appropriately, but no worker should ever be paid less than \$15/hr.
 - Pay should not be fee-for-project, that is an invitation to abuse assistants’ labor. Pay your assistants monthly, if not monthly, then weekly, if not weekly, then a day rate, if not a day rate, then an hourly rate.

¹¹ For example, see [Soho Rep’s Project Number One](#)

- Eliminate 10 out of 12s and 6-day workweeks.
- Overtime pay should be given for hours worked exceeding 10 hours in a day or 40 hours in a week.
- Work as an assistant should not begin until an initial payment is received. The onus cannot be on the designer or assistants to “cover” these payments in a waiting period.
- Pay should reflect actual labor performed. Do not expect associates and assistants to perform work outside the scope of their contractual obligations without renegotiation.
- Fair and timely pay for all designers.
 - Work as a designer should not begin until an initial payment is received.
 - A set overtime rate should be established for designers who are not paid a daily rate and tech hours per day should be outlined contractually.
 - Contractually define the number of days in residence and additional compensation should the preview period extend.¹²
- We advocate for all job postings to include a public declaration of the pay range.
- We encourage all institutions to re-evaluate wages on an annual basis as the cost of living increases.
- We encourage institutions to put designers and assistants on the payroll as employees (W2) rather than as contractors (1099) when possible and be transparent about the ramifications of either hiring practice.
 - Notify designers and assistants when they are not covered by the organization’s policies including workman’s compensation and professional liability insurance.
- We advocate for a grant process to fund the application and entrance exam fees required to join USA Local 829.
- Agents should treat all clients equally regardless of career status: avoid causing unnecessary harm, prioritize the young designers, advocate for their wages, and working conditions.
- We encourage creating a process for BIPOC mutual aid on a local level as desired by the community.

ADVOCACY FOR IMMIGRANT & INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS & DESIGNERS

International and immigrant designers make significant contributions to the theatre design industry in the United States. Despite the value they bring to all productions, these designers are unprotected from discrimination in many states and are subject to ever-changing and complicated visa and immigration requirements.

¹² For example, see pg. 9 of the [Off-Broadway League Fully Executed Agreement 2021-2025](#)

We acknowledge the complexity and breadth of international designers. Understand that immigrants have different reasons for coming to the U.S. – avoid judging or assuming people’s motivation for immigrating.

For Designers

- Support international designers’ O-1 Working Artist visa applications by writing letters of recommendation, sponsorship, and agency.
- Be aware of visa limitations which mandate that international designers may only work within their field. We encourage established designers to employ international designers as assistants, associates, and studio support.
- We encourage mentorship and relationship building, especially with established international designers who have navigated life and work in the U.S.

For Institutions/Producers

- When hiring international designers, look beyond Western countries. We note that when international designers are brought in to work on U.S. shows they are often from European countries and not other places.
- Understand that co-design initiatives can be particularly valuable for student and early-career designers who will be applying for an O-1 Working Artist visa.
- Participate in initiatives like Curricular Practical Training (CPT) and Optional Practical Training (OPT) programs, which allow students on the F-1 Student Visa to gain valuable work experience before and directly after graduation.
- Create a fund to cover the cost of CPT summer work internships and O-1 Working Artist visas, and lawyer fees.
 - Provide assistance as needed in Visa applications (e.g. letters of recommendation and paperwork)
- Institutions should work to ensure that visa/immigration status in no way affects their hiring decisions (consciously or unconsciously).
- Acknowledge the lack of government assistance for people working under O-1 visas (e.g. unemployment insurance benefits) and establish mutual aid opportunities for international designers.¹³
 - Designers are discouraged from applying for unemployment as it may get added to their record and make it difficult to get a green card.¹⁴
- When interviewing, do not ask questions about immigration status or specific visa status.
- Normalize providing translators in contract negotiations and budgets.

