

# Department Of Political Science Asks Has SIUE Arrived At Destination Anti- Racism?

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Southern Illinois University Edwardsville College of Art and Sciences' (CAS) Department of Political Science, encouraged by a campus-wide anti-racism initiative, started on the road to affect positive change with a series of conversations about race and racism.

A year later, the department presented its final discussion entitled, "Are We There Yet?: A Conversation of Anti-Racism at SIUE," which was a virtual dialogue moderated by Timothy Lewis, PhD, assistant professor of political science, held Wednesday, April 7. Panel members included Lakesha Butler, PharmD, BCPS, director of diversity, equity and inclusion for the SIUE School of Pharmacy (SOP); Dominic Dorsey, director of the

Office for Accessible Campus Community and Equitable Student Support (ACCESS); and Kevin Leonard, PhD, CAS dean. Providing opening and closing remarks was Kenneth Moffett, PhD, chair and political science professor.

“Is SIUE an anti-racist campus?” Lewis asked the panelists.



“No” was the short answer that each respondent gave.

“We have to remember that SIUE was established some years ago, in wake of the Jim Crow era, and we have not necessarily made a tremendous change where racist individuals feel uncomfortable,” Butler expounded. “Almost a year ago, SIUE had its initial focus on racism with the anti-racism task force (ARTF), and it was a huge undertaking. Still, we have much work to do at the root of what is creating a non-inclusive, non-equitable environment for individuals – and that is racism.

“There is a collective on campus who have experienced racism, and another who have undergone an awakening and are actively educating themselves on what racism is and how it manifests. However, there is another collective on campus who don’t believe and potentially don’t want to understand that racism actually does exist, because it doesn’t affect them directly.”

The CAS dean noted an institution of higher learning where he once worked. Leonard said the school had a history of segregation, and now Blacks make up one-fourth of its student population.

“I don’t want to make excuses for why SIUE is not progressing as rapidly towards its goal of anti-racism,” explained Leonard, “but I find it refreshing to be here, where we are at least talking about racism explicitly and honestly. In looking at ARTF recommendations, I see real progress such as bringing in more speakers to speak about

racism, and there are other places where we have made some progress. But we come up against a lot of barriers because of the history of racism, not only in the institution, but also in the larger society.”

“Not only is the answer, no, we’re not an anti-racist campus, but the question is why,” challenged Dorsey. “This institution operates as a ‘We’re not a racist campus.’ As opposed to being an anti-racist campus. A lot of institutions operate the same way. It’s about the publicity, the perspective and the perception of those on the outside looking in. It’s not enough to profess that we’re anti-racist, if we’re not doing the things that anti-racism demands. If we espouse to and profess to be anti-racist, when are we going to start taking on an active role of calling racism out for what it is, and not penalizing individuals when they do so?”

“How are we doing something tangible, not performative, to address the issues that are impacting our students? We can’t allow racism the space to breathe, to grow and to expand. We have to be like ghostbusters, and when we see racism happen, we have to attack it, eliminate it, remove it and be transparent about the process. If we pretend like our hands are clean and nothing has ever happened like that on this campus or ever will again, that is being disingenuous and people don’t believe it or trust it.”

Moderator Lewis posed another question: “Who and what are the barriers between this campus being anti-racist?”

“We have individuals in power and who have currency,” noted Butler. “The individuals in power, who are not necessarily spending their currency, because it may make them lose some of their power and lose some of their currency. Then there is the situation that we are so used to being in a culture that is racist, that we allow things to happen and accountability is not there. Also, the idea of addressing racism or even accepting that racism exists is new for a lot of people.

“I want to echo what Dr. Butler said about a lot of white people on campus who have not been asked before to think carefully about the history of racism, and how it carries forward into our present,” said Leonard. “But we have to push back against racist history and policies, and the fact that there are a lot of assumptions that people don’t question. There is resistance to the concept of white privilege and the idea that there is systemic racism.

“I see evidence of systemic racism, and I struggle with my own racism. I grew up in a racist society, with lots of assumptions of what it meant to be white, and how other people didn’t deserve what I had because of race. Thankfully, I’ve been challenged by a lot of people who care about me as a person, who intervene and hold me accountable. I appreciate when people say we need to do that with administrators. I hope I will be open

to being confronted and to have people say, ‘This is what you’re doing that perpetuates racism. What are you going to do to end racism and to be anti-racist?’”