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Answering the Calls for Inclusion from St. John's Students

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ANSWERING THE CALLS FOR INCLUSION FROM ST. JOHN'S UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

I am proud to announce the launch of the *Journal for Critical Race and Ethnic Studies (JCRES)*, a publication of the Institute for Critical Race and Ethnic Studies (CRES), a research unit at St. John's University in New York. The journal will serve as one of the cornerstones of the CRES Institute via the type of research that it highlights in its pages, i.e., the knowledge generation approaches emblematic of the interdisciplinary fields of critical race and ethnic studies. These methods center the voices of people who have been racially and ethnically marginalized and foregrounds, as our mission notes, the knowledges and practices that have long existed outside formal academic structures and settings. These approaches represent pathways aimed at democratizing education and supporting inclusive scientific/research practices that strengthen our conceptual understanding of the world.

Launched on October 22, 2021, the CRES Institute's overarching goal in its research focus is to address the problems caused by systemic racism and the intersecting forms of oppression it manifests associatively, particularly in other elements of social identity such as gender, sexuality, class, and ability, to name a few. The CRES Institute's approach to this work occurs via collaborative relationships between members of the university community and people and groups outside St. John's, locally, nationally, and globally, e.g. researchers, grassroots activists, artists, industry leaders, policymakers, legislators, community-based organizations, who are similarly engaged in finding redresses for systemic racism.

The vigorous demands made in 2015 by St. John's University's students for inclusivity in the social world of their campuses and in their curriculum spurred the inception of the Institute. The Institute grew from the efforts of these students along with the support of a coalition of faculty and administrators at St. John's. Its origin can be contextualized historically with national and global student-activist movements for inclusivity. Such campus movements also coincided with national and global racial justice movements.

In the United States in the 2015-2016 academic year, student activism reached new heights at college campuses across the nation. Protests at the University of Missouri were some of the most broadly covered in the media. These protests occurred in the wake of the police killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri in August 2014. By June 2015, a white supremacist murdered 9 people in a bible study group at Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina. Like many other places, the 2015- 2016 school year at St. John's University ushered in increased student activism. Here at St. John's, a multi-racial group of students, who called themselves Students of Consciousness (SOC), organized against the racism and non-inclusivity they experienced on campus. St. John's students' activism was similar to the protesters at other campuses across the U.S. in that they too raised the issues of exclusionary practices based on race and sexuality.¹

SOC presented a program of nine demands that provided solutions to the campus climate they encountered.² Four of their stated demands focused on what could be identified as the university's responsibility for student learning and overall knowledge development. One demand was a call for incoming students to be provided with an orientation program that allowed them to learn about the diverse lived experiences of the multi-racial groups that make up the St. John's student body. Three

other demands concerned knowledge production in the academic/disciplinary structures of the university and the content of the curriculum and pedagogies in those structures. The students identified the History, Sociology & Anthropology, Psychology, and English departments as spaces where they wanted the university to hire more faculty of color who “specialize in Africana studies” to serve in those disciplinary areas.³ They also wanted Latin American and Caribbean Studies to be structurally incorporated as an undergraduate academic program. And, they wanted the university’s Tobin College of Business to develop partnerships outside the university that supported minority business programs.

The demands from St. John’s SOC students and other U.S.-based student activists follow chronologically the rise of the student-initiated and student-led Rhodes Must Fall Movement at University of Cape Town (UCT) in South Africa, which spread globally to the United Kingdom and then to the United States.⁴ Students leaders in the Rhodes Must Fall movement called for the removal from the UCT campus the statue of Cecil Rhodes, a southern Africa colonialist.⁵ These students also called for the hiring of more faculty of color and a democratized, inclusive curriculum that reflected the knowledges and lived experiences of people who have been traditionally marginalized in their academy.⁶ These types of demands are often incorporated in what many researchers classify as “decolonizing the university.”⁷

Generally speaking, SJU student activists, as well as other student activists nationally and globally, represented ways of seeing and knowing the world that universities had yet to adjust to. Universities at their core should operate with a flexibility, a “transformability,”⁸ that allow them to continuously incorporate in their various disciplines and their respective disciplinary knowledge generation processes the new information being unearthed and the new questions being raised in society. This is the nature of all the sciences, the humanities and legal studies departments incorporated in university structures: new empirical evidence is incorporated; they transform our conceptualizations of the world, which provides updated outcomes in research.

This is not an argument about the neutrality of science; it is just the opposite. When we knowingly ignore empirical evidence, the sciences are no longer about the creation of knowledge; they instead operate as ideologies.⁹ For example, it is necessary for us to incorporate in our everyday interactions and the ways in which we research, produce, and distribute knowledge an awareness about this epistemic shift that has been under way for more than a century—racial categories are not a biological/genetic phenomena; they are socially constructed.¹⁰ This was empirically established in the hard sciences about a quarter century ago with the mapping of the human genome in 2000.¹¹ Creating intellectual scaffolding in the structures of the university to meet this and other epistemic shifts that may be reflected in the students’ demands should be a concern for universities across the globe.

