




SPEECHWRITERS OF COLOR

Our Historic Pivot Point: A Report on Diversity in Executive Branch Speechwriting

Speechwriters of Color

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Executive branch speechwriters wield enormous power. They can help shape public sentiment, set historic events in motion, and spur changes in public policy. They are, in many ways, the unseen narrators of our national story.

For most of our country's history, that story has been narrated by one subset of Americans. In a country in which more than half the population is female, 40 percent are non-white, and 7 percent identify as LGBTQ+, executive branch speechwriting is overwhelmingly the domain of straight, white men. Estimates vary, but data suggests that anywhere from 70 percent to 90 percent of speechwriters in the U.S. are white and an estimated 63 percent are male.

This lack of diversity has important implications for democracy, which can thrive only with robust and widespread civic participation. Whether consciously or not, speechwriters infuse their prose with aspects of their own identities, values, beliefs, and backgrounds. Often, that story resonates with a broad audience, but not always. And when it doesn't, large swaths of the population can feel alienated, their distinct needs, aspirations, and challenges absorbed into an overarching national narrative that bears little resemblance to their lived experience.

This is a missed opportunity to strengthen civic engagement and maximize the impact and reach of political communications. People are more receptive to ideas and more likely to engage in the political process if what they are hearing resonates with their own experience of the world. This can only be achieved if leaders engage speechwriters who reflect the diversity of the audiences they seek to address.

Fortunately, some significant progress has been made in recent years. Early into their administration, President Biden and Vice President Harris committed to building an administration that “looks like America,” and there have been important strides toward that goal, including the appointment of several speechwriters of color to prominent executive branch roles. For example, the current White House director of speechwriting is a person of color. For the first time in history, a Black woman holds the formal role of senior presidential speechwriter. The Office of the Vice President has employed multiple speechwriters of color. Also in the current administration, the directors of speechwriting at the Department of Housing and Urban Development have both been people of color. These developments are important building blocks in the foundation of what we seek to achieve—a wealth of diverse messengers that can serve as a model for change across industries. But they are only the beginning.



This report, drawn from a first-of-its-kind survey of current and former executive branch speechwriters, summarizes the current state of the profession and recommends strategies to bring more people of diverse backgrounds into these critical roles.

...Much of speechwriting was done through informal networks and word-of-mouth, which reified existing disparities. I've been encouraged with the [Biden-Harris] Administration to see them take a deliberate focus on racial diversity across the Administration, and am hopeful that will follow into speechwriting as well. It's a good first step, but there is much farther to go.

METHODOLOGY

A survey was sent via Qualtrics in March 2021 to over 100 current and former speechwriters who served in executive branch departments, including the Office of the President, White House, Department of State, Department of Defense, Department of Justice, Department of Treasury, and Department of Education.

Participants were identified through targeted outreach using professional networks, the Speechwriters of Color listserv, and LinkedIn.

Responses were received from 32 participants working in 20 different executive branch departments across five Presidential administrations. This relatively small sample size limits the degree to which the findings can be generalized. In addition, changes occurring between the time of the survey's administration in March 2021 and the present are not captured. Nevertheless, we believe the results generate new and important insights for the field.

"In a niche field like speechwriting, where reliance on networks is so critical to finding and seizing on hiring opportunities, I think the risk of the 'old boys club' effect is especially pronounced."

-Executive Branch Speechwriter

Summary of Results

- Survey participants were 81 percent white and 71 percent male
- 18 percent of respondents identified as LGBTQ+
- 41 percent of respondents were referred for their role by another speechwriter
- 63 percent of respondents reported having no speechwriters of color on their staff while in their role
- 81 percent of respondents strongly or somewhat disagreed that representation of speechwriters in the executive branch “is currently reflective of our nation in racial diversity.” When asked the same question about the time period in which they served, the percentage who strongly or somewhat disagreed with this statement was 88 percent.
- 53 percent of respondents strongly or somewhat disagreed that representation of speechwriters in the executive branch “is currently reflective of our nation in gender diversity.” When asked the same question about the time period in which they served, the percentage who strongly or somewhat disagreed with this statement was 59 percent.
- More than a third of respondents strongly or somewhat disagreed that the representation of speechwriters in the executive branch “is currently reflective of our nation in diversity of sexual orientation.” When asked the same question about the time period in which they served, the percentage who strongly or somewhat disagreed with this statement was 50 percent.
- More than half of respondents do not know any executive branch speechwriters who graduated from a Historically Black College or University (HBCU)

“Passively taking applications will not move the needle; it’s necessary to affirmatively build the pipeline”



Recommendations

Survey respondents were asked open-ended questions about how the executive branch can better engage speechwriters of color, as well as how students of color can prepare for careers in speechwriting. Below is a summary of recommendations drawn from their responses.

Recommendation: Mentorship

Lack of role models and/or awareness of speechwriting as a career were cited as potential barriers to engaging more speechwriters of color. To address this barrier, several respondents cited the need to connect aspiring speechwriters of color with current or former executive branch speechwriters who can support their professional development and provide career guidance.

Solution: Mentorship

Organizations can develop “career talk” mentorship programs with local organizations ranging from local National Speech and Debate Association affiliate leagues to providing “career talk” sessions at community organizations or classes that teach students civics or public speaking.

Recommendation: Internship Opportunities

Networks and professional contacts play an important role in the recruiting of executive branch speechwriters. However, because there has been relatively little diversity historically among executive branch speechwriters, these networks are often inaccessible to people of color. Internships and job shadowing programs were noted as ways for people of color to make valuable professional contacts and familiarize themselves with speechwriting as a career.

