

A Proposed Center for Racial Justice and Equitable Futures

Working Group C

Final Report to the Faculty Senate

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1. BACKGROUND

[Working Group C](#) (WG-C) was charged with developing plans for an “Antiracism Center” as part of the larger [antiracism initiative](#). A Center focuses scholarly and public attention on issues and research topics in ways that a department, school, or college cannot. Together with the graduate field system and other organizational structures that we have at Cornell, they promote interdisciplinary research, innovation, and a collaborative spirit. We are well known for our [91 centers, 70 institutes, and 43 programs](#) of which [more than twenty](#) would likely have some level of collaboration with the proposed Center.

Antiracism centers are being established or expanded at [peer institutions](#) across the United States. Over the years various task force reports at Cornell have suggested the creation of a center that deals with race and ethnicity following student activism, petitions from the university community, and program reviews. These [past efforts](#), the entangled histories of colonization and racism in the United States, and the urgency in the current moment, framed the deliberations of WG-C.

What do we mean by “antiracism” and why is there a call to create an Antiracism Center?

President Pollack's [July 2020 Directive](#) to develop plans for an Antiracism Center and various educational programs was, in one sense, prompted by the nation-wide protests that followed the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and others. Black student activism at Cornell on this occasion was but the most recent reminder to the campus that the forces of structural racism and systemic bias have been, and continue to be, at work in our own community and that we have a pressing obligation to redress a longstanding problem by examining and reconceiving existing modes of teaching, research, and proactive community engagement.

We understand "racism" in the U.S. to include the many interlocking and mutually constitutive forms of racisms directed at Black American, Indigenous, LatinX, Asian American, and other historically marginalized peoples whose daily lives continue to be impacted by the legacy and ongoing effects of a settler colonialism underwritten by principles of white supremacy. We accept as well that Black Women and Women of Color in general experience racism in ways which intersect with institutional sexism.

We understand the excavation of the local to be a grounded and enabling point of departure for pursuing analyses of the interlinked histories and discourses of race and racism within transnational and global frames. Concepts of race, modes of racialization, and practices of racism manifest themselves globally, and the particularities of those manifestations emerge out of specific historical, cultural, and sociopolitical contexts. While "racism" may be a global phenomenon, it is important to avoid attaching to all instances of racism an ahistorical and abstract equivalence. Our ability to understand and to challenge racism(s) depends on recognizing both their respective specificities in our local contexts, and the ways in which they become articulated across time and space.

By "anti" we signal the necessity of proactive opposition. Use of the prefix foregrounds an intellectual, political, and moral imperative to oppose the hierarchical structuring of social relations that are predicated on ideologies of white supremacy.

By "Center" we envision a permanent, institutionally supported unit that responds to instantiations of racism that are brought to the fore by current events while at the same time being a constant, unrelenting advocate for racial equality and healing. For example, in this historical moment, the Center must mount effective responses to the anti-Black racism that is currently raging. Concurrently, it must support long term work that understands and acts to redress the relationship of race and ethnicity to settler colonialism and violent indigenous dispossession, interrogating hierarchies in local, national, and transnational contexts. The Center should be innovative in how it engages students and faculty across campus through new forms and modes of collaboration. In terms of teaching and research, such collaborations could emerge, for example, from advancing comparative frameworks for understanding processes of mutually constitutive racialization both locally and transnationally, or from team teaching. Productive forms of collaboration could also emerge from cultivating deeper and broader forms of engagement with and across diverse communities both on and off campus.

2. A CENTER FOR RACIAL JUSTICE AND EQUITABLE FUTURES

We envision a Center that will focus our attention on a just and equitable future, while acknowledging that our current lives and their meanings are inscribed in violent pasts of colonization, dispossession, enslavement, exclusion, and racialization, both in the United States and abroad. To capture the intended scope of activity we propose that the unit be called "**The Center for Racial Justice and Equitable Futures.**" We fully understand that a more appropriate name may emerge as discussions unfold on whether the Center would be better served by being named in the service of an aspiration or goal or after an individual (Toni Morrison was one of several names raised at the Working Group meetings).

The Center should amplify and support rigorous scholarship, engaged research, performance, art, and design to build a community of scholars and students capable of generating and acting on visions of ethical alternative futures. It must advance our understanding of the structural and systemic character of forms of racialization that have emerged out of histories of settler colonialism, enslavement, and exclusion. In the face of the ways in which this history of white supremacy has enforced social divisions and inequalities, the Center's cultivation of interdisciplinary collaboration and community engagement in physical and virtual space should provide opportunities to forge new intellectual and social bonds.

