

RACIAL EQUITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE COMMITTEE PROGRESS REPORT

July 6, 2021

In the University of Houston President Renu Khator's June 10, 2020 [message](#) to the campus, expressing sympathy, sorrow and frustration in the aftermath of the George Floyd killing, she announced that she would establish a university-wide group that would be charged with asking the right questions, facilitating dialogue and generating actionable ideas for UH to be part of the solution to bring about change.

She also requested that all deans and directors host dialogues, listen and reflect on necessary steps to building inclusion. And, she committed to convening Houston Guided Pathways to Success, a consortium of 13 public university and community colleges in greater Houston, to discuss the role and responsibility of higher education in combating racism. This dialogue took place on July 9, 2020, with Ruth Simmons, President of Prairie View A & M University, as the featured keynote participant.

By July 6, 2020, the Racial Equity and Social Justice Committee (RESJC) was appointed by the President. Elwyn Lee, vice president of Neighborhood and Strategic Initiatives, and Robert McPherson, dean of the College of Education, were named co-chairs for the group. The 28 [committee members](#) consisted of UH faculty, staff, students and alumni along with several resource participants from the University's Marketing and Communications, Student Affairs and Enrollment Services, General Counsel and Governmental Relations offices. The July 6 charge to the RESJC was very broad:

“The Racial Equity and Social Justice Committee (RESJC) is charged to assist the university in evaluating its own policies, practices and attitudes as they relate to racial equities and social justice. While doing so, it is also charged to identify ways in which the University of Houston can help identify and respond to the economic, social and cultural challenges affecting the quality of life in the city of Houston, the state of Texas and the world through its education, research and service.”

With its internal and external focus, the committee was specifically charged to undertake four specific tasks, which are described below. The RESJC leadership created five work groups to address the specific tasks. In consideration of COVID-related budget concerns, President Khator asked the RESJC leadership to leverage existing university and community resources to conduct the work. She also provided financial support to hire a graduate assistant and cover other costs incurred by the committee in its work.

1. Create awareness by inviting speakers, holding forums and town hall meetings and taking a baseline view of what is currently happening in the university to tackle in the area of racial equity and social justice.

To address this charge, Work Group I Dialogue, chaired by April Peters-Hawkins an associate professor in the College of Education, and Work Group II Speakers, chaired by Lisa Schumate, the associate vice president and general manager of Houston Public Media, were established. The work groups were created to organize campus conversations and invite experts on critical issues to share their wisdom, respectively. By the time these work groups were organized, it was apparent that many other campus units had already formed committees or task forces, which had held or were planning a plethora of town halls, forums and speakers throughout the University.

Examples included the Staff Council Diversity Equity and Inclusion Committee that sponsored town halls and a program on macroaggressions. The Center for Diversity and Inclusion (CDI) held campus town halls and hosted specific programs on topics such as discovering your own cultural identity. The College of Liberal Arts and Social Services (CLASS) quickly established a Special Committee on Race and Social Justice that organized a lecture series on the following topics:

1. Racial Dimensions of the COVID-19 Pandemic
2. Sports Activism and Social Justice
3. Race, Criminalization and Policing
4. When Black Women Led the Fight for Voting Rights
5. Race and Mass Incarceration
6. COVID-19 and Reliance on Undocumented Labor
7. Racial Capitalism

The Graduate College of Social Work established a yearlong series of conversations exploring abolition as a framework for change, conversations about challenging systems and reimagining ways to achieve justice. Examples include conversations about the LGBTQ black experience; a social worker's history of working with police, prisons, and foster care; and a felon's firsthand insight into the harms from incarceration.

The Women's, Gender & Sexuality Studies program sponsored a panel discussion on anti-Asian racism and sexism. Most of these programs and ensuing discussions involved local and national experts in the topic from distinguished universities. Many of these programs served the UH community of students, faculty and staff.

After learning about these already initiated programs, the RESJC's Work Group 1 organized a well-planned virtual dialogue about the Black church that involved campus and local community participants and breakout sessions.

