The “Doyle Conversations about Anti-Racism in Higher Education” was a three-part conversation series held during the 2021 spring semester that brought together students, faculty, and staff at Georgetown University. Sponsored by the Doyle Engaging Difference Program, the series invited members of the Georgetown community to share strategies and tools related to anti-racist work across campus, building on a similar series of events held in fall 2020.

Events in the series explored anti-racist work in a wide variety of settings at Georgetown, from the curriculum and classroom pedagogy to student life. In each event, leaders from across the university reflected on their anti-racist work as part of a panel discussion. By fostering critical dialogue on anti-racism at the university, the event series helped to support the ongoing quest for racial justice at Georgetown.

This conversation series was sponsored by Georgetown University’s Doyle Engaging Difference Program, jointly administered by the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs and the Center for New Designs in Learning and Scholarship.

**KEY TAKEAWAYS**

- The ongoing work of anti-racism at Georgetown occurs in a wide variety of settings, from the curriculum to
classroom learning to student life. Students, faculty, and staff are engaged in the quest for racial justice across the university.

- Anti-racist work on the curricular level benefits from engagement with and input from students, faculty, and staff at the university. Integrating diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts into ongoing curricular work can help to support longer-term change.

- Diversity, equity, and inclusion work requires thoughtful reflection on the part of both participant and facilitator. Setting clear community guidelines can encourage spaces for productive dialogue.

- Incorporating a wide diversity of perspectives in the classroom curriculum can help students to connect course content with the ongoing work of anti-racism at and beyond Georgetown.

- There is a solid foundation of anti-racism work at Georgetown. However, further dialogue on racial justice at the university can be a productive way to share best practices and to chart a path for future action.

**ANTI-RACIST WORK IN OUR DEPARTMENTS AND CURRICULUM**

The first installment of the series included four panelists, who discussed ongoing anti-racist work in departments and across the Georgetown curriculum. Panelists included Amanda Yen (C’23), Edilma Yearwood (NHS), MC Chan (Biology), and Amanda Phillips (English).

“The is important work that needs to permeate all levels, not just the classroom. It has to permeate all levels of our community here at Georgetown.”

— Edilma Yearwood, School of Nursing and Health Studies

**Rethinking the Diversity Requirement**

Amanda Yen (C’23), an American studies major, is exploring how the undergraduate diversity requirement could be changed to better suit the needs of the Georgetown community through her work at the Hub for Equity and Innovation in Higher Education. Yen has been reviewing the diversity requirement, exploring best practices at other institutions, and reading literature on diversity education. Her work has resulted in surveys of the student body, exploring how undergraduates view the diversity requirement and what they want to see going forward.

As Yen explained,

“My role has involved listening to what other students at Georgetown want from this. Any diversity education at Georgetown should listen to what the students want to get out of it because, at the end of the day, this is our education, and I think that’s why it’s important that we as students be able to do this work.”
Inclusive Training at the Medical Center

Edilma Yearwood is chair of the Department of Professional Nursing Practice in the School of Nursing and Health Studies.

She will be launching a co-curricular series with students on social responsibility, as a way to approach diversity, equity, and inclusion in the nursing profession. The series will bring together students and faculty for small, intimate conversations where much of the groundwork for anti-racism and inclusion is often done.

The series aims to put the tenets of racial justice in conversation with the ethical principles that nursing students must consider as they interact with a wide diversity of patients in their careers.

When discussing her approach to anti-racism at the university, Yearwood explained: “My work at Georgetown not only as a department chair but as a faculty member has been to really see the potential of Georgetown but also to be realistic that we have a lot of work to do.”

Supporting Equity in STEM

MC Chan is assistant teaching professor in the biology department, where he is a member of the Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) working group.

The EDI working group began by assessing the department climate, asking faculty and students about where the committee should focus and what challenges the department is facing when it comes to inclusion. The working group has initiated changes to DEI statements in syllabi, sponsored events to discuss diversity in science, and started a journal club focused on questions of belonging in science, technology, engineering, and math.

“It is important for DEI work to be a part of the entire department from top to bottom, committee to committee, within undergraduate studies and graduate studies, and recruitment,” says Chan.

