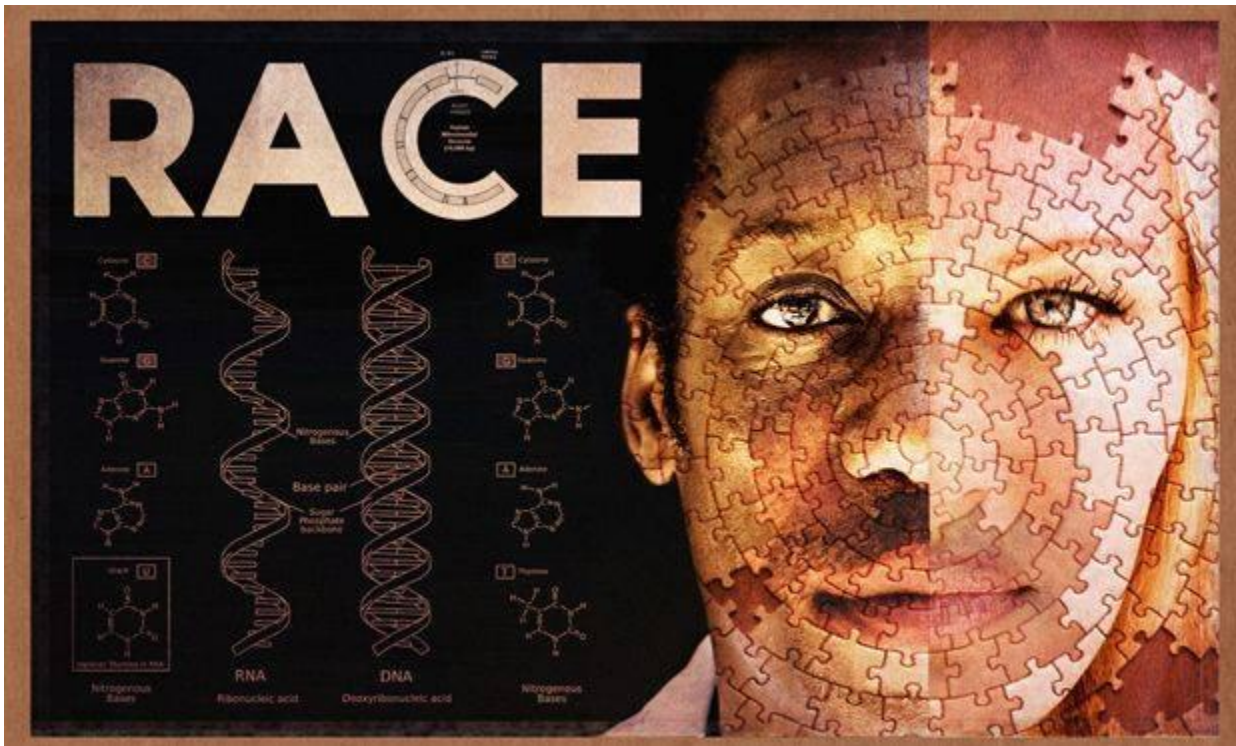


Lewis and Clark students hosting panel on racial discrimination in criminal justice system

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer
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GODFREY - In today's simultaneously diverse and divided society, topics such as racial discrimination and the criminal justice system are often polarizing.

Students from Jen Cline's sociology class focusing on race and ethnic relations are working together to facilitate a respectful and informative discussion panel to address some of those issues in an educational manner. The panel will be held on Wednesday, April 12, 2017, at 1:30 p.m. in Hathaway Hall at Lewis and Clark Community College

(LCCC). The [Justice for All?](#) panel will consist of several guests from many aspects of the topic of racial concerns and disparities on several levels of the criminal justice system. The main goal of the panel is attempting to find ways to alleviate those issues.

The panel is open to the public and will feature the following speakers: Wesley Bell, an attorney who teaches criminal justice at St. Louis Community College in Florissant Valley and serves on the Ferguson City Council, Dr. Larry Golden, who helps exonerate wrongly-convicted individuals and is associated with the Innocence Project based out of Springfield, Illinois, Mario Love, an adjunct LCCC professor who teaches both American government and history of race, and Joseph Splittorff, a detective with the Alton Police Department.

Admission to the panel is free, and public involvement is encouraged.

"This event has been put together with the idea of shedding light on some of the tough topics that flood our media that tends to put a negative spotlight on police," Linsey Rice sent in an email.