¹³ See [Lighting Foundation](#)

¹⁴ [Unemployment Benefits for Immigrant Designers](#)

- Remove barriers that prevent immigrants from joining USA Local 829 and perpetuate inequity.
 - Currently, within IATSE, international designers must pay \$30-\$500 for an advisory opinion letter to prove capability to join. Paying these funds does not guarantee membership and there is still a potential for rejection.
- Understand that the theatrical freelance framework is incompatible with the U.S. system for visas.
 - The O-1 Working Artist visa is flawed because it requires proof of future work, which is difficult or impossible due to the freelance nature of theatre employment.
 - If one does not sponsor their O-1 Visa under an Agent, they will be limited to only work for the sponsor company.
 - When the questions about the artist's immigration status are brought up, directly communicate with the artists and, if necessary, hire an O-1 specialist to avoid incorrect assumptions and discrimination.
 - There is a 90-day period to find employment post-graduation. If one does not find employment then they must leave the country. This creates pressure to develop a portfolio of work for visa applications and leaves international designers at risk of exploitation.

THE FIVE PRINCIPLES IN EDUCATION

Education should be a nest for our future. To expand our ways of seeing and understanding the world, our practices in education must reflect the demographics of the people and work to foster acceptance and knowledge of all facets of the history and identity of the North American Theatre.

This section outlines how Design Action's Five Guiding Principles relate to academic institutions and educators. This section is supplementary and is not meant to substitute a diligent reading and implementation of the points from previous sections.

As the cost of postsecondary education rises, BIPOC students face disproportionate economic barriers to access due to generational wealth inequality.¹⁵ Often, it is no longer feasible for students to work a minimum wage job in order to put themselves through a degree program at a four-year college or university. Instead, students are dependent on their parent's wealth, scholarships, and financial aid. Hence, we recognize that the issue of representation in education is intrinsically linked to the larger issue of economic equality in the United States.

We encourage universities to expand and diversify their programming, thoroughly re-evaluate white-centered practices in their curriculum, take strides to increase equitable representation in their student and faculty demographics, and establish a comprehensive policy to mitigate instances of harm. We advocate for a program that disrupts the white colonial power structures which are inherent in academia and that encourages students to challenge these structures through their work.

Create an environment where BIPOC students can flourish professionally, personally, and emotionally.

We advocate for the following steps:

- Institute a sustained anti-racist training program for the faculty and student body.
- Create safe avenues for communication between faculty and students (eg. Town Halls and anonymous feedback).
- Value BIPOC students and see their potential as equal to their white peers.
 - Support their work and their ability to perform to the same standards.
- Establish transparency for potential students:

¹⁵ [Institute on Assets and Social Policy – The Roots of the Widening Racial Wealth Gap: Explaining the Black-White Economic Divide](#)

- On faculty/staff demographics.
- On the curriculum.
- On season programming.
- On professional development and opportunities.
- Acknowledge that internalized oppression and a history of microaggressions are forms of emotional trauma that many BIPOC students have experienced.
 - Understand that this history affects how they experience conflict and new instances of harm; honor their experience of the harm.
- Validate all dialects of English.
 - Do not equate fluency and flawless pronunciation of “Proper English” with intelligence.
 - Avoid using language for academic one-upmanship or to assert authority, it is rooted in an implied supremacy of the English language.
- Make an institutional commitment to protect and support international, immigrant, and undocumented students from harm, disenfranchisement, and deportation amidst social and political pressure.
- Re-examine the rubric of “excellence” through a decolonial lens. Be open to different ideas on what makes a design “good.”
- Establish a sustained investment in BIPOC students' success beyond graduation; take pride in BIPOC alumni as they develop professionally.

HARM IN ACADEMIA

It is the responsibility of educational institutions to uphold a procedure to respond when harm is caused. There are unique forms of harm that BIPOC students and educators face due to the inherent power dynamics of academia. It is imperative that institutions recognize the potential for these forms of harm. As institutions achieve greater diversity, it is essential that they put equal effort into enacting harm reduction policy as they do to repairing harm when it occurs.

