

# MAA FOCUS



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# Student Advocacy and Black Lives Matter

## The MSED Coalition

*Adriana Corrales, Kevin Pelaez, Nicole Suarez, and the MSED students*

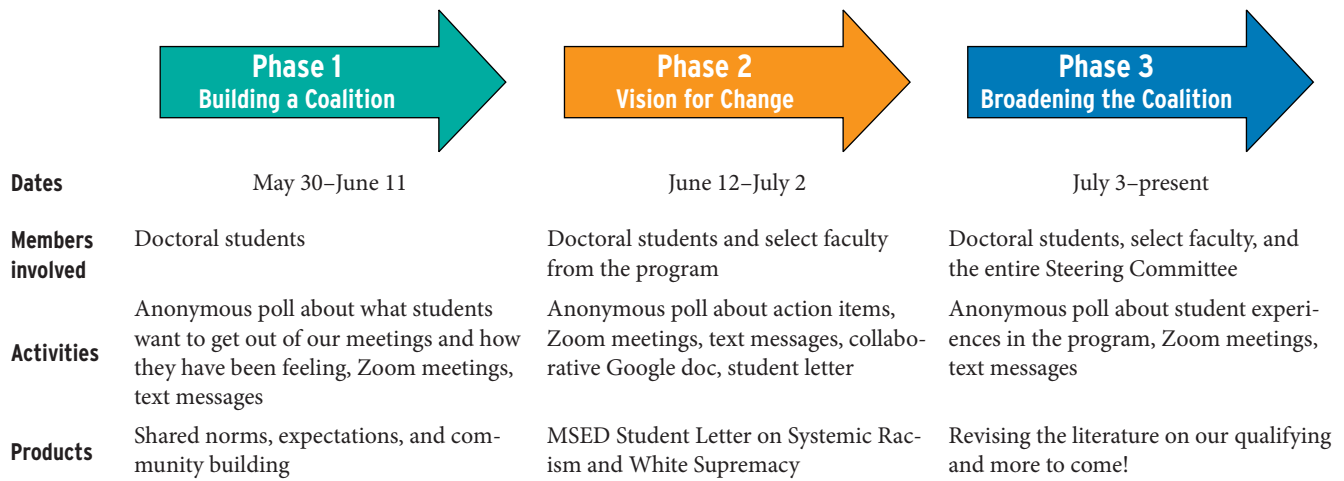
Racial injustices against the Black community, including the deaths of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Aleah Jenkins, Muna Kuri, and countless others, exposed how social and political institutions continue to fail Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC). This has prompted many members of our Mathematics and Science Education Doctoral (MSED) program to engage in protests in our own ways, from marching on the streets with community organizers, to sharing anti-racist resources on social media, to supporting local Black-owned businesses. We recognized that, as future educators and researchers, we have and will be in positions of power, giving us the potential to create change within our program and broader disciplinary fields.

In this article, we share a movement, referred to as the *MSED Coalition*, that was initiated, organized, and led by graduate students of color to address issues of systemic racism and white supremacy within our educational environment. We share this journey to inspire others to consider ways in which they can begin to dismantle systemic racism and white supremacy within their own purview. It is important to note that our intention is not to speak for our Black colleagues. Rather, we want to unfold and expand on some ideas to combat systemic racism and white supremacy in our current educational structures as non-Black people, as well as to find ways to be co-accomplices for Black students, faculty, staff, colleagues, and community members.

### Background and Positioning

To better understand the MSED Coalition, it is important to situate the movement within our disciplinary field, program, and as individuals. As disciplinary fields, mathematics and science are too often portrayed as apolitical, culture- and color-blind universal domains. However, recent work in mathematics and science education has called for a sociopolitical turn in how we teach and learn mathematics and science, placing an emphasis on the intersectionality between teaching and learning with race, gender, language, culture, and other identities.

As a program, our movement is situated within a joint doctoral program in the borderlands of Southern California. This program is unique in that it does not have one home department or institution, but spans departments across two institutions. Central to the program structure is the Steering Committee that oversees the program.



**Figure 1.** Three phases of the MSED Coalition.

As individuals, we span research interests and experiences. Adriana is Chicana and has research interests in graduate education and mentorship as well as faculty-student partnerships. Kevin is Chicano, a former high school teacher, and has research interests in statistics education, teacher education, and critical race theories in education. Nicole is Filipina with interests in designing equity-themed professional development opportunities for instructors in higher education.