Summarily, many campus units have invited knowledgeable speakers to address topics of social disparity and social injustice. The Provost Office has done this for years and the 2020-2021 academic year was no exception. With the office's financial support, Baraki Sellers the young attorney and former representative in the South Carolina legislature spoke virtually to the campus. Her office joined with the UH Law Center and the Graduate College of Social Work to bring human rights activist Nadia Murad to the campus. Ms. Murad is the recipient of the 2018 Nobel Peace Prize and the leading voice internationally for survivors of genocide and sexual violence. The Sociology Department in Action Lecture Series invited Professor Rashawn Ray from the Brookings Institute in Maryland to speak on pursuing racial equity in policing. He offered evidence-based policy prescriptions that could help transform policing in America. The Center for Public History lecture series brought Professor Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez from UT Austin to discuss Oral Histories of Latinx and African American Health in the COVID-19 Pandemic.

RESJC Work Group II organized a few carefully planned speaker events that complement the rich speaker environment that already exists. Partnering with Houston Public Media, which aired a four-hour PBS documentary on the Black church, the RESJC landed an exclusive one-hour conversation with the noted scholar, speaker and producer of the documentary, Harvard Professor Henry Louis Gates. The program attracted over 48,000 viewers and listeners. The second speaker event organized by RESJC, in collaboration with the Cullen College of Engineering, addressed racial and general disparities in STEM college education. The panelists explored strategies for diversifying and strengthening the STEM workforce. As the semester came to a close, RESJC organized a forum on the anniversary of George Floyd's funeral, June 9, entitled "George Floyd: Where Are We After One Year?" It featured UH scholars in psychology (Professor Rheeda Walker), law (Professor Sandra Guerra-Thompson) and comparative cultures (Professor Nicholas De Genova), along with Houston Police Chief Troy Finner and Larry Payne, Chair of the Mayor's Task Force on Police Reform.

Future event topics being explored include disrupting the school-to-prison pipeline and voting.

As noted previously, most campus colleges and other units established a task force or committee and hosted forums and speakers for their respective constituencies. Noting that there was considerable topic redundancy and opportunity to better leverage college and university resources, the RESJC leadership organized a meeting of college diversity and inclusion representatives to stimulate conversation, inspire future collaboration and better leverage university resources to serve a broader section of the university community. To create more awareness of the various diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives, programs and services at UH, RESJC is working with UH Marketing and Communications to establish a webpage. The page will serve as a resource directory and include academic programs, self-learning resources and volunteer opportunities, as well.

The Center for Diversity and Inclusion (CDI) hosted two campus conversations, specifically following George Floyd's death in June of 2020: one for students, and one for faculty and staff. Almost 300 people attended these events, which were created to provide some historical context to the systemic oppression of people of color and served as an emotional processing space. CDI also hosted a workshop in July to provide tips on how to have conversations about race, with 160 participants from UH. CDI also hosted a campus conversation in March 2021, after the murder of six members of the Asian-American Pacific Islander community (AAPI). CDI has also provided 25 consultations on campus with faculty and staff groups to open a dialogue about race and has provided diversity and social justice training to more than 450 UH student-athletes through UH Athletics. CDI also provided a racial justice session for the University Sponsored Organizations and Affiliated Student Organizations leaders, as well as the resident and office assistants within the Student Housing and Residential Life.

Of special note is the outreach of Houston Public Media (HPM). Throughout the year, on multiple media platforms, HPM reaches millions with programs that address racial equity and social justice issues. A recent example is "I SEE U," an HPM produced Saturday podcast that premiered May 15. The new series strives to bring us closer together by allowing people to learn about cultural issues and ethnic perspectives with which they may not be familiar.

2. Review and advise the President on the work product of the work groups established because of conversations with student government as well as with the authors of student petitions.

There were four work groups appointed by President Khator before the RESJC was appointed and fully operational. The sexual harassment work group's work product involved incorporating governmental dictates into the policies and procedures and was not reviewed by the RESJC. Each of the three remaining work groups were comprised of between 13 and 18 members and met numerous times during the summer and early fall of 2020. RESJC was impressed with the diligence of the work group members and the amount of time spent discussing the issues.