We advocate for the following steps:

- Create a simple and safe process for students to report racist language, abuses of power, and other forms of racially charged academic harm.
- Be clear in the terms of Graduate Assistant Work and cease the exploitation of Graduate Assistants. Terms should include the following steps:
 - Provide a livable wage in addition to tuition waivers.
 - Provide housing, stipends, and health insurance.
 - Be transparent about which students are offered which benefits.
 - Allow and encourage graduate students to unionize.
 - Clearly outline the scope of work in the initial agreement.

- Create a humane balance between work, teaching, and education expectations.
- Provide equal access to opportunity and funding, particularly for studio materials, software, tools, and departmental resources necessary to develop key skills.
- Develop a process for educators being considered for tenure tracks, which includes judiciously evaluating previous instances of harm.
- Develop a system of effective repercussions for current tenured faculty – senior professors should not be immune from consequences for harmful behavior.

Note: for a more detailed discussion, see [Harm Reduction](#).

CULTURAL COMPETENCY IN EDUCATION

Researchers must approach cultures outside their area of expertise with appropriate, careful, and thorough scholarship. As additional institutional infrastructure exists in academia, it behooves colleges and universities to enact clear and comprehensive policies regarding cultural competency.

We advocate for the following steps:

- Academic institutions must train their faculty, staff, and students when engaging in any programming outside of the cultural norm of the institution.
- It should never fall on the BIPOC collaborators to perform this education without an agreement and adequate compensation for this labor.

Institutional Recommendations

- Land acknowledgments should be included in departmental syllabi and at all events presented by the college.
- Consider holidays outside of the Christian calendar in forming the departmental production schedule and academic programming.
- Ensure the proper pronunciation and spelling of BIPOC names in all departmental affairs.
- End the practice of grouping all non-western items in an “Ethnic Section” in costume and props stock areas.

Note: For additional details see [Cultural Competency](#).

On Cultural and Intercultural Performances

We advocate for proper expertise in designing for specific cultural performance practices (e.g. Yoruba Theatre) or intercultural performances (Kyōgen-Commedia Dell’arte).

Either have traditionally trained faculty on-staff who have studied the style in question or faculty have been trained by a guest master artist and have permission to teach that style. Alternatively, hire guest artists to teach students. If you do not have the support in place, do not continue. Your instructors are unqualified.

In addition to oversight from masters of specific forms, considerable dramaturgical research should be conducted by students as part of their design process. This must extend beyond appropriating an aesthetic and into a deeper understanding of where those design decisions come from culturally and how they fit into the specific style.

End hurtful practices of appropriation, particularly in the field of performance studies.

- Acknowledge the patterns of academics or designers engaging in surface-level cultural research (with the intention of treating the host culture as an aesthetic commodity free for taking) and the problematic colonial nature of these practices.
- Create a learning environment where appropriated and stereotypical design decisions are identified and re-examined early in the production process.
- Avoid divorcing cultural stories from their original context to circumvent having to engage with the host culture (e.g. by transplanting these stories into another culture or whitewashing them).

REPRESENTATION IN EDUCATION

Representation in Demographics

We advocate for the following steps:

- A robust recruitment push for BIPOC design students in all training programs.
 - Actively recruit from underprivileged school districts.
 - Support underprivileged students in navigating financial aid and scholarship opportunities.
- Establish equal representation in faculty, staff, and students through a transparent recruiting practice that avoids tokenization.
- Advocate for rising BIPOC who may be interested in academic positions.
- Avoid using BIPOC students as institutional props to misrepresent your student demographics.
 - Get consent from students to use their image, biography, and work on any public-facing document, website, or promotional material.

Representation in Production

It is essential that the canon of plays being taught and produced include equal representation of BIPOC stories. Be aware of the additional emotional labor for BIPOC students that comes with collaborating on certain shows, particularly in a Predominantly White Institution¹⁶. In selecting a production season, we recommend that academic institutions make a conscious effort to:

- Produce more diverse shows which feature BIPOC lead roles and explore a spectrum of identities.
- Ensure that design teams are culturally competent and prepared to engage in these texts without causing harm.
- Be aware of the imperialist conditioning ingrained in many North American narratives and carefully select productions which disrupt rather than reinforce this systemic ignorance.

