

# A Proposed Center for Antiracist, Just, and Equitable Futures

Working Group C

Revised Draft 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](#) include some work on aspects of race, ethnicity and inequality.

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 prompted by the nation-wide protests that followed the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and others. Black student activism at Cornell reminded the campus that the forces of structural racism and systemic bias are at work in our own community and that we have an obligation to address the problem through 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 on whom impacts still persist in the context of settler colonialism. We accept as well that Black Women and Women of Color in general experience racism in ways which intersect with institutional sexism. Racism operates globally; various groups are dehumanized by hierarchies, structures, policies, systems and practices in their contexts. While we acknowledge that racisms are connected, we also note that an ahistorical and abstract equivalence cannot be attached to all forms.

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 both local and global contexts. The Center should be unique in how it engages students and faculty across campus through collaboration, taking a unified and comparative approach to teaching, research, and engagement with on-campus and off-campus communities.

## **2. MISSION: The Center for Antiracist, Just, 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 Antiracist, Just, and Equitable Futures.**" We fully understand that a more appropriate name may emerge as discussions unfold. Naming opportunities should also be considered insofar as they might sharpen outside perceptions of what the Center is all about. "The Toni Morrison Center for Racial Justice" was one of several interesting suggestions that the Working Group discussed.

The Center should amplify and support rigorous scholarship, engaged research, performance, art, and design to build a community of scholars and students who keep at the forefront the "futures vision". It must advance our understanding of the structural and systemic basis of race, indigeneity, ethnicity and bias through collaborations across disciplines and identities with communities in Ithaca, across the United States and beyond. For the Center to be transformational it must be a physical and virtual space that fosters exceptional teaching, research, public scholarship, and leadership in action.

## **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 Colonialization 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.
- 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.

Collaboration is in Cornell’s DNA and a source of its innovation and strength. A good example is 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 Botanical 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.

This example shows that the smaller-slices-of-the-pie concern is not justified if the proposed Center is structured as the leading place for scholarship on questions of race and ethnicity, collaborates with partners, and carefully positions itself for outside funding.

Collaborations with units across campus 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 would help take the Center’s academic mission forward and make it unique among its peers.

##### 4.1 Collaboration with 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: Africana, AIISP, Asian American Studies, FGSS, Latino 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. An emphasis on intersectionality and comparative global work would bring together and strengthen all groups across campus.

## 4.2 Collaboration with 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 mission of the Center.

By properly integrating what the library has to offer, the Center has the potential to become the premier place on campus to promote critical scholarship on race and diversity that enriches the nation's historical record. In this regard it is useful to think of the Center as a "laboratory" with CUL serving as both an intellectual and possible physical host. Laboratories are places of interrogation and in this case ongoing interrogation is fundamental for understanding race and privilege, colonization, and all forms of othering and oppression. There are three aspects to this:

- *Research Support.* 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.
- *Engagement and Outreach.* The model for engagement and outreach programming for the Center should be as complex and multifaceted as the BIPOC community at Cornell. The Center should provide a collaborative space for critical conversations about race and belonging at Cornell, and in all the places our students call home. The Center should aim to provide a platform in which previously marginalized groups are empowered to gather and feel valued and heard on their own terms. Across the country, a model that is proving appealing to funders is to marry such academic cultural centers and strategies for DEI engagement to digital scholarship and research hubs that bring together the campus community and the world outside, including BIPOC alumni.
- *Physical Location.* CUL is centrally located on campus and would contribute a central location critical to the identity of the Center. The Center will be a space that represents a connection to history and the struggle for equity at Cornell and across the world, through archives, public space and cultural collections that are representative of our community. The Center will simultaneously be forward-facing connecting us to cutting edge local and global scholarship and programming. Co-locating the Center and CUL would have a tremendous impact on both institutions, bringing down barriers scholarly and social, and moving us closer to a just, equitable future.

We also note several research efforts across the country that support our view that library involvement in the Center will be critical to its long-term success. [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. At Cornell, CUL-Center collaboration would allow us to make seminal public archives like Cornell's [Hip Hop Collection](#) accessible to the communities it showcases, even as it could pave the way to transformative acquisitions such as [The Toni Morrison Library](#) which is currently available.

## 4.3 The Johnson Museum

The Center can collaborate with the Museum to enhance the role it plays in our educational programs and to amplify its mission through Museum hosted exhibitions and shows with themes that connect to the proposed

Center. Recent examples include [How the Light Gets In](#) (2019, on immigration) and the prospective [Art and the Global Climate Struggle](#) (2021, based on fieldwork with Indigenous peoples in Central Asia, the Arctic, and North America) that will foreground works of art that explore the consequences of climate change on the food production, security, cultural independence, and general wellbeing of Indigenous and other peoples with strong ties to their land. Effective collaboration with the Museum will elevate the profile of the Center across campus and in the surrounding community, while providing another 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 is 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. Because of their interdisciplinary component, the core academic programs mentioned above also support policy-focused curriculum and research.

### **5. INFRASTRUCTURES FOR COLLABORATION**

The Center must have sufficient infrastructure if it is to realize its ambitions.

#### **5.1 Infrastructure to Enhance External Funding Opportunities**

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 collaboration 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 that ensures long term success. The location of the Center in CUL and the creation of a Digital Hub has been discussed. We also suggest collaborations with the [Office of Academic Diversity Initiatives](#) and partnering with Student and Campus Life to further strengthen community within and between BIPOC groups, similar to how many [campus cultural centers around the country](#) have been working.

### 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. These partnership opportunities should be built 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 a 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, the Center should host the governance of the literacy component of the education requirement currently being developed by Working Group – S and 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, with a preference given to those who have done engaged and/or public-facing scholarship, and/or have admin experience. 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 Cornell 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. The student representatives should include undergraduates and graduate students drawn from BIPOC, issue-focused student organizations within each college/school including the Graduate School. The 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 credibility to the effort and facilitate the development of an outward facing vision. The importance of getting external advice during moments of crisis and of consolidation cannot be overstated. 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, and would 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 AIIS Program 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 provide 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 help the Center navigate the politics of change.
- A journalist or media-savvy individual from the constituent communities. They will advise the Center in all matters that concern communication.
- A respected entrepreneur from the constituent communities. They will provide the Center with key connections and strategies associated with the market place.
- A religious or spiritual leader who has a record of being inclusive and outspoken on issues of justice (like Dr. King or Archbishop Tutu). They will impart to the Center a sense of moral purpose.

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