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Collaboration helped bring anti-Black racism class together quickly

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By **SUSAN JONES**

The speed with which Pitt moved to provide an anti-Black racism course for first-year students is a credit to the committee that worked on it, according to Yolanda Covington-Ward, head of Pitt's Africana studies department and chair of the committee.

COURSE COMMITTEE MEMBERS

- **Yolanda Covington-Ward:** committee chair, and chair and associate professor of the Department of Africana Studies
- **Oluchi Okafor:** student representative from the Black Action Society studying Africana Studies and political science
- **Keisha N. Blain:** associate professor in the Department of History
- **Nicole Mitchell:** Endowed Chair in Jazz Studies in the Department of Music
- **Alaina Roberts:** assistant professor in the Department of History
- **Felix Germain:** associate professor in the Department of Africana Studies
- **Waverly Duck:** associate professor in the Department of Sociology
- **Leigh Patel:** professor in the School of Education and former associate dean for equity and justice
- **Gabby Yearwood:** lecturer in the Department of Anthropology
- **Michael Goodhart:** professor in the Department of Political Science and UCIS, Director of Global Studies Center
- **James Huguley:** assistant professor in the School of Social Work and interim director of the Center on Race and Social Problems
- **Dawn Lundy Martin:** professor in the Department of English and director of CAAPP

But some in Faculty Assembly were left wondering how the class came about and whether it was required for graduation.

Covington-Ward said Provost Ann Cudd reached out to her directly to chair a committee to create the course, and even though she had other work planned this summer, "I said, 'You know what, this is a priority, not just for our institution, but for our nation and really the world.'"

She then reached out to people "across the university, who I thought had experience and expertise in anti-Black racism." And in about a month, they pulled together a series of 50-minute lectures that they hoped would connect the course material to what's going on locally and nationally after a summer of unrest initially sparked by the killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police in late May.

"It was kind of a perfect storm at a perfect time," Chancellor Patrick Gallagher said, citing a petition started by a Pitt alum asking for a course like this. It probably was surprising how quickly this moved ahead, he said.

"It was a very collaborative effort," he said. "This was not a back room with a small number of people, this was a pretty big effort. When something moves that quickly with a big team, I think that just speaks more about the spirit of collaboration and shared purpose that people have. I take two lessons: One it was the right thing to do in this context, and the other lesson is when we really want to, we can move quickly."

The course, "Anti-Black Racism: History, Ideology, and Resistance," will be taught by a series of Pitt professors, such as Eric Beeko, a visiting assistant professor in the Department of Africana Studies, on Pre-Colonial African History and Misconceptions of Africa, and Leigh Patel, a professor in the School of Education, on Formal Schooling and Anti-Blackness.

They will be joined by community members, such as Carl Redwood, chairman of the Hill District Consensus Group, who will discuss U.S. Racist Housing Policy, and Darnell Moore, author of "No Ashes in This Fire," and Bree Newsome Bass, who led the fight to take down the Confederate flag in South Carolina, who will discuss Contemporary Black Liberation Movements.

Each week features an asynchronous lecture, along with some required readings and some recommended readings.

During week seven, in lieu of class, students will be asked to attend at least one synchronous activity during the Black Study Intensive from Sept. 28 to Oct. 2, a week in which the Center of African American Poetry and Poetics will hold virtual performances and creative sessions open to any discipline and the general public.

Covington-Ward gave particular credit to Mike Bridges in the Center for Teaching and Learning for helping with the tech side of the class and Amanda Godley, vice provost for Graduate Studies, who is supervising a teaching assistant from the School of Education who is developing questions for students to answer after each module and is helping with student inquiries.

Faculty Assembly questions

A string of emails between Faculty Assembly members and others last weekend raised several issues, although none questioned the motives behind creating the class.

The class is required for first-year students and available to any others. It will be graded as Satisfactory or Not Completed. Students were automatically enrolled in the free course. It is just one of the many initiatives Pitt has taken in the past few months to address systemic racism.

The questions were first raised by Patrick Loughlin, professor and associate chair of Bioengineering in the Swanson School of Engineering, who said in his email that he had received queries from colleagues about the class that he couldn't answer.

