

RECC Observer Report May 2025 - Marena McGregor

Overview

The following observations, reflections, and suggestions are offered in the spirit of collective learning, accountability, and the continued evolution of the credentialing program in alignment with Unitarian Universalist values, particularly those of equity, inclusion, and justice.

OBSERVATIONS

- **Committee's Dedication:** I want to name the high level of care, compassion, and attention to detail that the committee puts into its work. This is deeply felt and appreciated by the candidates, as I can attest from my own experience as both a candidate and observer of this committee.
- **Mentor Roles Vary Widely:** There is a significant range in the completeness, skill level, and engagement across mentors and the packets they support. The role of the mentor appears inconsistently understood and enacted, creating inequity in candidate experience.
- **Reader Summary Number Scale Interpretation:** Readers interpret the rating scale differently. This inconsistency can skew evaluations and diminish the clarity of feedback.
- **Critique Hesitation:** Committee members often seem hesitant to offer honest criticism, possibly out of a desire to avoid offending one another or the candidates. I find this noteworthy as cultural background can significantly impact the way a person offers and engages with criticism.
- **ARAOMC:** Candidates are tasked with integrating a significant amount of work that demonstrates their Anti Racism-Anti Oppression-Multiculturalism competency. This includes showing an aptitude in advocating for folx with marginalized identities, but does not require aptitude in actually centering the needs of people with those marginalized identities. This empowers white religious professionals who are unable to create a spiritually nourishing space for people of color. This type of performative anti-racism is "othering" and sends unintentional messages about belonging, causing simultaneous harm to other marginalized identities. This is such an important lens to include as a core requirement. However, the current requirements are designed for people with white, heteronormative identities. Harm reduction/prevention is important, but we also need more emphasis on inclusion.
- **Marginalized Experiences Overlooked:** In discussions as a committee and interviews with the candidates, white perspectives often dominate. I observed candidates' tendencies to "lift up" marginalized voices as a way to show their acquired anti-racism learnings, but this is tokenizing as it is done without exploring the actual support structures needed by people who identify as BIPOC or LGBTQIA+. Additionally,

different questions are needed for white and BIPOC candidates. For instance, candidates who identify as white could be asked to give an example of a time when they have been “called in” while BIPOC candidates could be asked to reflect on how they get support despite having to navigate white supremacy culture.

- **Credentialing Tools and Neurodiversity:** There is a growing need for better tools and understanding to support neurodiverse candidates in the credentialing process.
- **Power Dynamics with Clergy:** Credentialing candidates are not often given space to discuss power dynamics with ministers, particularly when clergy misconduct is involved. The intersection of race and gender significantly complicates this silence. This dynamic can have a huge impact on a candidate’s access to professional development and experiences, therefore making it difficult to impossible to develop the level of professional identity needed to achieve credentialed status.
- **Disproportionate Emphasis on White UU History:** BIPOC candidates are often asked to recall details about discredited or problematic white UU theologians, reinforcing a canon that doesn’t reflect their lived experience nor the foundations of their UU identity. This can create both cognitive dissonance and emotional distance from the credentialing process and Unitarian Universalism as a whole.

IMPACTS

- **Credentialing Process Does Not Center Spiritual & Educational Needs of BIPOC Candidates:** Many BIPOC educators experience the credentialing system as one that was written by and for white folks. For a potential BIPOC candidate, the credentialing process can feel like being forced to cross a metaphorical BIPOC picket line, not reflective of the values the credentialing program and Unitarian Universalism aim to uphold. This creates a spiritual divide in the way BIPOC UUs experience the credentialing process and UUism as a whole.
- **Anti-Racism Work Performed, Not Embodied:** There is a disconnect between the committee’s celebration of anti-racist resources and practices and the lived impact on BIPOC candidates who must perform or witness performative inclusion. This is important to note in the credential program design in its entirety. There is a strong emphasis on antiracism work in the required coursework, reading material, and portfolio. None of this is designed with the BIPOC candidate’s experience in mind.
- **Barrier of Uncompensated Work:** The lack of compensation or institutional support for credentialing is a barrier to access, particularly for those already under-resourced or in marginalized identities. It is worth noting that the Religious Education Credential does not officially translate to other work outside of Unitarian Universalism. (i.e. The credentialing program asks for Master’s of Education-level work, but is only formally recognized in professional UU spaces. This is a lot of time for a religious educator to put into higher education to have nothing to show for it if they need to make a career pivot. Thus, many choose to pursue alternative programs through accredited

institutions.)

- **Clergy Misconduct Unaddressed:** There is significant underreporting of clergy misconduct. Religious educators with marginalized identities are disproportionately affected. The systems in place make it difficult to report and easier to protect harmful leaders. It is important to keep the “halo effect” in mind when we lift up UU BIPOC leaders. Offering disproportionate and unearned reverence to a UU BIPOC leader can be both tokenizing and disincentivizing to potential candidates of color.
- **Internalized Learnings/Impacts:** Personally, I see how positionality around race and systemic dynamics influence how I internalize expectations, strengths, and perceived “weaknesses,” and in the ways I showed up as an observer on this committee.

SUGGESTIONS

- **Support for BIPOC Candidates:** Create clear, proactive structures for supporting BIPOC religious educators, including mentorship, pastoral care, and affinity-based check-ins.
- **Custom Compensation Letters:** Offer template letters or committee-supported advocacy around fair compensation for religious educators in process, so candidates don’t have to navigate this alone.
- **Debrief After Interviews:** Provide space for candidates to debrief with the committee after they have had time to process their credentialing experience, allowing them to process feedback and offer reciprocal reflections. The candidate is not in the right headspace to do this immediately after their interview.
- **Avoid Harmful Reader Assignments:** Do not assign two white readers to the packet of the only BIPOC candidate. As much as possible, attend to all identities when forming reader groups to avoid tokenization and potential harm.
- **Hire Pastoral Support:** Provide an optional chaplain or pastoral care person on credentialing days. The credentialing process is a long and emotional journey; emotions and anxieties run high on interview day. Offering pastoral support is a great way to integrate spiritual care for our religious professionals.
- **Clarify Observer Role:** Be more explicit about observer expectations and communication. Balancing multiple commitments can make it difficult to track involvement without clear scope and reminders. As the structure currently stands, it is hard for folks with full-time jobs and familial needs to make this commitment.

CLOSING REFLECTION

The work of credentialing is sacred. It is a gateway to full participation and leadership in our faith. But it must be an equitable and loving gateway, not a gatekeeping mechanism.

I offer these reflections in deep respect for the work already happening, and in shared commitment to a future that honors all of us, not just in theory, but in practice.