During this most recent period of heightened student activism at St. John’s University, the then-university administration (and the subsequent one) through the work of a coalition of faculty and administrators responded with institutional transformation plans that included the development of an [Academic Center for Equity and Inclusion](#), an [Office of Equity and Inclusion](#), and an [Inclusivity Resource Center](#). These were all in place by the end of the 2018-2019 academic year.

In June 2019, a group of faculty and administrators of color at St. John's University began actively exploring the creation of an academic program/department in the fields of critical race and ethnic studies. At the end of that school year, in May 2020, police in Minneapolis, Minnesota murdered George Floyd, setting off more global protests for racial justice and against police abuse of power. Across the globe a large variety of types of institutions, from corporate entities to universities, had some response in support of racial justice. Here at St. John's, the senior leadership pledged to make St. John's an anti-racist university.¹² The university's inclusivity statement notes the following:

As a Catholic and Vincentian university, St. John's is committed to institutionalizing practices of inclusive excellence to ensure that we welcome and celebrate the intrinsic worth of all members of our community.¹³

By the 2020-2021 school year, [St. John's' minor in critical race and ethnic studies](#) was approved and began offering classes. In the following school year, the New York State Education Department approved a [B.A. program](#). Also, in the fall of that academic year, the University launched the [LGBTQ+ Center](#) and the [Institute for Critical Race and Ethnic Studies](#).

St. John's University has a 150-year history. In the span of nearly a decade through activism and deep reflections about knowledge creation, institutional transformation that portends a noteworthy shift in the knowledge production processes and spaces of the university is tangible.¹⁴ The CRES Institute's research goals include responding to the new developments in race and racism in the larger society (and about which our incoming students have questions), and incorporating these responses in collaborative studies with people and community-based groups outside the university using the interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary critical race and ethnic studies approaches to research. This work supports faculty research and curricular and pedagogical growth in the Academic Programs and across the university's six schools and colleges. *JCRES* represents one of the ways in which we do this work.

~ Natalie P. Byfield, Ph.D.
Founding Director,
Institute for Critical Race & Ethnic Studies

Endnotes:

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- ¹ Hartocollis, A. and J. Bidgood. 2015. "Racial Discrimination Protests Ignite at Colleges Across the U.S." *The New York Times*. Nov. 15. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/12/us/racial-discrimination-protests-ignite-at-colleges-across-the-us.html>. Also see: Blay, Y. and I. Day. 2019. "External Report on the Departmentalization of Transnational Race and Ethnic Studies (TRES) at St. John's University." The initial name considered for the CRES program was Transnational Race and Ethnic Studies. While meeting with the consultants, students said that title (TRES) had no meaning to them. The planning committee then switched the name to Critical Race and Ethnic Studies as the field of Critical Race and Ethnic Studies would be the methodological and intellectual driving force behind the program.
- ² Blay and Day, 2019, "External Report."
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Andrews, K. 2016. "The Black Studies Movement in Britain." *The Black Scholar* (blog). October 6. <https://www.theblackscholar.org/black-studies-movement-britain/>.
- ⁵ Southern Rhodesia was renamed Zimbabwe in 1979. See also: Parker, K. R. 2016. "Introduction: Decolonizing the University: A Battle for the African Mind." *College Language Association*. Vol. 60(2):164-171. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26355914>.
- ⁶ Andrews, K. 2016. "At last, the UK has a black studies university course. It's long overdue." *The Guardian*. May 20. <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/may/20/black-studies-university-course-long-overdue>.
- ⁷ See Keet, A. 2019. "The Plastic University: Knowledge, Discipline and the Decolonial Turn." Pp. 202-216 in *Decolonisation in Universities: The politics of knowledge*. Edited by Jonathan D. Jansen. Johannesburg, South Africa: Wits University Press. <https://doi.org/10.18772/22019083351.15>; and Mbembe, A. J. 2016. "Decolonizing the university: New directions." *Arts & Humanities in Higher Education*. Vol. 15(1):29-45. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474022215618513>.
- ⁸ Keet, 2019, "The Plastic University." See also: Parker, 2016, "Introduction: Decolonizing the University."
- ⁹ Kuhn, T. 2012 (1962). *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Fourth Ed. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. This proximity between science and ideology is fueling some of the debates in the culture about "truth" and "facts."
- ¹⁰ Du Bois, W.E.B. 2007 (1899). *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study*. With an Introduction by Lawrence Bobo. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- ¹¹ Roberts, D. 2011. *Fatal Invention: How Science, Politics, and Big Business Re-Crete Race in the Twenty-First Century*. New York, NY: The New Press. p. 26
- ¹² <https://www.stjohns.edu/equity-and-inclusion/becoming-antiracist-institution>
- ¹³ <https://www.stjohns.edu/equity-and-inclusion>
- ¹⁴ See Keet, 2019, p. 212.