Subsequent emails helped clear up questions he and others had, Loughlin said.

- **Is this a degree requirement?** The class is not formally a degree requirement, said Joseph McCarthy, vice provost for Undergraduate Studies. While it will count toward the required credits for graduation in many (if not all) instances, it is not a specific requirement of any degree from any of the schools/campuses of Pitt at this time. If a student receives an NC grade for this course, it will appear on their transcript as such, but will not impact their GPA nor their ability to graduate.
- **What are the policies and procedures governing how a course is approved and mandated across all disciplines?** McCarthy said this academic year is the first time the University has utilized a university-wide subject code (PITT). For a course to be offered across all disciplines, the Provost's Advisory Committee on Undergraduate Programs (PACUP) approved a pilot whereby a course needs to gain the support of more than one school or campus. Next, PACUP must vet the syllabus and agree that the course is of broad enough significance that it fits the subject code and that PACUP is willing to examine the assessment of learning outcomes to assure that the course is worthy of continued offering. In the case of the anti-Black racism course, both the School of Social Work and the School of Education confirmed that they approved of the course and PACUP was unanimous in its support of using the PITT subject code. The first course offered under the PITT subject code was PITT 0130 Wellness and Resilience.

Part of the confusion over how the course came about is linked to previous discussions in Faculty Assembly about a proposal from Pitt alum Sydney Massenberg, and a subsequent petition signed by 7,200 people, to have a three-credit Black Studies general education requirement.

The one-credit course, which was outlined to the Senate Educational Policies Committee (EPC) by McCarthy, is not intended as a substitute for the proposed three-credit class, Senate President Chris Bonneau said.

In the email chain, Bonneau answered concerns that faculty were not involved in approving the University-wide course: "The 'process' in this case, while unorthodox, was not without Senate involvement, in particular myself and the EPC. Everyone involved was (1) keen to get something operational quickly given the current climate on campus, in our community, and in our country; (2) understood that the Massenberg proposal was going to be vetted by the usual process, and (3) wanted to incentivize students to take it seriously (hence offering credit) but not place an additional full course on students without the usual process (hence making it asynchronous and pass/fail)."

Bonneau said in an interview, "It was a way for us to react quickly to a changing scene that touched the lives of so many people in our community and continues to do so. We're going to discuss broader reforms in due time, but here's something we could implement relatively quickly and show that we take this seriously and we're making steps, and I think it's going to do a lot of good."

Covington-Ward said eventually the lectures will be available to faculty and staff, and Bonneau said he's looking forward to taking it. As for the three-credit course, he said he would prefer to have a range of classes students could take to fulfill the requirement. "I think students learn best when they are engaged with the material. Giving students some choice, while ensuring that these courses still fit the general topic, is generally, I think, a better way to go."

The Education Policies and the Equity, Inclusion and Anti-Discrimination Advocacy committees will be discussing the three-credit course this fall.

What about other minorities?

Another question raised in the emails and by others is whether this class should include information about the struggles of other targeted minorities, such as anti-Semitism, LGBTQ discrimination, and women's rights and suffrage.

Covington-Ward says anti-Black racism goes back to the United States' "original sin" of slavery.

"While many other groups have histories of similar kinds of experiences around discrimination, the root of anti-Black racism is really tied to the dehumanization of black lives that goes back to slavery. I think that it's very important to mark that as a very particular vexing part of race relations in this country. If you think about it in terms of racism in our country, there are these poles of black and white, and everyone who falls in between. That is how our nation has been set up for hundreds of years.

"I think that it's very necessary to talk about the ways in which other groups have been discriminated against. ... But the ways in which anti-Black racism plays out has a very particular kind of aspect that's tied to slavery. This is the reason why you don't have the same repercussions for killing someone who is Black than you do for someone who is not. This is the reason why Black men in particular are experiencing particular higher rates of incarceration. All of these things are tied to that history. You have to understand that long history in order to understand where we are today."

Susan Jones is editor of the University Times. Reach her at suejones@pitt.edu or 412-648-4294.

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University of Pittsburgh
Craig Hall, fourth floor
200 S. Craig St.
Pittsburgh, PA 15260

412-648-4294
utimes@pitt.edu

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