3. ACADEMICS AND SCHOLARSHIP

The Center must be a vibrant programmatic space that is alive with talks, workshops, and exhibitions; a congenial space that promotes the intermingling of students, faculty, and visitors as it showcases to the outside world the work of those involved. We outline three strategies to achieve this: an annual focal theme, a pipeline-to-the-academy program, and selected grant-making programs.

3.1 An Annual Focal Theme

We recommend that the Center draw on the successful model developed by the [Society for the Humanities](#), which identifies a [focal theme](#) each year. At the Center programmatic aspects would include:

- A *Visiting Faculty Fellows Program* that attracts scholars from across academia who are accomplished researchers in areas that relate to the focal theme. The Center should be an attractive destination for faculty who have a sabbatical leave from their home institution.
- A *Visiting Professor-of-the-Practice (PoP) Program* that attracts non-academics from the public, civic and nonprofit sectors who have a record of accomplishment in areas that relate to the focal theme. They would teach special courses and seminars, perhaps having a half-time appointment in an appropriate academic unit. The [Rhodes Professors Program](#) that is associated with the West Campus initiative is a possible venue to develop a visiting PoP version of the highly successful [Andrew D. White Professors-at-Large Program](#).
- A *Cornell Faculty Fellows Program* that would support colleagues who perform research and teach in areas that relate to the focal theme.

Potential focal themes include:

- Technologies of Racism and Liberation
- Internet Access and Race
- Afro-Asian Connections
- Environmental Justice
- Public Health and Race
- Language Hierarchies and Race
- Settler Colonialism and White Supremacy in the Americas
- Comparative Entanglements: Blackness and Indigeneity
- Racism and State Violence

A well-chosen sequence of focal themes will promote broad cross-disciplinary engagement with the Center.

3.2 A Pipeline-to-the-Academy Program

The Center should support efforts to create a pipeline for BIPOC students into fields where they are underrepresented both as graduate students and as faculty. These efforts should be designed in collaboration

with the [McNair Program](#) (managed by the Office of Academic Diversity Initiatives) and the Graduate School's [NextGen Professors Program](#). At the Center the initiatives would include:

- *A pre-doctoral program* that could include summer schools and yearlong mentoring programs with advanced undergraduates interested in graduate careers (in specific STEM and Social Science fields for instance).
- *A mentored gap year for BIPOC seniors* who wish to explore careers in academia.
- *A post-doctoral program* that would sponsor and support future faculty. Each participant would be situated in a unit that is relevant to their planned academic trajectory and serve as a research conduit to the Center.

3.3 Various Grant-making Programs

These programs would focus on Cornell scholars and students who work in areas that are relevant to the Center's mission. Potential areas of funding include:

- seed grants for radical transformative collaborations on issues of race, indigeneity and ethnicity.
- focused research projects (including engaged research with communities, in collaboration with OEI).
- public scholarship, performance and outreach on a range of media.
- conferences, performances and workshops.
- summer writing support for faculty and advanced graduate students, including jointly authored publications by faculty and students to advance mentoring efforts.
- reading and discussion groups that would bring together faculty, students and community members.
- dissertation and junior faculty writing groups.

4. COLLABORATIONS

Early on we identified a host of [centers and programs](#) whose existing research and teaching agendas would be highly relevant to the mission of the proposed center. If the goal is to institutionalize a commitment to antiracism through a new center, then what would be its "environmental impact" on neighboring centers and programs?

The impact will be positive if there is collaboration and the creation of new opportunities. It will be negative if the proposed center simply intensifies the competition for a fixed pool of resources. No one disputes that the latter must be avoided. The focus must be on making the case for collaboration, which also responds to President Pollack's request that we develop a blueprint for a center that amplifies Cornell's existing scholarship on antiracism.

A good example of the collaboration dynamic referenced by President Pollack is manifested in an upcoming exhibition on Art and the Global Climate Struggle at the Johnson Museum. The exhibit will coincide with a locally hosted international conference on climate change and Indigenous and local knowledge and together the two events will engage scholars from (1) the American Indian and Indigenous Studies Program, (2) the South Asia Program, (3) the Department of Natural Resources, (4) the Botanic Gardens, (5) the University Library, (6) the Atkinson Center for Sustainability, (7) the Global Development Program, (8) the Department of Performing and Media Arts, and (9) the Judith Reppy Institute for Peace and Conflict Studies. The recently funded [Migrations Initiative](#) at the Einaudi Center similarly engages multiple centers and programs across campus.

