



December 8, 2020

Dear members of the Niagara University community,

As the fall semester winds down, I wanted to share with you a recap of the work being done in response to the recommendations presented by the Identifying and Dismantling Racial Injustice Task Force this past summer.

While I am extremely proud of the engagement in this work from the entire campus community and grateful for the work that has taken place thus far, this is only the beginning. Over the past several months, we have been laying the groundwork to build a community that is not only inclusive, but is anti-racist and embodies the true Vincentian mission and spirit.

As we prepare for the holidays, I am pleased to reflect on our progress as we move forward with intention and purpose.

1. **Education and Training**—The task force working group has developed a series of training and education sessions for staff, students, and faculty that will cover a number of themes. In addition, a campus-wide survey has been distributed to assess the community's awareness about anti-racism and identifying/understanding biases.
  - a. There will be a two-part training session for staff centered on how to have meaningful conversations about race and identity. This training will be held on Dec. 15 and 16 from 10:00 am-noon.
  - b. Last month, the student subcommittee hosted a virtual student training on intersectionality.
  - c. The faculty-led committee is working on a training and education series that will focus on a variety of areas, such as athletics and racial justice, intercultural pedagogy, etc. Dr. Patrick Tutka and Dr. Haoua Hamza have both agreed to present next semester.
  - d. A book club that will feature literary works focused on anti-racism has been established. The first book will be "How to be Anti-Racist" by Dr. Ibram X. Kendi, and the first 15 members to join the book club will receive a free copy. The book club discussion is scheduled for Friday, Feb. 5, 2021, in Bisgrove 250 or via livestream.
  - e. The Department of Athletics has partnered with The Institute for Sport and Social Justice, a global leader in leadership, equity, and social justice training, as part of a department-wide training and education series for student-athletes, coaches, administrators, and staff.
2. **Enrollment and Marketing**—Enrollment Management's marketing division will begin targeted initiatives to promote diversity, including:
  - a. Developing, in partnership with the university's diversity committee, a "celebrational" calendar to amplify diverse voices and images.
  - b. Streamlining the university's capability to speak on current issues so that it can enter critical conversations about racism, equity, and inclusion more quickly and in more than a "one-off" fashion.

- c. Amplifying and including diverse voices and improving BIPOC (Black or Indigenous Person of Color) representation throughout the university by:
  - i. Choosing models and images with heightened intention. For example, according to the census, the U.S. population is 18% Hispanic or of Latin American origin, 13% Black or African American, 6% Asian, and 3% multiracial. Those figures can inform local markets and submarkets, as well as creative assets and representation.
  - ii. Identifying, developing, and helping BIPOC content creators and creators from other underrepresented groups to create content that is shareable on the main university channels.
  - iii. Marketing employment positions on social media and other media that is heavily patronized in BIPOC markets, and featuring BIPOC supervisors, administrators, and members of hiring committees.
  - iv. Uplifting marginalized voices by identifying and enlisting BIPOC followers, especially alumni, on our social media pages, and seeking out and sharing user-generated content from underrepresented followers or their networks to increase their volume and improve representation.
  
- 3. **Academic Programs**—One of the task force’s recommendations was to review the Africana/Black Studies minor to see how it can be better supported for students.
  - a. Christopher Lee, Ph.D., associate professor of political science, has taken the lead on this effort, which included:
    - i. Looking at options to expand the list of courses available in the minor.
    - ii. Working with different departments in Arts and Sciences to examine which courses may fit the minor.
    - iii. Ensuring that all classes currently listed in the minor are still being offered with reasonable frequency.
    - iv. Creating a working group to find opportunities for Africana/Black Studies program offerings outside the College of Arts and Sciences.
    - v. Working to strengthen and create additional internship and community work opportunities for students in the program.
  - b. In addition, the College of Arts and Sciences has also created a new “Inequality, Race, and Justice” minor program of study. The five-course program will include three classes from sociology and two selected courses from history, political science, or criminal justice.
  
- 4. **Academic Hires** – The College of Arts and Sciences has added two new faculty members whose teaching and research areas focus on race, systemic racism and immigration. Dr. Carrie Glenn, has joined the history department as assistant professor of history, and her research has focused on slave trades, and exploitation of slaves in the Caribbean. Dr. Sevsem Cicek-Okay joins the sociology department as an assistant professor of sociology. Her research focus is on race, ethnicity, poverty and immigration. These faculty members strengthen the university’s commitment to an expanded curriculum that will include options for coursework with themes on social justice. Both faculty members will join the Niagara University community in the spring 2021 semester.

5. **Increased Financial Support**—The task force recommended increasing financial aid support for BIPOC students with a developed and engaged program focused on providing equal support and opportunities for BIPOC students.
  - a. This semester, we announced the establishment of the Fannie Lou Hamer Freedom Retention Scholarship, which will financially support students of color as they complete their degrees and establish and pursue their career goals. Through a review and restructuring of an existing endowed scholarship from the Vincentian Community, the Hamer scholarship will receive an immediate draw and may begin to assist Niagara University students as early as this spring.
  
