

## 2021 Report to the College: Year One of Meredith College's Anti-Racism Initiative

Over the past 12 months, Meredith College has engaged in a reexamination of our institution's history and recommitment to the critical work of anti-racism through the institution's [Anti-Racism Initiative](#). We do so because not only national and world realities weigh on us, but also because our fundamental mission calls us to educate and inspire students "to live with integrity and provide leadership for the needs, opportunities and challenges of society." In the early work on this initiative, I want to report to our community about our progress and additional, forthcoming efforts that our community can expect.

I have been inspired by how many of you — [students, faculty, staff, alumnae/i, trustees, and others](#) — have offered your support for this important work—especially in a year that has afforded so many additional challenges. Faculty, staff, and the Student Government Association have crafted and endorsed a [statement in support of diversity, equity, and inclusion](#)—heartily approved by the Executive Leadership Team and the Board of Trustees, that will enhance the environment of our classrooms, offices, and other campus spaces:

*Meredith College is committed to fostering an inclusive and pluralistic campus environment where diverse identities are safe and welcomed into our learning and working community. The College is committed to actively addressing diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts in all departments and administrative processes. The College admits undergraduate women students of any age, race, creed, sexual orientation, national and ethnic origin.*

*In alignment with our core values and our mission as a women's college, the College respects race, ethnicity, culture, sex, gender identity, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, ability, age, national origin, immigration status, veteran status, political affiliation, religion, and spiritual identity that enrich and ennoble our campus conversations, relationships, classrooms, extracurricular programs, and work environments. Our community appreciates that identity is intersectional and that diversity extends beyond this incomplete list of categories.*

*The College strives to cultivate a climate of respect and dialogue around these aspects of identity. Meredith adheres to a comprehensive non-discrimination policy that recognizes differences and acknowledges that these differences are valued assets that enrich our community.*

The bottom line is that our commitment to racial inclusion is broad and unwavering and extends to all facets of our operations including but not limited to admissions and financial aid; curriculum, classroom, lab, and field experiences; residential living communities, dining services, athletics, clubs and organizations; and human resources, campus security, counseling, and career services.

### **Campus Climate Survey**

To ensure we are operating on the basis of empirical data, not just assumptions, we conducted a nationally normed campus climate survey (Higher Education Data Sets) last fall. Results have been released to administrators, mid-level administrative teams, the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) exploratory committee for hiring a new DEI professional, employee participants in our [on-campus professional development sessions \(PIE\)](#), the Board of Trustees, and the [Meredith website](#). Additionally, the DEI exploratory committee (co-led by faculty and staff and a diverse set of campus leaders) conducted Campus Climate follow-up focus groups of students, alumnae/i, and employees that informed its recommendations for hiring a new DEI professional.

### **A Commitment to a More Diverse Meredith**

A formal position statement for the DEI professional is in the process of being approved by the Executive Leadership Team and our Human Resources experts; it will be submitted to our search consultants, Academic Search, a nationally known, top-rated search firm in academe for posting. Academic Search's work will help us build a strong, competitive pool of applicants for the position and help with scheduling and other elements of the hiring process. (This step reflects the campus's request for a more visible expert in DEI work.)

Already, our commitment and successes are making a difference. In June, I was interviewed for a nationally aired higher education podcast with Dr. Jay Lemons, president of Academic Search, who specifically wanted to feature the work we are doing in anti-racism. We are seeing an increase in BIPOC applicants for campus positions, some of whom have expressly cited our work on anti-racism as a reason for their interest in working at Meredith. For those who already know us well, we are hearing encouraging messages of support from alumnae/i, current students, and retired and current employees, as well as Trustees, who are proud of this commitment to ensuring a healthy environment for all.

### **The Board's Commitment to Inclusivity**

This year, the Board of Trustees has taken a number of steps to demonstrate its commitment on behalf of the College to inclusivity. Most notably, the Board supported the hiring of a national consultant to help capture diverse thoughts and expressions regarding the historical context in which slavery and white supremacy flourished and in what ways these vestiges remain either covertly or overtly in our society policies, and practices. Many of the trustees and alumnae joined faculty and staff to form a diverse group to articulate the underpinnings of how to contextualize the naming of buildings on campus.