These examples serve as a reminder that collaboration is in Cornell's DNA and a source of its innovation and strength. The proposed Center will serve as a central node, amplifying scholarship on racism, indigeneity, ethnicity and bias across disciplines/fields and supporting new opportunities for collaboration, including with extramural support. The Center's collaborations could be long-term or episodic, involve single units or groups of

units, and be tied to grants or focal theme cycles. Here we describe five long-term collaborations (out of many) that will collectively give the Center a unique reputation among its peers.

4.1 Core Academic Programs

Even as the Center remains open and welcoming of all faculty and students from any discipline or field who engage in issues central to the Center's mission, there must be an ongoing and effective relationship between the center and these graduate fields, departments and programs: the Africana Studies and Research Center, the American Indian and Indigenous Studies Program, Asian American Studies, Feminist, Gender and Sexuality Studies, Latino/a Studies, and American Studies. Faculty in these units come from over twenty departments across multiple colleges, with disciplinary affiliations in the humanities and social sciences. They will have a critical role to play in terms of the design, implementation, and evolution of the educational requirement for students and in research and scholarship. An emphasis on intersectionality and comparative transnational work would bring together and strengthen all groups across campus.

4.2 The University Library (CUL)

CUL is one of the world's leading research libraries, which collects, organizes, preserves, and provides services and access to a rich and unique record of cultural heritage and history of diasporic communities. Access to these heritage documents and their use by scholars resonates with the intended mission of the Center. The Center would serve as a landmark of research into Black experiences and cross-cultural interactions at Cornell. Its competencies in descriptive bibliography, paleography, textual criticism, and the history of the book and book arts as well as the tools included in its collections -- the incunables, folios, diaries, maps, and daguerreotypes -- aid researchers who engage in cultural dialogue and projects of uncovering narratives and histories, along with other scholarship focused on issues of race, indigeneity and ethnicity.

A current example that points to just how the CUL can contribute to the success of the Center is its support of the [Freedom on the Move Digital Archive](#), a collaboration with the Department of History and the Cornell Institute for Social and Economic Research. That project involves a database of tens of thousands of advertisements placed by enslavers who sought to recapture self-liberating Africans and African Americans. Another example is a [digital collection](#) of Haudenosaunee archaeological materials that is the result of a collaboration between archeologists and librarians at Cornell and Onondowa'ga (Seneca) partners, including staff at the Seneca-Iroquois National Museum and the Seneca Art and Culture Center.

We believe that by properly integrating CUL into its research mission, we will strengthen the Center's nodal position as supporting critical scholarship on race and indigeneity, thereby enriching the nation's historical record. Cornell would not be alone in leveraging its library this way to advance the cause of antiracism. [The Colored Conventions Project](#) at the University of Delaware is a virtual "Center for Race" and an outreach model for digitally based scholarship. [The Black Metropolis Research Consortium](#) at the University of Chicago is a collaboration that highlights the role a library can play in expanding broad access to its holdings of materials that document African American and African diasporic culture, history, and politics. [The Center for Human Rights Documentation and Research](#) at Columbia University is a model of how a library can partner with on-campus research units, in this case, the School of International and Public Affairs.

It is useful to think of the Center as a "laboratory" with the CUL serving as both an intellectual and possible physical host. Laboratories are places of interrogation and in this case the Center is a place where ongoing interrogation fundamental for understanding race and privilege, colonization, and all forms of othering and oppression occurs. *The library should also be considered as a possible physical location for the proposed Center.* The Working Group shares the Senate's Faculty Library Board's enthusiasm about this option. By locating the

Center physically within the Library, its activities will be both centrally located and extend across all Library spaces, resources, and collections (including Africana, Kroch Asia, RMC, Catherwood, and many more), and therefore across the Ithaca campus as a whole. In short, by locating the Center within the Library, the Center will be, like the Library, located everywhere. It is an ideal partnership. The Library provides a space that is not confined to a single college or a single discipline; that is deeply integrated into the lives of our students, faculty, and staff; and that has a wide-reaching presence throughout the University. The intellectual and social reach of the Library can inform and shape the life of the Center, and the Center can help make visible the range of Library resources that document the history of oppression and dispossession, that record the voices of active and activist resistance, and that chart alternative paths to a more equitable future.

4.3 The Johnson Museum

Collaborations with the Museum can enhance the role that the Center plays in Cornell's mission to combine education with public engagement, through co-hosted exhibitions, programs, publications, Cornell classes, and visual arts focused PreK-12 outreach. The Museum has an excellent track record in this area, with a range of past and upcoming projects designed to bring new scholarly insights on art, race, and equity to the broadest possible audience. Most recently, [How the Light Gets in](#) (2019) provided a platform for a range of timely and provocative art exploring migration in a global context, while [Art and the Global Climate Struggle](#) (forthcoming, 2021) will foreground art exploring the consequences of climate change on the lives of Indigenous and other peoples across the globe with strong ties to their land. Effective collaboration with the Museum will elevate the profile of the Center both across campus and beyond, while providing a nationally recognized venue for work by BIPOC artists.