Representation in Curriculum

Educational institutions must begin re-evaluating their white-centered curriculum and prepare students to design for diverse casts. Increasing representation onstage goes hand in hand with understanding what it means to design for nonwhite performers and audiences. Almost all North American postgraduate design programs are fundamentally centered around whiteness and the production of white shows by white casts. This extends into how design is taught, beyond the popular canon, as well as beyond representation on and off stage.

Institutions must conduct a careful and comprehensive restructuring of their curriculum to incorporate anti-racist practices. Single lectures or one-offs with a diverse focus are insufficient and still perpetuate white as the default; the end goal must be that these topics are integrated throughout the curriculum. However, we emphasize the need for immediate action, which may take the form of supplemental lectures and classes while larger structural changes to the curriculum are discussed.

Examples of white-centered conventions and curriculum:

- Design research needs to match the specificity of the performer (e.g. when researching costumes from the Renaissance ensure that students are not only looking at clothing styles worn by white people).
- Designers creating scale models with only white figures (particularly in CAD).
- Production supplies should not treat white as default and equate the words “flesh” and “nude” with whiteness.
 - Stocking makeup products primarily for white performers.

¹⁶ Henceforth referred to as “PWI”

- Having only white lavalier microphones.
- Covering only white hairstyles in hair and makeup courses.
- Teaching color theory with the expectation that the performer will be white and not have strong undertones.
- Design choices that do not take race into account and create visibility issues for BIPOC performers and erase the specificity of designing for individuals.
- A cursory overview of non-western design styles.
- Being only capable of producing shows in proscenium settings, which is a largely western scenographic arrangement of space and which often creates a barrier to the possibility of producing more communal/community-oriented works, transgressive political performances, or non-proscenium traditional cultural forms.

In teaching theatre history, we advocate for the following steps:

- Re-evaluate using theatre history textbooks that center whiteness.
- Develop theatre history courses that include performance practices outside of Europe, and which move beyond a cursory overview of these practices.¹⁷ For example:
 - Classical Southeast Asian performance styles like ancient Sanskrit theatre are frequently omitted in favor of classical Grecian practices despite extensive literature surrounding the history of ancient Sanskrit theatre (e.g. the Nāṭyaśāstra).
- Acknowledge and include BIPOC contributions to the North American Theatre in history courses.
 - Discuss in-depth the history of the racist practice of minstrelsy, upon which the North American theatre is based.
 - Acknowledge forms of Black performance in American history and the profound impact these forms have had on our music, arts, and performance styles.
 - Cover Indigenous performance practices and avoid framing these practices within a problematic anthropological approach to performance studies rather than as legitimate history deserving of academic discussion.

These changes must be integrated throughout the curriculum, as such:

- These considerations should be brought up throughout the coursework as they are relevant.

¹⁷ See Community Created "[Alternative Canon](#)" – *Non-Western plays, plays by Black, Indigenous, People of Color, by women and by queer writers from before 1945.*

- A single class or guest lecture with BIPOC focus is insufficient (e.g. classes on “Kabuki sets” or “Black Hair”) – this still upholds white as the norm and others BIPOC.
- Instructors should give in-class examples that are specific to different skin tones and avoid using a shorthand that treats white as default.
- While it is permissible to teach classes with a cultural focus (e.g. Kathakali costumes), a program should not be diversified by creating individual classes or lectures with a racial focus (e.g. “how to design for Asian performers”).
- It is essential that the curriculum be developed along a spectrum of skin tones and not emphasize racial categorization.
 - Skin tones and racial identities may vary considerably even among people from a particular country or geographic area, and many people are multiracial.
 - Race is socially constructed and biological features are not neatly separable.
 - For example, we recommend teaching about makeup considerations for performers with olive undertones of varying strength, not for specific races that the instructor considers to have strong olive undertones.