Through its Executive Committee, the full Board of Trustees has taken on the responsibility of reviewing the names of buildings at Meredith. A Statement of Guiding Principles undergirds its work. (This step represents the advice and best practices of hundreds of other institutions undergoing the same kind of examination of their histories.)

### **The Faculty and Administration's Commitment to Anti-Racism**

In addition to a year-long diversity and inclusion series in 2019-20 for mid-and upper-level management, various groups of employees have actively participated in multiple training sessions on anti-racism as part of our formal initiative. The Executive Leadership Team first participated in the [Racial Equity Institute's](#) nationally recognized Phase 1 Racial Equity Workshop training session that focuses on the history of racism. Since then, over 100 employees have also participated in the Institute's Groundwater training. Additionally, more than 100 employees participated in [Stir Fry](#), a unique anti-racism approach that focuses on the emotional tolls of racism. (This step has opened the campus to various training approaches to help broaden our understanding of the root causes and myriad impacts of racism.) We are proud to report several faculty and staff are participating in or leading national conversations about racism and, in particular, about racism in higher education. Their work is part of [Universities Studying Slavery](#), a consortium hosted by the University of Virginia; in addition, our College has been selected by the Council on Independent Colleges as one of only seven national hubs focusing on particular studies of racism. Our [work](#) focuses on lifting the voices of Black women through an oral history project and in a Political Institute that prepares Black women and women of color to run for office successfully. (This step is indicative of the nature of our educational mission and vision—that we intentionally pursue knowledge and nuances that define our experiences--while realizing that different people learn differently.)

The School of Arts and Humanities faculty, staff, and students presented their findings of “Belonging at Meredith,” a review of the history of inclusion and exclusion at the College. The results were presented throughout the College to students, employees, administrators, and the Board of Trustees. (This step responds to students and alumnae/i whose expressions of troubling experiences spoke to both the history and ongoing nature of inclusion/exclusion at the College, giving insights for how to improve.)

The pandemic created extra pressure on students without strong technological resources or skills—especially when classes moved online and students moved out of the residence halls. Our IT team worked diligently to be sure students had the technology they needed, even delivering tablets to their homes, as well as ensuring they could find a free Wi-Fi connection.

Several other employee-led offerings ensure a more equitable treatment of all. Just a few highlights—hardly an exhaustive list—demonstrate the expansiveness of our commitment:

- Significant work has gone on with Residence Life staff, including focusing on inclusion in the physical and emotional space of the residence halls. The role of diversity in leadership roles for resident assistants and student advisers has offered further opportunities for development and exploration of inclusion.
- Campus Security, one of the most diverse units on campus, requires annual training on treatment of others including sensitivity training, cultural diversity, and other means of communicating respect and accountability.
- The leaders of StrongPoints are looking to include more student voices in their work. In addition, tentative plans for a session on Strengths’ domains as a lens for exploring racism may open conversations about how we can each use our individual strengths—or the combined strengths of those in each unit—to dismantle racism.
- The Office of Career Planning, in addition to working with students to enhance their options for working in a healthy environment, also work with employers to help review and guide hiring practices, workplace equity, and other commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion.
- The Alumnae Association has opened conversations with BIPOC alumnae about their experiences at Meredith. Encouraging expanded and healthy conversations, the Alumnae Association seeks to bring voices together to address solutions and to enhance the alumnae/i experience.
- Marketing & Communications has engaged in a thorough exploration on the inclusion of BIPOC in our publications and websites. Working to resist tokenism, these professionals are examining the ways BIPOC are represented at Meredith.
- The Office of Research, Planning, and Assessment has been invaluable in helping to select or design appropriate instruments to survey or conduct focus groups that generate more evidence of racism and anti-racism at work. This evidence and its analysis have helped shape conversations about the nature, settings, and types of anti-racism that demand our immediate attention.

- The Admissions Advisory Committee, driven by pandemic-related problems with access, preparation, and availability of standardized tests (e.g., SAT, ACT), [recommended a permanent deletion](#) of the requirement for applicants to submit standardized test scores for consideration for admission. Students who opt-out of testing simply have one less factor in the weight of application evidence and are held harmless in that decision. (This step follows a national trend of questioning the value of standardized tests, particularly those used as admissions criteria.)

