

2022 National Day of Racial Healing: Reflections on building inclusive institutions

By Greta Hacker

Over the past two months, communities across our state observed a variety of events and activities dedicated to acknowledging the realities of systemic oppression in our nation, listening to the experiences of diverse groups, and taking continued action to promote racial justice. These events included the Arkansas Racial Equity and Social Justice Challenge celebrated during the month of February, the Martin Luther King Jr. National Holiday (MLK Day) in mid-January and the National Day of Racial Healing (NDORH).

Created by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation in 2017, the NDORH takes place on the day following MLK Day and is dedicated to helping communities build trust, hold open and respectful dialogue about racial issues, and work together to create more equitable institutions.

In observance of the NDORH, the University of Central Arkansas Center for Community and Economic Development partnered with the Arkansas Peace and Justice Memorial Movement and Conway Conversations to host “Revisiting Broken Systems,” a panel discussion that shared insights from UCA scholars on how to inspire positive changes in our entrepreneurial and academic institutions. Panelists included Drs. Taine Duncan (chair of the UCA Department of Philosophy and Religion), Kristy Carter (marketing director for UCA Outreach and Community Engagement), and Marsha Massey (assistant professor of chemistry at UCA).

Dr. Duncan kicked off the panel discussion by explaining how Critical Race Theory (CRT) can help us understand racial equity issues. Duncan noted that CRT was developed in response to the ways in which civil rights gains failed to ensure racial equity under the law. CRT posits that legal remedies to racial discrimination cannot be achieved without understanding the historical roots of racism or without fundamentally addressing both the specific laws unfairly applied to different groups and the everyday practices of institutions that create racial disparities.

“Our policies and practices don’t come out of nowhere,” Duncan said. “They are built upon the history

that has led us to this point and what we do now is going to influence the future, so there’s a responsibility to both understand the past and to actively try to change the future to make [it] better.”

Dr. Carter discussed her research detailing a specific system affected by discriminatory practices: the entrepreneurial ecosystem. Carter’s research surveyed female entrepreneurs and business owners of color about their experiences navigating the financial, legal and cultural institutions that relate to entrepreneurship in Arkansas. Her findings suggest that access to capital is the biggest barrier that women entrepreneurs of color experience. Other prominent barriers are cash flow, credit worthiness, gaining access to markets, and racial bias and discrimination.

Carter also found that 50 percent of participants surveyed reported that they feel traditional entrepreneurial support organizations, including colleges and universities, chambers of commerce, business development service providers and community development finance institutions, do not provide adequate support to them. “There is more work to do to create a culture where Black women are valued—not just welcome—but where they are valued in the system,” Carter said. She stressed the importance of building inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystems that do not make access to resources more difficult based on entrepreneurs’ personal identities or backgrounds.

Rounding out the panel was Dr. Massey, who provided a series of personal reflections on her experiences as a Black woman in STEM education, which served to illuminate how academia can better support diverse student populations.

Massey first noted that although her upbringing never communicated to her that her race was a setback or a barrier in her professional life, she still struggled with self-doubt. She wrestled with questions such as, “Do I belong here? Am I good enough? Do the people around me care about the same things that I do?” She said she ultimately found herself asking, “Do I belong here because I am Black?”

Massey reflected that her doubts may have stemmed from the lack of support and education she received from her high school and college counselors, first when she was considering applying to medical school, and later when she had aspirations for Ph.D. programs in chemistry. She found it strange that she saw other students receiving information from counselors that was never shared with her. She also reported that her academic advisors in college appeared worried about her ability to be successful in difficult math and science courses, even encouraging her not to take certain courses for fear it would overwhelm her.

“These experiences I had [are] snapshots of where I think our academic system can have some broken parts,” Massey said. She encouraged the academic community, especially advising and counseling professionals, to devote more attention to empowering and “listening

to the passions of their students” and less to trying to protect them from failure.

Events such as the National Day of Racial Healing remind us that everyone in our communities can benefit from thoughtful discourse and action to address racial injustice. To learn more about NDORH, view the recording of this event and find out how your community can get involved, visit: uca.edu/cced/national-day-of-racial-healing. 🏠



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