## The MSED Coalition

The MSED Coalition was borne out of communication among the student community amidst both the COVID-19 pandemic and the newfound coverage of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement ([blacklivesmatter.com/](https://blacklivesmatter.com/)). We emphasize the notion of *newfound coverage* to note that systemic racism and white supremacy are not new, but have been brought to the fore by recent media coverage. There were three main phases in our coalition, shown in Figure 1.

In Phase 1, students found emotional support and resources within our existing networks, which quickly evolved into a need for actionable items for how we, as an MSED community, could contribute to and uphold the BLM movement. In Phase 2, we reached out to different groups of students within the MSED community and organized student forums in which we brainstormed recommendations that specifically applied to the MSED program. Finally, in Phase 3, we found trusted faculty advocates who guided us in our next steps, which ultimately led to sharing this information with the Steering Committee.

### Phase 1: Building a Coalition

In order to process the underlying issues and create a vision for change, we needed to build a coalition of partners. The coalition began with a series of meetings inviting all graduate students in our program to attend and discuss the ways in

which systemic racism and white supremacy were manifested in our own experiences and how structures of our educational program worked to dismantle or perpetuate inequity. For example, the existing qualifying exam in our program features literature from predominantly (roughly 75%) white cisgender male researchers. We began to discuss the ways in which this serves to perpetuate and normalize whiteness in STEM disciplines. We also discussed the ways in which our own positionality and identity contributed to different experiences within our program, such as pushing BIPOC students to do equity and justice research more than our white counterparts.

These were not easy conversations. Students in our program (just like faculty) have a wide array of professional experiences and backgrounds. The virtual nature of these meetings provided participants different modalities (e.g., chat, reactions, breakout groups) to engage in difficult conversations. During each meeting we agreed upon learning guidelines and norms for communication, read a native land acknowledgment ([bit.ly/2FzCxU0](https://bit.ly/2FzCxU0)), conducted a check-in activity, and then discussed the topics for the meeting.

### Phase 2: Vision for Change

After the first meeting, we asked students to anonymously share recommendations they would like to see in the program. The recommendations were then grouped by themes based on what structural components in the program they related to. As we expanded on these, we considered the following questions: (a) how is this related to the BLM movement, (b) how is this related to general equity and justice, (c) is this short- or long-term, (d) what are some limitations, and (e) what are some affordances of this recommendation?

Recommendations addressed changes across multiple structures (Table 1). We recognize that this list is not exhaustive. Rather, it is intended to be the first in a series of pro-

**Table 1.** Subset of the MSED Coalition Recommendations.

Structure	Recommendation
Departmental	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Commitment to hiring faculty with a record of success working with Black students</li></ul>
Programmatic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Incorporating literature from Black authors in our coursework and on our qualifying examination</li><li>• Incorporating more work from critical perspectives in our core classes</li><li>• Casting a wider net on who is recruited (e.g., intentionally reaching out to specific professional organizations, listservs, HBCUs, etc.)</li></ul>
Student-Level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Establishing a critical reading circle or “book club,”</li><li>• Building relationships with community leaders, outside of math and science education, to learn about our local context</li><li>• Catering socials and events from Black-owned businesses</li></ul>

posed actions that spanned easy to implement “low hanging fruit” and long-term goals.

Finally, with an introspective gaze towards our education, we formulated a student statement on systemic racism and white supremacy ([bit.ly/3htG5W6](https://bit.ly/3htG5W6)). We consulted trusted faculty advocates in writing it. This statement was composed of two sections. The first section is a statement of solidarity with our Black community members and the second is recommendations to combat systemic racism and white supremacy within our own program. In writing this statement, we acknowledged the complexity of academia and systemic change and sought to situate our recommendations within our university’s Ten Point Strategic Plan (TPSP). The TPSP was formulated by our campus leadership in response to the BLM movement and it enhanced support for Black students, faculty, and staff.

### Phase 3: Broadening the Coalition

Engaging in dialogue and articulating a statement was an important first step towards building our own vision for change. After consulting with our trusted faculty advocates, we shared our statement with the Steering Committee and faculty affiliated with our program. With support from members of the Steering Committee, the second step was to organize a listening session with two main goals in mind. First, we wanted faculty to listen to and try to understand student experiences in the program and how these experiences served as motivation for our written statement. Second, we wanted to allow the Steering Committee to ask any clarifying questions regarding our statement. Both parties recognized that the listening session was only the beginning of a conversation about achieving and promoting equity in the program and creating the foundation for a more community-based collaboration between faculty and students. Recognizing the inherent power dynamic that exists within academia, we requested a moderator who is external to our program. This individual acted as a neutral resource to facilitate productive conversation.