### **Our Students' Commitment to a More Equitable Meredith**

Our students have been exceptionally helpful in stepping up to the work of anti-racism. Many have responded to surveys and participated in focus groups, giving us a clearer sense of where problems lie. We are taking their experiences and ideas for solutions to heart.

One element of the campus climate survey and follow-up focus groups, for instance, shows that students are unclear about what constitutes anti-racism and other forms of bias and discrimination and how to report incidents. Initial changes have been made to the [Dean of Students Office web page](#) to help make these processes clearer. Additionally, the Student Judicial Board has expanded the Honor Code to address bias, harassment, and discrimination. The revisions, which will appear in the 2021-22 student handbook, provide clearer definitions as well as processes and a range of consequences for dishonorable behavior.

Several student organizations and athletics teams have also been investigating and sponsoring programs regarding the realities of racism in their sphere of interest. Understanding how racism has impacted leadership and leadership development, treatment of athletes, and the disciplinary interests of various groups has helped to uncover the ways that racism has seeped into and throughout our culture and how we may confront and eradicate that influence.

In addition, the Office of Student Leadership has specifically addressed cultural appropriation and accommodations to include differently abled students in our traditions (Cornhuskin' in particular), in the selection and opportunities for student leaders, and ways that students voice their concerns on campus.

### **STEPS TO COME**

While these aforementioned steps are progress, there's more work to be done. Our commitment will mean a long, thoughtful, inclusive process of investigation, understandings of context and nuance, painful truths faced head-on, and, ultimately solutions that will make the College even stronger. In the immediate future, we look to this timeline of events:

- By mid-July, we will complete and post the position statement for the DEI professional on our HR portal and with our partners at Academic Search. We hope to hold interviews this fall and encourage participation from faculty, staff, students, and others. We plan to make the selection and have the professional in place by mid-Fall, depending on his/her schedule.
- During Freshman Orientation and First-Year Experience courses, we will engage students, faculty, and staff in the [selected summer reading, \*Tell Me Who You Are\*](#). Written by two young women (Winona Guo and Priya Vulchi) who took a gap year before college to travel and hear people's stories of race, the work invites us all to reflect on and share our stories of who we are with all who will hear.

- The Board of Trustees anticipates a release of the three rounds of (re)naming decisions: the first (academic buildings) by late December 2021; the second (residence halls) by late Spring semester, 2022; and the final (ancillary buildings) by early fall 2022.
- We will also be developing our next five-year strategic plan throughout the next year. The College's most authoritative statement on priorities, resources, intentions, and measures of success, the plan will require DEI goals for each of the six pillars: Educational Excellence, Optimal Enrollment, Facilities and IT, Financial Strength, Marketing and Visibility, and Quality of Life. Some of this work will introduce new initiatives, deeper reviews of current work, and more cross-campus collaborations on our DEI priorities. We will provide more information on how you can get involved and provide feedback on this process.
- As we begin a new fiscal year and re-establish employee evaluations in a post-pandemic culture, supervisors will seek to incorporate DEI goals for each employee or group of employees, focusing on unit and individual contributions toward ensuring a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive College.

## **FINAL NOTES**

We are also looking at available campus resources that can strengthen the curriculum, services, and outreach to those interested in and committed to anti-racism. A more diverse curriculum, for instance, shows the contributions of BIPOC throughout the disciplines, just as the history of the disciplines provides a lens through which to view our history of racial treatment. Our signature Strengths work will allow us to use the lens of strengths to coincide with the lens of race and racism in building the intellectual and emotional courage to learn vital lessons of application, as well as to continue this initiative.

As a final word: We are especially grateful for those donors who have specified their gifts to the annual fund be designated for this work on anti-racism. For the students who love this College and all it can be, for employees who could work anywhere but choose Meredith, and for the Trustees whose guidance and love for this College are evident in their hours-invested voluntary capacity, we are especially thankful. Most of all, and to all, we are grateful for your own commitments to help us be the College we aspire to be amidst the world we hope to leave those who follow us.

President Jo Allen, '80