4.4 The Botanic Gardens

The Botanic Garden's [strategic goals](#) resonate strongly with the mission of the proposed Center. During the past several years, the Botanic Gardens has featured African American conservationists and poets, Native American activists, and ethnobiologists. The Botanic Gardens has also worked collaboratively with AIISP to develop a new course on [Cayuga Language and Culture](#). In addition, they have hosted African medical professionals and healers, collaborating on the development of innovative projects that rethink the role of gardens in medicine, and recently co-sponsored a cross-campus book reading that focused on the role of African traditional knowledge, addressing new ways to confront the layered crisis of racial inequality and healing through public health, food production systems, and the environment. A collaboration with the Botanic Gardens amplifies the Center's mission and emphasizes the active ways in which the path to equality lies through re-establishing healing connections with plants and ecologies.

4.5 The School of Public Policy (SPP) and other Policy-focused Programs

The newly established [School of Public Policy](#) will have deep ties to the social scientific, scientific and technocratic communities, and a focus on evidence-based research and work that aims to transform policy, which is key to dismantling the structures and systems that create and perpetuate racial injustice and inequity. SPP aims to build on areas of existing strength at Cornell, make strategic investments, and prioritize newly available resources to ensure that it becomes a prominent addition to the global public policy stage. Policy-related programs outside SPP and core academic programs noted earlier that support policy focused curriculum and research on a range of issues from development infrastructure, food systems, and the urban built environment to the digital world will also be critical collaborators.

5. INFRASTRUCTURES FOR COLLABORATION

The Center must have sufficient infrastructure if it is to realize its ambitions as a node for collaborations.

5.1 Infrastructure for Proposal Support

The Center should provide support for the submission of high-quality proposals to funding agencies and foundations. The [Just Futures](#) initiative (Mellon) and the [RacialEquity2030](#) initiative (Kellogg) are examples of highly relevant funding opportunities. The Center should also help educate faculty and student researchers on ethical issues associated with community-based activist research, especially when BIPOC and other marginalized groups are involved. This would be a joint effort with the [Office of Research Integrity](#).

5.2 Infrastructure to Enhance BIPOC Engagement

The Center should be an inclusive space of gathering and belonging for BIPOC scholars and students, breaking down barriers and providing the integration and support between knowledge and action that ensures long term success. The possible location of the Center in CUL and the creation of a kind of digital hub discussed above squares with this. Indeed, across the country, a model that is proving appealing to funders is to marry academic cultural centers and strategies for DEI engagement to digital scholarship and research hubs, which brings together the campus community and the world outside. Promoting this dynamic will require collaboration with the [Office of Academic Diversity Initiatives](#), the [Office of Engaged Initiatives](#), and more generally with Student and Campus Life where there is an understanding of how [campus cultural centers](#) are critical to the academic success of the BIPOC student.

5.3 Infrastructure to Enhance External Engagement

The Center should support students, faculty, and visiting PoP's whose antiracism work takes them into surrounding communities in Ithaca and surrounding counties. There are obvious opportunities to partner with the [Office of Engaged Initiatives](#) and the [Cornell Public Service Center](#).

6. ACTIVISM AND ADVOCACY

One goal of the Center is to empower members of Cornell's BIPOC community as they participate in the research life of the university. This helps define the advocacy role of the Center within Cornell:

- It must advocate for BIPOC faculty and students by working to increase their research opportunities across campus and by taking steps to ensure that these opportunities are fully visible across our highly decentralized university. This would be in collaboration with the [Office of Undergraduate Research](#).
- It must advocate for full BIPOC representation in all academic units and decision-making bodies. This would be in collaboration with the [Office for Faculty Development and Diversity](#) and the [Office of Diversity Initiatives](#).

But more than that, the Center should inspire and support antiracist research and teaching in a way that creates greater justice and equity on campus and beyond. Cornell's founding mission of inclusivity remains radical, a moral compass that aligns what we strive towards: an institution for all people of *all colors, all sexes*, charged with "creating knowledge for the betterment of humanity." Accordingly, the Center's activism should have two components:

- An **education-driven component** that prompts students to understand the structural and systemic basis of racism and bias, to examine the extent of their personal antiracist behavior and leave Cornell with the tools to engage difficult questions and thrive in a multiracial world. To this end, we suggest that the Center should host the governance of the literacy component of the education requirement currently being developed by Working Group S. The Center should also collaborate with OEI to create a robust program of engaged research and learning through community-university partnerships.