- a. UH Police Department Work Group – RESJC reviewed the work group report and spoke with the work group co-chairs and the UH Police Chief Ceasar Moore at length. RESJC is fully supportive of the recommendations that included: 1. Review and explore how police can have increased opportunities to engage with students so that there is a better understanding of police training and procedures; 2. Consider expanding student participation on the UHPD Safety and Security Committee; 3. Review and potentially revise the process for reporting and handling UHPD complaints with the goal of making it easier; and 4. Ensure that personnel continues to receive extensive training in implicit bias, anti-discrimination and trauma-based investigations.

- b. Freedom of Expression Work Group – This group grappled with how UH can best educate the community on the UH Freedom of Expression Policy, the First Amendment and hate speech. The members agreed on recommendations that would add clarity and transparency such as workshops, updating the FAQs with situational examples, and developing a comprehensive website. The RESJC fully supports these recommendations.
 - c. UH Diversity and Inclusion Training Work Group – This group reviewed the admirable array of UH education, training, workshops and events in the area of diversity, equity and inclusion hosted by colleges and departments. Student Affairs centers, especially the Center for Diversity and Inclusion (CDI), provide education and training in allyship, privilege, feminism, gender equity, diversity, bias and more. Many of the CDI programs are now available to departments upon request. However, there is no staff requirement for diversity, equity and inclusion training. RESJC believes that whether education opportunities should be broadened and required should be studied further. We agree that UH should consider adding questions related to diversity and inclusion to the periodic faculty, staff and student climate surveys. The work group recommended that UH should create greater awareness of UH diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives, possibly through a comprehensive website and that a visible campus campaign should be considered to build a sense of community and commitment to the issue – all ideas the RESJC embraces.
 - d. Registered Student Organization Policy and Practices Review Work Group – This group conducted a review of event and registered student organization (RSO) policies for social and other types of events that take place on campus. The work group recommended revisions to the language in various policies to ensure policies are equitable and consistent. Student leaders also voiced concern over the perception that events sponsored by culturally based student organizations had a higher degree of security requirements. Working with UHPD, the group developed the “RSO Event Security Minimum Guidelines Based on Attendance.”
3. ***Identify faculty and staff expertise, resources, best practices and research findings both within our institution and elsewhere that can be used to advance the cause of social justice and equity in our community, the city and beyond.***

Resources – In the immediate aftermath of the George Floyd killing there were worldwide demonstrations and a call for action. Many educational institutions quickly announced activities and new initiatives, particularly at schools with robust discretionary budgets and a long-neglected history of racial disparity. For the campus members, RESJC has urged them to do what many thoughtful activists have urged and

that is to first engage in self-learning. Toward that end, RESJC established Work Group III – Resources (chaired by Monica Perales, associate professor and director of the Center of Public History) charged with developing a list of [resources](#) that would allow individuals to learn about racial equity and social justice issues and some of their possible solutions.

President Khator’s Racism and COVID-19 Research Program – The President has established a \$1 million grant program for UH faculty research addressing (1) racial equity and/or (2) COVID-19 issues. In the area of racial equity, eight small grants of \$10,000 or less were awarded to faculty from CLASS, the College of Education and the Law Center. Their grant topics include racial bias in forgiveness, mapping enslavement in early colonial Mexico, the effectiveness of social media for engaging in anti-racism, and race-related housing issues. Seven large grants, ranging from \$46,000 to \$66,000 were awarded to faculty from CLASS, Pharmacy, Nursing and Education. Their research topics cover culturally relevant risk factors for suicide among Black youth, understanding the impact of racism on refugees, addressing racism in the juvenile justice system and Houston’s Black freedom struggle.

Ten small grants of \$10,000 or less were awarded for research on COVID-19. These awards went to faculty in CLASS, Natural Sciences and Mathematics (NSM), Education, and Technology. Topics of their grants include misinformation through social media communication, the digital divide and Latinx parents, the effectiveness of lockdowns and mask mandates, and first-generation college students’ experiences. There were six large grants of \$67,200 each awarded to faculty in Engineering, NSM, Pharmacy and CLASS. Their research topics included the development of a COVID-19 vaccine, antiviral drug screening for the virus and methods for COVID-19 diagnostics.

Examples of Additional UH Research Addressing Racial Equity or Social Justice Issues

- a. HEALTH-Helping People Achieve a LifeTime of Health Institute, College of Education
- b. COVID-19 Vaccine Hesitancy Research, College of Medicine
- c. Mental Health in Communities of Color, College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences

4. Building on the many outreach programs that already exist, the committee is also directed to develop a strategy for the creation of university partnerships with a wide variety of community agencies and institutions and the business community, to build a united sense of purpose and capacity to disassemble the racial barriers that so profoundly and negatively affect our community.