We started the listening session by presenting anonymous feedback from students and alumni about their experiences in the program. Students and members of the Steering

Committee then engaged in a candid conversation about student experiences in the program. The agenda included a discussion about the recommendations proposed in the student statement, however, in the midst of the listening session, we felt compelled to elaborate the *emotions* behind the anonymous responses in order for the Steering Committee to recognize and validate them. The listening session was overall perceived as a success, as it provided a chance for students to feel like and be integral members of the MSED community. It also provided faculty with a deeper understanding for how systemic racism was being perpetuated and experienced within the program.

Distributing the letter and engaging in the listening session were emotional and nerve-racking experiences. Given the different positionalities among faculty and graduate students, we were unsure how our ideas and actions would be perceived. Ultimately, the listening session served as a defining moment in broadening our coalition.

### Reflections and Suggestions

We know that there were years of systemic racism and white supremacy that led us to this point, and there will be years of anti-racism work that will lead us out of this. Mathematics and science education play a role in perpetuating as well as tackling these issues. To create and sustain change, the MSED Coalition accepts our responsibility to identify, analyze, and, more importantly, dismantle structures of oppression in ways that hold ourselves and each other accountable.

This article documents our journey to develop a vision for a more just and equitable doctoral program. As a result of these efforts, there has been and continues to be a commitment from both faculty and students to work together towards dismantling systemic racism in our own program, with the first actionable item being the creation of a committee to revise the literature from our qualifying exam. Our vision for change is fluid and developing as our coalition involves more stakeholders, faculty and students, and we are hopeful about transforming our local educational environment.

We implore readers to identify and analyze the ways in which systemic racism and white supremacy are manifested

within their local environments. We also invite readers to consider whether students' voices are part of the conversation for change. Note that it is important to include many ways for students to participate in order to amplify multiple student voices. In the MSED Coalition, we have felt empowered by advocating for change while building community through difficult conversations. For others looking to take similar actions, we provide the design principles that we used in our own movement in Table 2. This is not an exhaustive list but, rather, provides aspects of our planning process that we consider noteworthy.

We suggest building a coalition of interested parties and formulating a vision for change. This will not be easy, but we found that having various ways of participating created a more robust vision. In addition, having leaders who organized and structured the meetings kept up momentum towards our goals. Finally, we found it useful to draw from institutional resources and to continuously remind ourselves that we are critiquing structures of oppression, not individual people or programs. As students we have a vast array of experiences, backgrounds, and ideas that can be leveraged to inform the design of educational programs. After all, we are the ones experiencing it first-hand!

**Acknowledgements.** We want to thank the MSED community, including faculty and students, who have supported our efforts the last few weeks. We appreciate you! ■

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**Table 2.** Design principles for the MSED Coalition.

Principle	Examples
1. Build a coalition of interested parties	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Utilized student forums and anonymous forms to gauge interest</li> <li>Negotiated meeting times with all interested graduate students</li> <li>Reached out to trusted faculty mentors for advice and support</li> <li>Sent out the student statement to the Steering Committee and all MSED faculty</li> <li>Worked with trusted faculty on next steps including planning the listening session</li> </ul>
2. Leaders who will organize and structure the meetings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Distributed leadership among all interested students to ensure that the original organizers' views were not overrepresented</li> <li>Emphasized student agency and leveraged the experiences/perspectives of student participants</li> </ul>
3. Provide various modes of participating	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Distributed anonymous feedback forms throughout all phases</li> <li>Alternated times to give people multiple opportunities to join the meetings</li> <li>Encouraged participation at any and all phases</li> </ul>
4. Amplify multiple student voices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Recognized experiential knowledge as legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding systemic racism and white supremacy in our educational institutions, including the MSED program</li> <li>Organized activities around student feedback and anonymous contributions</li> <li>Remained cognizant of who was speaking during meetings and found ways to amplify other voices</li> </ul>
5. Draw from institutional resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Situated our student statement within the university's Ten Point Strategic Plan for addressing systemic racism and white supremacy on our campus</li> <li>Sought advice from trusted faculty advocates to ensure language was consistent with a collaborative movement for change</li> <li>Invited an external mediator to help facilitate conversations with the Steering Committee</li> </ul>
6. Critique structures, not individuals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Considered the larger structures, both socially and culturally in our national contexts as well as our local program</li> <li>Examined the existing structures that could be built upon in enacting change</li> </ul>