We must also begin to decolonize our design processes. North American academic institutions teach design processes through a western lens. It is key that we keep an open mind and understand that different cultures have different approaches to design.

- For example, in non-western traditions:
 - The ultimate authority may lie with master artists.
 - Ways of knowing may be passed down through genealogy.
 - The performance itself may be tied to the natural environment rather than a theatre building.
 - The designer and performer may be an intertwined role.
- Academic programs engaging in cultural or intercultural performances should always pay great attention to the design process of traditional forms and represent these processes in their curriculum.
- A design curriculum should cover the different meanings that cultures assign to color, arrangements, symbols, and other aesthetics.

ADVOCACY IN EDUCATION

We advocate for the following steps:

- Advocacy must begin early. We recommend the creation of programs that reach high school and undergraduate students who may not be aware of design as a career.

- Reduce the cost of application to undergraduate and graduate programs. Allow for online remote portfolio reviews or funding to travel for in-person interviews.
- Universities that are attached to a producing entity or professional theatre should provide a pathway for students to work, intern, or design for that company, and be paid for their labor.
- Establish a path for community college students to transfer to traditional design programs and provide scholarship money to aid underprivileged students in making this transition.
- Advocate for theatre design and production track programs in underprivileged communities to be fully funded, respected, and included.
 - Tribal Colleges and Universities have unmatched and special relationships with tribal communities and can reach Indigenous students in ways the rest of the United States college system cannot.
 - Historically Black Colleges and Universities should be considered as complete and equal to other institutions.
 - We advocate for creating authentic and reciprocal partnerships with other universities and PWIs.
- Establish robust alumni networks to connect BIPOC students to career opportunities following graduation.
- Encourage interested BIPOC designers to apply to academic jobs, and advocate for their hiring at institutions into fair paying, full-time, tenured positions.
 - Protect BIPOC faculty from abuse and racism from within the institution.
- Invest in local vocational, trade schools, and communities to introduce students to production skills.

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Educational institutions must treat international students as equal to their peers from the U.S. If the institution commits to accepting students, it must follow through in supporting students' success in overcoming all the barriers that might arise.

Financial, Legal, and Equity

- Provide financial or legal assistance necessary to navigate the legal challenges international students face when studying in the United States.
 - We suggest creating a fund to cover the cost of student visas.
- Address the multilingual needs of international students who do not speak English as their first language.
- Faculty must provide international students equal access to design assignments for school productions regardless of their English language abilities.

- Guide international students on how to legally gain work experience (CPT, OPT) while under student visas (F-1, J-1).¹⁸
- Support students seeking CPT credit through internships or other professional opportunities; understand that for the purposes of the O-1 Working Artist visa application process, design work completed through a CPT program may be more valuable than student design work.
 - Develop programs to facilitate CPT/OPT paths to paid internships and summer jobs for students on the F-1 or J-1 student visa, which have restrictions that affect students' ability to work in the U.S.
- Provide financial or legal assistance for international students who choose to remain and work in the United States after completing their education.
- Communicate challenges to international students on seeking employment visas post-graduation, and help them to overcome these barriers.
 - Provide legal advice for international students who choose to remain and work in the United States.
 - Help students search for a visa sponsor.
 - Consider providing funding for immigration lawyer fees.
 - Work with external organizations to guarantee stable future work for students immediately following graduation.
- Create connections with other international designers who have been through the process of navigating their artistry within the United States.

¹⁸ [International Student Guide to Working in the USA](#)

A LIVING DOCUMENT

We acknowledge that this is a living document, one which is subject to revision and which will never be perfect. As the industry changes, we recognize the need for this document to adapt in response to improvements in equity and new forms of white supremacy. This document is not an “end all be all” to the problems in our industry.

HISTORY

This document is the result of a community-based, decentralized inter-generational effort under the umbrella of Design Action. This document reflects hundreds of hours of work by countless contributors in our ever-growing collective of (currently) 215 designers. Our coalition is composed of Black, Indigenous, People of Color, and white designers working across the United States including Broadway, Off-Broadway, Regional theatres, Universities, and non-traditional forms of performance.