- A **research-driven component** that prompts those on the outside who create policy and support equity-focused practice to make changes based on new understandings of structural racism and bias.

Both dynamics have been part of Cornell since its founding, namely, the belief in the value of a liberal arts education and the belief that research should have a practical and positive impact on society.

A liberal arts education has long been understood to have value insofar as it helps develop critical, reflexive skills and habits of mind that citizens need in order to be able to sort through the complex entanglements of our social, political and economic realities. Our graduates must be lifelong learners in all matters that concern antiracism and civic action aimed at building thriving multiracial democracies.

7. GOVERNANCE

What would a democratic, transparent, accountable system of governance for an innovative inclusive university wide entity look like? The governance structure of the Center must reflect its mission, goals, and its academic and activist orientation. It must itself be a model for an antiracist, just, and equitable future.

7.1 The Director

We recommend that the Center be led by a member of the tenured faculty whose scholarship and work is firmly grounded in the goals, ambitions, and programs that define the Center. We propose that the Center Director be selected by a committee composed of equal parts students (undergraduate and graduate) and faculty, with some administrative representation as necessary. The students, faculty and staff who populate the selection committee should have a track record of doing work on issues of race, ethnicity, and indigeneity on campus and/or beyond. Details for determining the membership of the selection committee remain to be developed. However, we recommend that it should include faculty representatives from core academic programs as well.

The Faculty Director should report to the Office of the Provost. The Director should provide leadership, and oversee all aspects of the Center's work. We expect fund-raising to be an important part of the Director's responsibility. The staff team should include an Associate Director who manages the Center's activities and day-to-day operation and who coordinates the many partnerships and activities outlined above.

Institutional commitment to the success of the Center and bringing a focus on racism/antiracist scholarship and teaching must include the addition of faculty lines for scholars who specialize in these areas. They can be in various fields, and include those who have a record of engaged and/or public-facing scholarship. These hires will be able to participate in or potentially help direct this new institutional effort; as importantly, their presence on campus can help free up others already on the faculty to engage with the Center's work. Adding significantly more work to the same number of faculty as currently on campus, particularly faculty of color who are already repeatedly drawn upon to engage Antiracism Initiatives is problematic. For Cornell's Antiracism Initiatives to succeed, we will need additional faculty lines.

7.2 The Internal Governance Council

There should be a Governance Council that works with the Center's leadership when framing scholarly ambitions and ongoing programming. It must be responsive to the needs of the Cornell community and regularly assess the Center's activity and impact. The Council should be made up of faculty and students. Student representatives should include undergraduates and graduate students drawn from BIPOC, issue-focused student organizations within each college/school including the Graduate School. Faculty representatives should be drawn from those departments, fields and centers whose scholarship the Center seeks to amplify. There must

be a clear channel to the Presidential Advisors on Diversity and Equity (PADE) and the group of Associate Deans that is regularly convened by the Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education.

7.3 The External Advisory Board

A carefully chosen External Advisory Board will bring additional visibility to the Center and facilitate the development of the outward facing vision. The stature of these individuals will set apart the Center from its counterparts at other institutions and give it local, national, and international prominence. Membership breadth is essential if there is to be effective outreach to key constituencies. We recommend that the Board include:

- A representative from the Ithaca African American community. They will bring to the Center a critical understanding of off-campus issues and promote student engagement with the city.
- A representative from the Haudenosaunee Leadership chosen with the involvement of the AIISP and the Cayuga Nation Leadership. They will provide to the Center the insights associated with the dispossession of their land. In addition, they will contribute wisdom to rooting the Center in the long-standing pluralistic and stewardship values of this land.
- A prominent artist, poet, and/or writer from the constituent communities. They will bring to the Center a vision that is distinct from all other professions.
- An internationally recognized diplomat or policy maker from the constituent communities. They will bring a policy-focused perspective on navigating the politics of change.
- A journalist from the constituent communities. They will bring a perspective on all matters that concern mass communication.
- A **respected** entrepreneur from the constituent communities. They will provide the Center with key connections and strategies associated with the marketplace.
- A spiritual or religious leader who has a record of being inclusive and outspoken on issues of justice.

There are certainly other possibilities. Regardless, the importance to the campus of bringing respected external voices and perspectives to bear on our thinking cannot be overstated during a time when so much is in transition.