6. **Race Relations and Social Justice Panel Discussions**—Increasing dialogue on campus was important to the task force, and one of the recommendations was to launch a series of forums/panels about race relations, social justice initiatives, and multiethnic culture to help the campus community understand and learn from one another while becoming more tolerant and inclusive.
  - a. This fall, through the Ostapenko Center, Niagara University students hosted a three-part series, titled “How does racial injustice affect you, an NU student?”
  - b. The Social Justice Speaker Series, in conjunction with Burning Books of Buffalo, engaged the campus and the broader community in discussions about political and social justice struggles by introducing the ideas of the individuals who have been active participants and who have led them.
  - c. The “Transformative Visions” presidential speaker series was established and hosted a number of high-profile guests, including Soffiyah Elijah, executive director of the Alliance of Families of Justice and the first Black woman to serve as executive director of the Correctional Association of New York; Denis McDonough, former White House chief of staff under President Barack Obama and former White House deputy national security advisor; and Dr. Wayne A. I. Frederick, president of Howard University, the nation’s leading historically Black university.
  
7. At this year’s [Vincentian Heritage Convocation](#), we had the opportunity to recognize [Heather C. McGhee](#) with an honorary degree for her strong commitment to bringing scholarship, passion, and innovative practice to eliminating racism and championing the rights of the marginalized. Heather also delivered the convocation address, titled “Environmental Justice and Racism.” She is a distinguished senior fellow of the public policy organization Demos, an influential voice in the media, and an NBC contributor. She was a featured speaker at the inaugural Obama Foundation Summit in October 2017, and is the author of “The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together,” which will be published in early 2021.
  
8. **Increased Funding for Multicultural Affairs Advisory Board**—Based on a recommendation of the task force, the Student Affairs sector has restructured the funding model to provide resources and support for student diversity and social justice initiatives.
  - a. A percentage of the Student Services Fee will be directly allocated to the Multicultural Affairs Advisory Board (MAAB), offering it greater governance in supporting new and innovative programming. This change in funding procedures will provide a dramatic shift in providing support to diverse educational and social programming.

9. **Naming Conventions and Language**—It is important that university names reflect recommended common language. For example, to better align with society’s understanding of equality and equity, the Ostapenko Center for Race, Equality & Mission has been renamed the Ostapenko Center for Race, Equity, & Mission. Equity is used when discussing racial disparities in order to describe how additional resources are warranted to address the impact of structural oppression and marginalization.
10. **Creating a More Holistic Approach for Non-NUOP BIPOC and At-risk Students** – Student Affairs and NUOP are collaborating with campus partners to explore broadened holistic support for BIPOC and at-risk students. The proposed program would utilize a care coordination approach to provide academic and financial support, counseling, mentoring, and career and professional services to expand opportunities for non-NUOP BIPOC and at-risk students. It is anticipated that the expanded program will begin in the summer of 2021.
11. **Niagara Falls Social Justice Commission**—I was honored to be asked by Mayor Robert Restaino to serve as a member of his Niagara Falls Social Justice Commission. The commission is addressing inequality across a variety of platforms in the community. The task of the commission is to present a blueprint to address inequality in our region. The group includes leaders from across a number of sectors in the region, including healthcare, education, housing, and employment; as well as members of the university community. I expect to hear more on the next steps from Mayor Restaino in the early part of the new year.

As we look to the actions for next academic year (2021-22), one of the recommendations from the task force was to develop a new sector, with leadership at the level of vice president, focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion to begin in the 2021-22 academic year. A few highlights are:

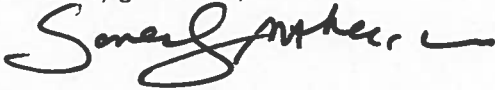
- a. This week, we presented to the Board of Trustees the new position of vice president for diversity, equity, and inclusion, which it approved.
  - i. A national search will commence in early 2021. The initial phase of the search will include the finalization of the search committee, a national search for and vetting of candidates, interviews, and screening.
- b. The task force working group has continued its work in developing the critical pieces to create this new sector. The group has:
  - i. Identified the disparate campus equity and inclusion efforts, initiatives, and functions, and grouped these functions under direct report and dotted-line authority to provide the basis for understanding the scope, potential reporting structure, and related functions for the new DEI sector.
  - ii. Created an organizational flow chart for the sector, with job summaries for each position.
  - iii. Identified related functions that will remain in their existing structures but coordinate efforts with the new vice president for Diversity, Equity & Inclusion. These include general hiring and onboarding, and the activities of the Ostapenko Center for Race, Equity & Mission, the

Levesque Institute, and the Office for Multicultural Affairs. This represents my commitment to the development of critical interdependencies across sectors of the university.

These are progressive actions, imbedded in the university's strategic plan and guided by the foundational work of the Identifying and Dismantling Racial Injustice Task Force. I am extremely pleased to say that this is just the tip of the iceberg, and we will continue to support this work as it moves forward. Together, we will walk with our brothers and sisters who suffer personal and systemic oppression and violence, and we will build our collective strategy and action to contest racism and racial violence.

Thank you again for your commitment in this work and for deepening the roots of our Catholic and Vincentian mission.

With every good wish,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "James J. Maher", with a horizontal flourish extending to the right.

James J. Maher, C.M.