

Some Key Take-Aways from SAS OUE's February 26, 2021 panel
Voices of Diversity: Black Lives at Rutgers

On February 26, the third panel in our series *Voices of Diversity: Rutgers Student Stories* was hosted by the SAS Office of Undergraduate Education and generously supported by a Diversity Innovation Grant from the RU-NB Division of Diversity, Inclusion, and Community Engagement (DICE).

This series of panels – four this year – is designed to provide a unique opportunity for faculty and instructors to directly listen to and learn from the varied personal experiences of multiple individuals in our incredibly diverse, intersectional, Rutgers student body. Our Student Advisory Board -- a team of 13 undergraduate students that represent the breadth and richness of our SAS community, including a range of majors and class years – is developing the panel topics for the year and is selecting panelists based on the essays of de-identified applicants.

We are enormously indebted to the Student Advisory Board and the volunteer panelists for the considerable time, energy, and mental and emotional labor that went into designing, preparing for, and participating in *Voices of Diversity*. Thank you to the entire SAS-OUE Teaching & Learning team for their work on this initiative, and especially to Jenevieve DeLosSantos for organizing this panel and serving as an advisor to the Student Advisory Board members. We are also extremely grateful to Darnell Thompson, Assistant Director of Education, Center for Social Justice and LGBT Communities, for moderating this panel.

The students shared many varied experiences and perspectives during the panel. Unfortunately, it is not possible to include all of the helpful and insightful contributions by the panelists in a brief document. Below, however, we have summarized a few common themes that emerged from the students' comments.

Please plan to join us for our final panel this year on Friday, April 2nd from 10:00 – 11:30 am. The topic for this panel will be "Facing Uncertainty: Returning to Campus and Life After Rutgers."

Voices of Diversity: Black Lives at Rutgers

Several common themes emerged during the panel:

Importance of recognizing diversity of backgrounds and experiences

"The Black experience is not monolithic. It is important to support us as individuals."

- Do not assume that all Black students have the same background or experiences.
- Panelists shared very different pre-Rutgers experiences with diversity and, as a result, different experiences when transitioning to life at Rutgers.
 - For some students from non-diverse areas, coming to Rutgers was "a culture shock seeing people who looked like me."
 - For some students from highly diverse areas, at Rutgers they felt more alone.
- Individuals have a number of intersectional identities (such as race and gender, among others), all of which contribute to individual experiences and needs.
- Students in different fields and majors have very different experiences in terms of representation and feeling included and safe in classroom spaces.

- One student shared that she has felt excluded in classroom discussions based on her faith, which is part of her identity as a Black student. We must recognize and respect diverse and intersecting experiences/perspectives/identities in our classrooms, including religious identities.

Difficulty of having to compartmentalize identities

"I see Black bodies being mutilated and killed on TV. And then I have to shut it off and go write a paper on Dracula."

- Panelists consistently described feeling that they have to compartmentalize and separate their identity as a Rutgers student from their identity as a Black person (in addition, in some cases, additional intersecting identities) in order to cope and succeed academically.
- Panelists candidly described the need to compartmentalize fearing for their own safety (including racist interactions on campus) and processing deeply personal responses to trauma (which might include systemic racism and violence) while having to continue functioning as a student.
- Difficulty navigating two different worlds (student and "real world"), especially during COVID.
 - Students are faced with serious issues like family health problems, institutionalized racism, and financial challenges. But they feel they have to set it all aside to focus on classes.
 - *"I want to break down, but I can't because I have so many other things I have to focus on and do."*

Feeling included and supported in some spaces but decidedly not in others

"My Black identity infrequently overlaps with my Rutgers identity.... I am only both when openly invited to do so."