Now in its second year, the working group is looking to further integrate its findings and recommendations to encourage even more dialogue around DEI issues in the department.

Diversity of Faculty in the Humanities

Amanda Phillips is assistant professor in the English department and sits on the Equity, Inclusion, and Climate (EIC) committee in the department.

The EIC committee recently had an external review that fostered conversations about the identity of the English department. In response, Phillips has embarked on conversations with colleagues about how the department can build an environment where faculty from a wide variety of backgrounds can thrive.

Based on previous work at the University of California, Santa Barbara, Phillips put together a syllabus to support productive conversations about institutional inequality and assembled a reading list of resources about racial politics in higher education.

While the work of the EIC committee has been complicated by the virtual environment during the COVID-19 pandemic, Phillips is hopeful that these conversations will encourage more faculty
across the university to address this work head on.

**COMMUNITY BUILDING AND FACILITATION FOR ANTI-RACISM**

The second session of the series featured five panelists, who explored community building and facilitation for anti-racism at Georgetown. Panelists included Amina Sadural (SFS’22), Tahsin Amin (C’22), Sabrina Wesley-Nero (Program in Education, Inquiry and Justice), Amena Johnson (LGBTQ Resource Center), and Obella Obbo (Center for Multicultural Equity and Access).

“*Any space that strives to be anti-racist needs to be active because it’s not enough to be impartial, just as it’s not enough to be non-racist. We have to be actively anti-racist and shut down things that are harmful and perpetuating systems of injustice.*”

— Amina Sadural (SFS’22)

**Safe and Brave Spaces**

Amina Sadural (SFS’22) is majoring in culture and politics. She has worked with the Center for Multicultural Equity and Access (CMEA) through the Young Leaders in Education about Diversity (YLEAD) and Leaders in Education about Diversity (LEAD) programs.

Sadural strives to bring an anti-racist lens to her various roles as a facilitator, particularly in programming with first-year students. When facilitating in both classroom and retreat spaces, Sadural uses “brave” and “safe” spaces to establish community guidelines for discussion. Brave and safe spaces function like a traffic light: Green represents comfortable content, yellow represents potential discomfort when discussing challenging topics, and red represents a space with harm.

Entering a discussion space with a communal expectation that healthy disagreement starts from a place of seeking to understand—and not telling others how they should feel—can help to prevent spaces of harm, according to Sadural.

Sadural shared how we must be willing to be wrong when engaged in anti-racist work, since our experiences have been shaped by racism. We must try to be actively anti-racist each day through personal growth, healing, and reflection.

**Leaning in to Vulnerability**

The second student panelist, Tahsin Amin (C’22), is majoring in psychology and women’s and gender studies. She has been involved in YLEAD and LEAD; ESCAPE, a first-year transition and reflection program sponsored by the Office of Campus Ministry; and the diversity education programs at CMEA. Amin works to bring anti-racist approaches to all of her work in holding spaces for student reflection.

In facilitation, Amin values holding emotional space for participants to lean into their vulnerability and to foster a sense of compassion and understanding. Healing is difficult and messy at times, so Amin strives to create space for members of a group to tackle healing together and to build community. Her strategy involves creating community guidelines ahead of time, encouraging...
the use of “I statements,” and discussing the difference between intent and impact.

Amin also emphasized the importance of calling each other in to conversations rather than calling each other out for saying something that could be interpreted as hurtful. This process helps to ensure that participants do not shut down or feel embarrassed, allowing the group to serve as a community-building space.

**Embracing Discomfort, Building Community**

Dr. Sabrina Wesley-Nero is director of the Program in Education, Inquiry and Justice in the College and assistant director of the M.A. in Educational Transformation.

In anti-racist facilitation work, Wesley-Nero leans into the pedagogy of care, an approach toward psychological safety in learning that involves both strength and stretching. Strength comes from the way participants gain strength from each other, and stretching comes from the way participants leave the conversation changed.

Establishing that there will be discomfort is not meant to push participants out—it is, in fact, an important way to bring them into the conversation. This acknowledgement makes it easier for the group to grapple with conflict and to work collaboratively to restore and repair after a challenging discussion.