Rice said in the email she was a criminal justice major hoping to pursue a career in law enforcement.

"We also want to ask the tough questions that many want to ask, but are too afraid of the answers they may get. The goal here is not to make our criminal justice system look bad, but maybe to expose some of the issues that are clearly affecting our society, and what can be done to help alleviate said issues."

Students from Cline's class worked together to facilitate the panel, Cline said. Students, Kim Bledsoe and Rice, pushed for the panel after Rice watched a documentary called "13th," a documentary hosted on the streaming service Netflix regarding the "intersection of race, justice and mass incarceration in the United States." It is named after the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which freed slaves and prohibited slavery, unless it is used as punishment for a crime.

In an email, Hornberger said it was difficult for her to accept some of the systematic issues with the criminal justice system, even describing herself as close-minded on many topics at the time. After viewing that documentary, and doing more research on other issues such as the prison-industrial complex and Black Lives Matter Movement, she said her mind, eyes and heart were open to a broader scope of ideas.

"I think as an aspiring police officer it's important for me to be open to this idea, because I want to not only help people, but be the best cop I can be," she said in an email. "If I go into this field close-minded, how will I ever reach my goal? Our class wants to show

the importance of educating yourself on topics you may not agree with, and understand why things are happening the way that they are, and not just focusing on what's happening. I think we've put together a panel of people who are highly-educated on the topic, and I can't wait for them to speak to the public."

Cline's race and ethnic relations class holds at least seven criminal justice majors, many of whom Cline said "hated sociology" before taking the class. After learning a bit about the racial injustice within the criminal justice system, however, Cline said her students were 100 percent behind the panel.

"This was all them," she said. "They are super excited about it."

Student Amy Yates said sociology helps "bridge the gap" with criminal justice, because it "shows and brings light to how the structures are set up, and why black people are more likely to suffer longer sentences." She cited the War on Drugs as well as federally-mandated minimum sentencing issues for why sociological issues apply to the criminal justice system.

Bledsoe said she was excited for next week's panel because of the involvement of Dr. Golden from the Innocence Project. She was soliciting donations for the Innocence Project at the beginning of Cline's 1:30 p.m. class on Monday, April 3. She had as much as \$20.

"It's a big thing," she said. "They help exonerate people wrongly convicted of crimes through DNA evidence. Sometimes don't want to take the extra time and go the extra mile to pinpoint who actually committed the crime."

Other factors in wrongful convictions may include such DNA testing not being available at the time of the trial, and a lack of resources to properly conduct such tests. The Innocence Project works with the wrongly-convicted to procure such evidence to prove innocence.

An African American student in Cline's class who did not wish to be named said he has spent as long as 20 years in the prison system. He identified himself as an ex-felon, and said he was worried he would not see the system change while he was still alive.

"It's like same years of trying on the same suit over and over again," he replied when asked about [Alton's current community policing model](#). "We get in the class and we talk about it, but is like going to the river with a shot glass. It's not enough to really know the problem."

That student recounted living in the "Mexico" area of Alton with his family. He said he could be sitting on his porch with his mother, and a police officer would park outside the home, get out of the car and ask for his I.D. The student said he would show the officer his I.D., and the officer would then ask him to search his property.

"I knew if he ran my papers and everything and realized I didn't have a warrant or anything, they would have no right to search my place, so I told them as such," the student said. "If I didn't show them my I.D., however, they may crack me over the head and come up with a reason to take me in. I've been through the system for 20 years, and I know how it goes."

He said he has since moved to Godfrey and has yet to even see a police officer, let alone be hassled by one.

While the community policing platform may be a step forward for Alton, the man said he was worried it would be more talking without action. He stood by his stance he would not see a paradigm shift while he was alive.

Because of his story, and many stories similar to it from across the country, Cline's students are hosting the panel for a civil discussion about what can be done by both the community and police departments to better improve the quality of life and equality of justice for all people regardless of their race. The panel will not be anti-police, especially considering the inclusion of a detective from the Alton Police Department and the facilitation by criminal justice system. It will, however, be an open, honest and frank discussion of what is wrong with racial inequity in the justice system and what can be done to make it better.

Oh, and 12-13 percent of the American population as a whole is African American, yet African Americans consist of 35 percent of jail inmates and more than 37 percent of prison inmates.