To determine what outreach programs exist and other social equity activities, RESJC Work Group V (chaired by Jarrod Henderson, instructional associate professor in the College of Engineering) developed a short questionnaire that RESJC sent to the academic colleges and the large non-academic campus units. Essentially, the deans were asked what their respective colleges did immediately after the George Floyd killing, what ongoing programs were already in existence, and finally, what new initiatives or activities have been developed or are in the planning stage. Overall, the reports received were very impressive.

With respect to the outreach programs, below are just a few of the many outreach efforts at the University of Houston.

- A. College of Medicine
 - COVID-19 summit with community stakeholders and leaders to devise action plans
 - Partnerships with community organizations to provide vaccinations
 - Efforts to provide food and water to low-income families
- B. College of Education
 - TOUCH Obesity Prevention Program
 - Advancing Community Engagement and Service
- C. Third Ward Initiative
 - Partnerships with Change Happens, SHAPE Community Center, Third Ward Schools, Project Row Houses and others
- D. C. T. Bauer College of Business
 - SURE – entrepreneurial training for low-income individuals
 - Small Business Development Center
 - Prison Entrepreneurship Program
- E. Katherine G. McGovern College of the Arts
 - Center for Socially Engaged Art
 - Mobile Music program
- F. Cullen College of Engineering
 - St. Elmo’s Academy - STEM program targeting Black/Hispanic boys
- G. Graduate College of Social Work
 - Social work internships throughout the region
 - Healthy Start program to reduce maternal and infant mortality
- H. Office of the Provost
 - Guided Pathways to Success collaborative with area community colleges designed to increase and accelerate smooth two-year to four-year college transfers.
 - Cougar Initiative to Engage
- I. Honors College
 - Bonner Leaders Program - mentoring; serving unused dining food to the needy
 - Community Health Worker Program
- J. Law Center

- Criminal Justice Institute
 - Juvenile and Children’s Advocacy Project
 - Education Rights Clinic
 - Center for Children, Law, and Policy
 - Pre-Law Pipeline Program
- K. College of Nursing
- Health fair for homeless veterans
 - Administered COVID-19 vaccinations in Fort Bend County
- L. Student Affairs
- Metropolitan Volunteer Program
 - Annual MLK Days of Service
- M. Athletic Department
- Student-athletes visit local schools to read to students and serve as role models
- N. Alumni
- UH Alumni Affiliated Associations collaborated with campus groups on discussion and forums.
 - The UH Black alumni met with Black undergraduates to listen and provide advice after the George Floyd killing.
 - Alumnus Dennis Kennedy is founder of the National Diversity Council that organizes conferences and trainings throughout the year.

ACTIONS

Student-Led Action -- Early on, there was a desire of several RESJC members to not just talk about disparities but to take action that had the potential to move the needle (indirectly or directly). This feeling was felt by many of our students as well. Work Group IV–Action, led by Asha Sowell director of Career Development in the Athletic Department, collaborated with student-athletes, the Student Government Association, the staff Black Leadership Network and others to put forth a vigorous nonpartisan voter registration campaign. This was followed by an effort to notify residents in the adjacent community about the location of voting sites. There was also a collaborative initiative with Third Ward organizations to convince residents to return their census forms, so the local government would receive its fair share of funds needed for use toward reducing social inequities. Along the way, there were two student-led campus walks and rallies to stimulate awareness of social disparities and the need to register to vote. When the Pandemic hit, SGA and other students volunteered to participate in food and mask distributions.

Historical and Cultural Sensitivity

- UH has petitioned the city to change the name of Calhoun Road to Martin Luther King Blvd. John C. Calhoun, a former vice president, was a staunch defender of slavery.