Wesley-Nero further stressed the importance of psychological care in order to generate healthier conversations. Commitment to living out the actions, values, and beliefs that are set in community guidelines is essential to building dialogue and doing the work of anti-racism. If we commit to living out these values when minor conflicts arise, according to Wesley-Nero, there will be more room for dialogue when larger issues emerge.

**Telling Hard Truths**

Dr. Amena Johnson is associate director of the LGBTQ Resource Center. Johnson stressed the importance of truth telling in discussions of race and racism. These conversations have to be rooted in the truth about history but also in the truth about the context of the conversation itself.

The truth may sometimes be difficult to maneuver, Johnson noted, especially when a participant says something hurtful but does not know why it was harmful. She acknowledged that this is at the essence of anti-racist work: understanding our impact and working together to build mutual understanding.

To foster generative conversations in the face of conflict, Johnson likes to think about replacing judgement with wonder—the goal becomes not just agreeing to disagree but committing ourselves to ask questions and to further our understanding.

Johnson also highlighted the importance of anger. Anger and tension in conversations around anti-racism means something needs to change. Facilitators must be willing to dive deep into the hurt and ask questions about the past that may be uncomfortable, according to Johnson, if they want to push for meaningful change.

**Taking Action for Change**

Obella Obbo is a program coordinator at the Center for Multicultural Equity and Access. Facilitating or participating in anti-racist work requires a certain level of fearlessness...
in order to actually make progress, according to Obbo. Some groups will stay away from making decisions to take action because they are scared of the outcome or the process of change.

Even though the process takes time, the longer we wait, the more unrest and distrust will build. We have to take meaningful action beyond conversations about anti-racism at Georgetown, Obbo said.

Obbo stressed that people involved in anti-racist work need to be well resourced in order to ensure that those with training in facilitation play a key role in these conversations. We need endurance to do this work, which requires individual, communal, and institutional investment.

To rethink how we operate, he says, we must navigate uncomfortable situations and acknowledge that this work comes with a capacity for harm.

**REFLECTIVE TEACHING PRACTICES FOR ANTI-RACIST WORK**

The final conversation in the series centered on reflective teaching practices for anti-racism. Panelists included Jade Ferguson (SFS’22), Ian Murakami (C’21), Abigail Lewis (Capitol Applied Learning Labs), and Ijeoma Njaka (Red House; Laboratory for Global Performance and Politics).

“Everyone knows enough to participate, everyone knows what they are good at, and everyone can figure out a way to participate in an anti-racist movement or an organization.” — Ian Murakami (C’21)

**Pedagogy as Resistance**

Jade Ferguson (SFS’22) is majoring in culture and politics. Creating inclusive, safe spaces for peers and searching for opportunities rooted in embodied learning can help contribute to healthy reflection, according to Ferguson.

At Georgetown, Ferguson leans into the shame, embarrassment, and discomfort that often comes with conversations around racism. But some forms of dialogue, such as strategies that “call people in,” often inadvertently expect individuals to forgive those who may have hurt them, according to Ferguson. These have the potential to delegitimize marginalized identities in the classroom.

Moving toward an anti-racist pedagogy means recognizing that “subjectivity can also be objectivity in the sense that elitist academe is too often focused on having evidence-based research to validate racism when the lived experiences of people of color and students in the classroom are just as valid.”

Ferguson cited “fugitive pedagogy” as means for experimenting with a more nuanced approach to anti-racist dialogue. Fugitive pedagogy challenges mainstream narratives through more creative modes of expression, such as spoken-word poetry and theater.

**Moving from Knowing to Feeling**

Ian Murakami (C’21) is majoring in government. For Murakami, reflection on racism in our everyday lives is part of the process of thinking and acting beyond surface-level change. Moving from knowing to feeling—a means to empathize and connect with others in
the conversation—is an important step in anti-racist work.

Reflective dialogue in the Georgetown classroom can be a transformative experience, according to Murakami. For example, he recalled a professor who structured discussions on global affairs and economics around defining who we are as a people and where we are going in the international space.