Solution: Internship Opportunities

Organizations can fund shadowing, internship, and fellowship opportunities for students to gain additional experience in learning the structure and process of a speechwriting job. Duties could range from supporting research to joining client calls and getting face time with a principal or drafting remarks, talking points, or outlines.

Recommendation: Targeted Outreach at HBCUs and MSIs

Partnering with Historically Black Colleges and Universities and Minority Serving Institutions can strengthen the pipeline of speechwriters of color by increasing awareness of the profession and introducing students to the skills required for a career in speechwriting.

Solution: Targeted Outreach at HBCUs and MSIs

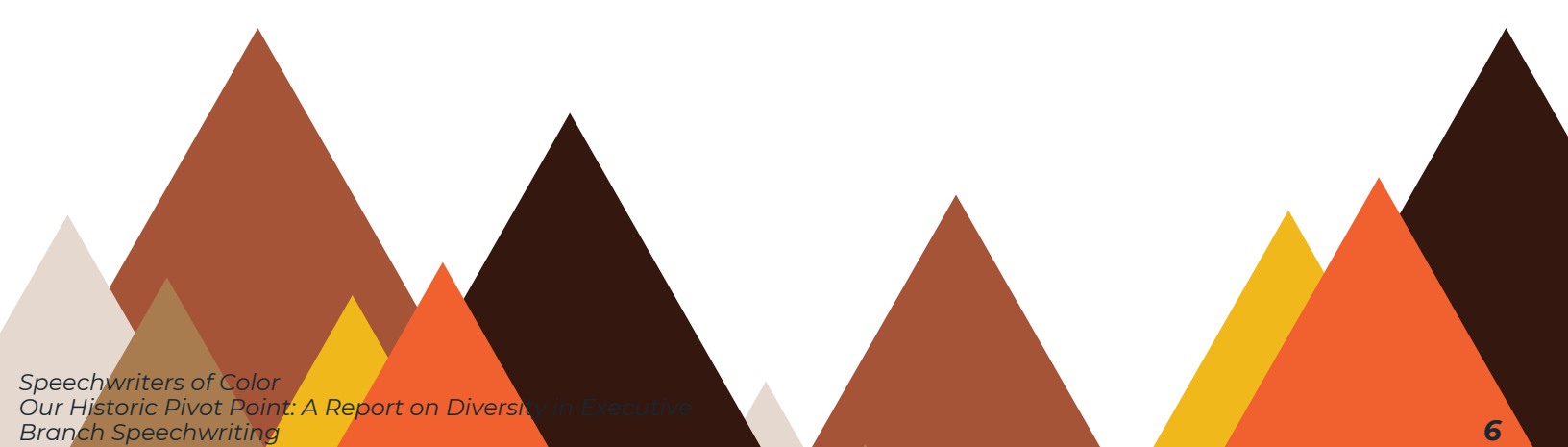
This can include on-campus events, recruitment, and guest lectures involving former or current executive branch speechwriters, as well as expanding academic courses dedicated to the craft of speechwriting.

Recommendation: Funding

In order to break into the profession, aspiring speechwriters often volunteer on political campaigns or work in unpaid internships. This model largely confines speechwriting to people from higher income backgrounds who can afford to work without pay. People of color, many of whom earn less on the dollar than their white counterparts, are often denied critical opportunities to build their portfolios and professional networks. Paid internships, scholarships, and other forms of funding, including need-based grants to offset the costs of conferences and workshops, can help aspiring speechwriters of color overcome the financial barriers that hamper their ability to gain a foothold in the profession.

Solution: Funding

Working with Speechwriters of Color to fund need-based grants for additional professional development opportunities.



Conclusion

Speechwriting has historically been accessible to only the most privileged Americans. This has important implications for the health of our democracy, which depends on robust representation of all citizens. When the discourse of our most prominent and powerful political leaders is filtered through the lens of one group almost exclusively, the experiences of whole swathes of the population can be systematically overlooked. The ramifications of this exclusion are far-reaching, ranging from disengagement from the political process to alienation from the broader community, and even the country at large. Bringing more speechwriters of color into the executive branch is a democratic imperative. Creating more mentorship and internship opportunities, engaging in targeted outreach at Historically Black Colleges and universities and Minority-Serving Institutions, and establishing funding sources that can help aspiring speechwriters of color offset the costs of professional development and networking are important steps toward increasing representation, in the executive branch and beyond.

Terry Edmonds was former president Bill Clinton's chief political speechwriter from 1995 to 2001 and the first Black speechwriter to work in the White House. During that time, President Clinton announced a welfare reform bill that Edmonds personally opposed.

Edmonds grew up in a low income neighborhood in Baltimore. "I had, I would say, a pretty tough childhood. I spent some time in a foster home. I know what it feels like to be evicted from your home. I know what welfare feels like because the family was on welfare for awhile," he has said.

After extensive reflection, Edmonds wrote the welfare reform speech, believing he could give the subject a more thoughtful treatment than someone without his lived experience.



About Speechwriters of Color

Speechwriters of Color is a global community of expert and aspiring communicators founded in 2020. Not all of us have the word speechwriter in our job title, but we all believe in the power of writing to make a difference.



About Michael Franklin, Co-Founder and Executive Director

Michael Franklin serves as the Executive Director of Speechwriters of Color. A proud graduate of Howard University, and a member of Gen Z, Michael has established himself as a credible leader in executive communications and strategic engagement. Michael's keen eye for developing strategies that wed traditional media approaches with innovative outreach and engagement strategies is especially prescient in a world where justice, equity, and democracy are under attack. In a constantly shifting media environment where leaders want to make a positive impact, Michael's ability to develop strategic communications plans and campaign strategies concurrently equips him to serve as an effective thought partner across industries.