- UH has applied for a state historical marker to acknowledge the Turkey Day Classic, the Thanksgiving Day game between Yates and Wheatley High School from 1947 to 1966. It took place in Jeppesen Stadium, which once stood where TDECU stadium now stands. Over 20,000 people would attend those games. For many in the Black community, that land is sacred ground. The state historical commission will decide on the historical marker request in December.
- On May 25, 2021, the anniversary of George Floyd’s murder, RESJC, Staff Council, Faculty Senate and the Student Government Association sponsored “Moments of Remembrance.” The UH Library Carillon bells rang nine times in one-minute intervals and were followed by a moment of silent reflection to encourage the campus community to think about what we have lost, how far we have come and how we might collectively work to reduce racial and social inequities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

While there is more work to be done, the RESJC recommends the following:

1. Increase transparency for diversity, equity and inclusion efforts - While there is much worthy work, programs, trainings and dialogues in the areas of diversity, equity and inclusion these efforts and programs should be made more visible through heightened transparency.
2. Make the Freedom of Expression guidelines more understandable to students, who should also be involved in reviewing the changes before finalized.
3. Undertake further research into best practices for diversity and bias training and determine whether the current array of activities should be modified and expanded.
4. Establish a university diversity, equity and inclusion campaign designed to build community and awareness of the UH commitment to the issue.
5. Determine how UH may best assess the diversity, equity and inclusion climate on campus. The current periodic campus climate surveys may need to be augmented to accomplish this.
6. Extend the test-optional pilot program for undergraduate admissions through spring 2022 to evaluate its impact on successful completion of the freshman year and diversity enrollment. We applaud the Guided Pathways to Success (GPS) equity

initiative in the Office of the Provost. This collaboration of universities and community colleges provides an integrated system of strategies designed to increase and accelerate student completion and smooth two-year-to-four-year college transfer while improving educational quality. We encourage the strengthening and continuation of the GPS program, which not only enhances equity across the region but also facilitates transfer enrollment to UH.

7. Identify and secure sustainable funding source for UH programs that inspire K- 12 students to consider college, such as:
 - a. UH STEM, a collaborative effort by College of Education (COE), Natural Sciences and Mathematics (NSM) and Cullen College of Engineering
 - b. Center for Mexican American studies partnership with Austin High School
 - c. St. Elmo's Academy, a College of Engineering program that works with elementary boys of color
8. Identify and secure sustainable funding sources for UH Bridge programs, such as NSM and the COE, that focus on high school seniors, pre-freshmen and freshman students. These programs address preparedness, study skills and time management while building confidence in students who often are the first in their family to attend college.
9. Develop a scholarship program that will allow UH to make more competitive scholarship offers to talented, under-resourced students at the undergraduate and graduate levels. As a Tier One University that is aspiring to become a top 50 public university, UH needs to attract and enroll the best diverse talent.
10. There should be more attention given to diversifying upper-level administration in the academic and non-academic units, particularly at the dean, assistant dean, executive director, director and associate director levels. We applaud and support the President's ProPel Program where human resources and Bauer College build core UH leadership competencies in select staff to ensure that the UH System has stellar talent in critical positions. This is complemented by the ProPel Mentoring program that provides participants to be mentored by UH senior leadership. Finally, we applaud the Provost Office's Cougar Chairs Leadership Academy that cultivates leadership skills for sitting academic chairs and future departmental leaders.
11. Establish a permanent space for safe dialogue – Conversations revealed that many members of the campus community feel the need for a space where they can ask questions and express emotions without the fear of ridicule, where they are respected and where they can learn from each other.

12. Explore the feasibility of establishing a one-stop portal for faculty and staff engagement and volunteer opportunities similar to the Center for Involvement portal for student volunteer and engagement opportunities.

FUTURE STEPS

The RESJC efforts continue to be a work in progress and support its continuation through at least the next academic year. In addition to launching a website that will be both outward and inward-facing, the RESJC plans to continue to encourage further collaboration across academic and administrative units, review admission processes and their effect on the racial and ethnic composition of the student body. And similarly, also review the racial and ethnic composition of staff and faculty.

It is noted that following the death of George Floyd, the University of Houston immediately and spontaneously responded to the tragedy and its effects on our students, faculty, staff and the Houston community. We believe that why there is still much to address regarding racial and social justice on campus, the University of Houston was already much further down this path in addressing racial equity and social justice than most other universities. We believe the implementation of our recommendations will propel us closer to our goal of racial equity and social justice.

Elwyn C. Lee

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