We developed this document through virtual meetings from August 2020 to June 2021. Initial meetings with moderation from artEquity created space for BIPOC colleagues to share their experiences, followed by breakout affinity sessions. Through these facilitated meetings, key areas of focus emerged as the Five Principles.

Various small groupings developed the content of this document over many months of meetings. Following the initial months of contemplation and debate, task forces were established to focus on the key Five Principles and re-evaluated all of the input generated from our larger collective. Lastly, the language was organized and polished by an editing team. Opportunities for feedback throughout this phase were given to the larger group and select outside readers.

This is the second version of Design Action’s Five Principles document, which we last revised in June, 2022. Please see our website for a list of contributors and editors of this iteration of the document.

LONGEVITY

It is Design Action’s intention to revisit this document every four years, or as needed.

If you have feedback or suggestions, please see the GoogleDoc [here](#) to leave comments. The GoogleDoc is a space for the community to contribute, debate, and interact with this material; hate speech will not be tolerated.

END OF DOCUMENT

RESOURCES

Guides, Reports, and Links to Other Resources

- [BIPOC Surviving PWI – ArtEquity Resources](#)
- [Shillington BIPOC Resources for Creatives](#)
- [AAPAC Visibility Report 2018-19](#)
- [Who Designs and Directs in LORT Theatres by Pronoun: 2020](#)
- [Community Created “Alternative Canon” *Non-Western plays, plays by Black, Indigenous, people of color, by women and by queer writers from before 1945.*](#)
- [International Student Guide to Working in the USA on a Student Visa](#)
- [Talking About Race - Whiteness - National Museum of African American History & Culture](#)

Links to Organizations

- [We See You White American Theatre](#)
- [Broadway For Racial Justice](#)
- [The Asian American Performers Action Coalition](#)
- [BIPOC Directors Collective](#)
- [Black Theatre Coalition](#)
- [Black Theatre United](#)
- [Everybody Black](#)
- [Broadway Advocacy Coalition](#)
- [La Gente: The Latinx Theatre Design Network](#)
- [See Lighting Foundation](#)
- [The Movement Theatre Company](#)
- [Production on Deck](#)

Resources for Early-Career Rising Designers

- [United Scenic Artists Website](#)
- [Off-Broadway Assistant Designer Resources](#)
- [Wingspace Mentorship Program](#)
- [in 1: the podcast](#)
- [Artistic Finance podcast](#)
- [Dirty Laundry Podcast](#)
- [American Theatre Wing Springboard to Design](#)
- [1/52 Project](#)
- [Hemsley Lighting Internship](#)
- [The Lighting Archive](#)
- [ALD Academy](#)

- [Equity Through Design Mentorship](#)

Books on Anti-racism and History

- How to be Anti-Racist by Ibram X. Kendi
- The new Jim Crow by Michelle Alexander
- Me and White Supremacy by Layla Saad
- White Fragility by Robin Diangelo
- So You Want to Talk About Race by Ijeoma Oluo
- White Rage; the Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide by Carol Anderson
- Black Wealth/White Wealth by Melvin Oliver and Thomas Shapiro
- Race and Racisms: A Critical Approach by Tanya Golash Boza
- The Origin of Others by Toni Morrison
- Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America by Ibram X. Kendi
- Lies My Teacher Told Me by James W. Loewen
- Orientalism by Edward Said
- The Making of Asian America: A History by Erika Lee
- Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning by Cathy Park Hong
- Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee by Dee Brown
- An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States by Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz
- 1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus by Charles C. Mann
- Aloha Betrayed by Noenoe Silva
- From a Native Daughter by Dr. Haunani Kay-Trask
- Dismembering Lahui: A History of the Hawaiian Nation to 1887 by Jonathan Kay Kamakawiwo'ole Osorio
- Captive Paradise: A History of Hawaii by James L. Haley