Growing up in a community where conversations on anti-racism were not the norm, Murakami has also appreciated learning with and from others at Georgetown through discussions outside the classroom, such as the anti-racist dialogues hosted by the Center for Social Justice Research, Teaching and Service.

These experiences led Murakami to involvement with the Native American Student Association, where he has learned how to recognize his own needs while also feeling the need to protect others—a delicate balance for anyone engaged in anti-racist work.

**Learning through History**

Abigail Lewis is director of the Capitol Applied Learning Labs, a Georgetown program housed in downtown Washington, DC.

As a trained historian, she reflects often on the stories of others and those who are silenced by history, thinking critically about how to spotlight those voices. Bringing the stories of marginalized people to the forefront of the classroom experience fosters empathy and gives students a better understanding of structural inequalities that we all experience differently.

In the classroom, Lewis attempts to challenge historical narratives by incorporating a wide diversity of personal narratives, connecting historical representation to anti-racist pedagogy. She also reflected on her experiences in incorporating Black feminist authors into her syllabi to help expose students to potentially unfamiliar perspectives.

**From Reflection to Empathy and Action**

Ijeoma Njaka is senior project associate for equity-centered design at the Red House and inclusive pedagogy specialist at the Laboratory for Global Performance and Politics.

As a person of color in predominately white spaces, Njaka is interested in reflection with people who may find it difficult to engage in discussions of race—the key is leaning into the discomfort and finding ways to point toward actionable change.

Telling others directly that they are racist does not allow them to respond well, so Njaka has learned to foster reflection without such explicit language.

For example, she often employs art as a means to raise awareness of racial justice issues. Art is a driving force in her work with the In Your Shoes program at the laboratory. The program brings together students from Georgetown University and Patrick Henry College. Students discuss their perspectives in pairs and then perform their partner’s words. Njaka hopes students will remember what it means to embody a person who is different from them.
CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

The ability to bring students, staff, and faculty together to engage in conversations about anti-racist praxis was a welcome opportunity in the virtual environment, the other challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic notwithstanding. Participants identified and shared the practical tools needed to continue anti-racist work in their spheres of influence as students, staff, and faculty.

Building on the groundwork from the fall 2020 conversation series, the Doyle Program compiled a list of resources for future explorations, and it continues to map efforts happening across Georgetown as a means of connecting to and with each other. As the university transitions back to in-person learning in fall 2021, the Doyle Program looks forward to continued opportunities to work together to cultivate the values of social justice that are central to Georgetown.

EVENT PARTICIPANTS

Anti-Racist Work in Our Departments and Curriculum
February 18, 2021

MC Chan (Biology)
Amanda Phillips (English)
Edilma Yearwood (NHS)
Amanda Yen (C’23)

Community Building and Facilitation for Anti-Racism
March 15, 2021

Tahsin Amin (C’22)
Amena Johnson (LGBTQ Resource Center)
Obella Obbo (Center for Multicultural Equity and Access)
Amina Sadural (SFS’22)
Sabrina Wesley-Nero (Program in Education, Inquiry and Justice)

Reflective Teaching Practices for Anti-Racist Work
April 12, 2021

Jade Ferguson (SFS’22)
Abigail Lewis (Capitol Applied Learning Labs)
Ian Murakami (C’21)
Ijeoma Njaka (G’19, Red House; Laboratory for Global Performance and Politics)
About this Brief

This event summary highlights contributions to the virtual event series “Doyle Conversations about Anti-Racism in Higher Education,” held during the spring 2021 semester. The series was hosted by the Doyle Engaging Difference Program at Georgetown University.

About the Doyle Engaging Difference Program

The Doyle Engaging Difference Program encourages Georgetown students and faculty to address cultural, religious, and other forms of difference through learning opportunities inside and outside the classroom.

The program began in fall 2009 with a generous gift and accompanying vision from William J. Doyle (C’72, former chair of the Georgetown University Board of Directors) to see the university deepen its Catholic and Jesuit commitment to diversity and dialogue. Now in its second decade, the Doyle Program continues to foster space for critical discussion and debate on intercultural and interreligious difference, enabling Hoyas to become engaged global citizens in an increasingly pluralistic world.

For additional event content, see doyle.georgetown.edu/doyle-events.