- Students feel that there is only "optional inclusion" of Black people in many classes and curriculum. There is no regularly provided space to share Black experiences, and some students shared that they only feel recognized and valued as an example of overcoming adversity and being exceptional.
- Black student voices are dismissed and disregarded in a number of classrooms and overlooked in favor of White students.
- Student in a Living Learning Community described feeling excluded, tokenized, and that the only support came from small group of other Black students in the community.
- Students find some support and community through student organizations and support programs, departments and majors/minors with greater representation of Black faculty and more inclusive coursework and curricula, and some individual instructors.
 - *"The only time I felt accepted was with people who looked like me, thought like me, shared experiences with me. Then I could tell that I wasn't crazy, that it really is that way."*
 - Organizations and programs with a sizeable number of other Black students have been helpful. Examples include ODASIS and the Africana Studies department.
 - Helpful examples of individual instructors devoting time before class to acknowledge racial violence and other events that were happening, reaching out to connect on a personal level with students, and making exerted efforts to be inclusive in their curriculum and classroom conversations. These examples seem rare but very positive and impactful when they occur.

What can instructors do to better support and include Black students?

- Critique your curriculum and make it more inclusive
 - Think about what you have learned and use it to reimagine and critique what you have planned in your curriculum. Classroom curriculum can be fluid—infuse the experiences of students.
 - Make sure the curriculum content is diverse so that Black (and other underrepresented) students can see themselves in the materials.
 - Recognize that no discipline is truly objective. Even (especially) in “hard sciences,” it’s important to maintain social consciousness in class.
 - Example of medicine and medical practices impacting Blacks differently, yet they are often seen and presented as objective.

- Have a values-centered approach to creating transformative classroom spaces
 - Reach out to Black students and make yourself available as a person to offer support and listen; offer time before/after class to just talk “as people.”
 - Openly invite students to talk about current and cultural issues to promote cultural competency.
 - Especially in large classes, try to connect with your students. Even if you won't remember names, ask them when students contribute to make them feel visible.
 - Be aware of, and avoid, ways of making comments that convey “you shouldn't be here” or “you don't belong” or “you don't deserve to be here.”
 - As an example, one student described an instructor recommending dropping down to a lower-level course than they initially placed into. When not properly framed, it is very easy for that to carry a highly discouraging message.
 - Help students with accessing resources; don’t just include statements on your syllabus. Recognize the value of things like posting course materials on Canvas and not requiring expensive textbooks.
 - With COVID, the strain for Black students has become exceptionally high. Panelists are dealing with health challenges and financial challenges that are compounded for Black people. In their experience, faculty rarely ask about challenges or offer meaningful support or flexibility.

- Recognize the trauma that Black students experience and allow for students to bring this (and their other identities) to class

“Either the cops or COVID will get us [as Black men] ... I could be another hashtag... I have to go to class and turn that off. It’s so difficult, and I become sort of numb to it.”

 - Reach out to students and engage them as whole people.
 - It takes work to break through barriers. Some students may be numb to someone reaching out to them to check in.
 - Not every student will recognize that they've experienced that trauma, but your work to engage students will still be impactful.
 - Acknowledge that we don’t live in a post-racial society and be able to “be that person” for students. Take the time and effort to read and educate yourself about these issues.
 - Recognize and discuss what's happening in the world outside the classroom.

- Ask students how they are doing and offer support and help; “*Be a human at the end of the day.*”
- Make accommodations for students to engage with what is happening.
 - E.g., allow a student to leave class early to attend a protest.
 - Show up at the protest.
- Be aware of the power that you hold and use that power to call out microaggressions and support Black students

"When I see microaggressions, I call them out. When I call out microaggressions, I'm faced with dismissiveness. But those individual events...it's death by a thousand cuts. They compound perpetually, and the anger accumulates. Your [instructors'] voice is far stronger when standing up to that; use the power that you have."

 - Use your power as professors to transform classroom spaces to be inclusive.
 - Being open about who you bring into the space—which scholars, which students, and what figures you engage with in your curriculum are very important.
 - Facilitate conversations among peers that are respectful and a place to learn.
 - Remember that it's not the job of a Black student to teach White peers about the Black experience. Each student can only speak to their own experience.
 - **Respond to microaggressions** and disrespectful conversations.
 - Back up Black students when they call out microaggressions and validate their experiences.