



Racial Justice and Abolition Democracy: An Action Curriculum for A Just Society

Professors Bernard E. Harcourt and Bruce Western

Project Description

Institutions of higher education have a responsibility to redress the gross racial injustices that today permeate our society—injustices that they themselves have contributed to over past decades and centuries. Far too often, these institutions talk about racial injustice and even teach about it, but do not concretely work with community partners to actually redress the patterns and practices of racial discrimination.

In collaboration with community-based organizations and higher-educational institutions across the country, the [Square One Project](#) and the [Initiative for a Just Society](#) have come together to establish the Racial Justice and Abolition Democracy Project (RJAD), a prototype for a national upper-division action-oriented multi-disciplinary curricular program in the humanities, arts, social sciences, public policy, and law. The RJAD curriculum will be designed, developed, and tested collaboratively with community and higher-educational partners and a dedicated, diverse team of scholars at Columbia University. The narrative-changing work of Square One and the practice-oriented justice engagement and abolition democracy work of the Initiative for a Just Society will be part of the curriculum, informing its development and providing opportunities for students and the community.

[The Justice Lab](#), led by [Professor Bruce Western](#), is a research and justice reform collaboration between the Department of Sociology and the School of Social Work at Columbia; it hosts the Square One Project, an effort to develop a humanistic approach to social science and policy through a national project of narrative change and movement building, aimed at eliminating mass incarceration, reckoning with a history of white supremacy in justice systems and other social institutions, and empowering communities. The [Columbia Center for Contemporary Critical Thought](#), led by [Professor Bernard E. Harcourt](#), is a practice and research collaboration between the Law School and Arts & Sciences at Columbia that is guided by a philosophical and critical theoretic approach and conducts transformational education, litigation, and social justice reform on issues ranging from the death penalty and mass incarceration to police violence, Guantánamo Bay, and prison health issues and COVID-19 release litigation; it hosts the Initiative for a Just Society (IJS). IJS is sponsoring this year the seminar series [Abolition Democracy 13/13](#) and the [Abolition Practicum](#) for arts and sciences undergraduate and graduate students and law students;

it is. RJAD's mission is to convert these diverse and proven initiatives into a model educational curriculum that will exponentially expand this work to reach graduate and upper-level undergraduate students around the country.

The Racial Justice and Abolition Democracy curriculum will be available for adoption, adaptation, and use across the nation in universities and colleges, prisons, and community settings. The curriculum will include a cluster of academic and clinical courses and experiential learning opportunities, with full syllabi and teaching materials, including online teaching resources (videos, lectures, lesson plans) and several MOOCs ("massive open online courses"), all of which will be developed, designed, and tested collaboratively at partner organizations and institutions. Working with a large network of existing partners at the Square One Project and the Initiative for a Just Society, the project will design and provide teaching material that will be suitable for advanced undergraduates or a one-year master's degree spanning the humanities, arts, social sciences, policy, and law. Many of the courses developed for the curriculum will have a practical or clinical component to them, allowing students to combine theory and practice. For example, a research practicum in political history and public policy may involve work on community-based justice reform efforts, or an abolition law practicum may involve both undergraduate- and law student- level legal research on active death penalty or civil rights impact litigation. The model curriculum will form the hub of a broader collection of activities that will engage undergraduates and graduate students (as enrolled students, research assistants, and teaching assistants), as well as community partners, in justice projects with the ambition of abolition democracy. In addition, the project will coordinate with the Columbia University Library to ensure the long-term preservation and open access to online materials.

Understanding the violence and indecency that comprise much of American racism requires a diversity of perspectives and experiences. The curriculum will be informed by the work of authors, poets, ethnographers, philosophers, historians, legal analysts, statisticians, and, above all, community representatives who bear witness in daily life. The real power of this project lies in the relationships and partnerships that extend well beyond Columbia. Square One involves an array of community organizations, community leaders, artists, universities and colleges, and reform-minded practitioners in justice, health, education, and other arenas. The network is host to a unique conversation that acknowledges the expertise that develops through racial justice advocacy, community healing, anti-violence work, poetry and creative nonfiction, and university scholarship. Participants are joined through a mission to "reimagine justice" in a radically different way, one that rejects punishment as an organizing principle and instead celebrates human dignity, equity, and healing. In a similar way, the 13/13 seminars, hosted by the Initiative for a Just Society, brings together humanists, social thinkers, and artists from around the country and globe to speak to topics such as the Movement for Black Lives, the Standing Rock movement, the Arab Spring, and abolition movements. IJS has used litigation and policy interventions to shine a light on the darkest corners of the penal system, providing voice and representation in the face of grave injustice.

The RJAD team will be guided by an advisory board consisting of colleagues from higher education institutions and community-based organizations around the country, including leaders

at the College and Community Fellowship (a community organization providing higher education opportunities for formerly-incarcerated women in New York), North Carolina Central University (an HBCU in Durham, NC), Merritt College (a community college in Oakland, CA), and Wayne State University (a university in Detroit, MI). We will also work with community based justice reform organizations in New York and around the nation, and will collaborate with justice-in-arts organizations. This working process draws on a plurality of expertise, including traditional scholarship, lived experience of the criminal justice system, and the practical work of justice reform to produce a new kind of model curriculum that will change the narrative on racial equality and criminal justice.

RJAD staff will consist of racial justice fellows, scholars and researchers, artists and practitioners-in-residence, and other staff and advisors of Square One and IJS. They will work with Professors Harcourt and Western to coordinate with community, institutional, and arts partners, and ensure the successful completion of the model curriculum. The RJAD staff team will represent multidimensional diversity and will seek to include many persons who have been formerly incarcerated or otherwise deeply impacted by mass incarceration and who have deep community ties. In addition, this work will be supported by the Department of Sociology and their administrative staff.

Through this process, we hope to demonstrate that justice and education are twin pillars for a strong democracy. The endeavor will demonstrate how the humanities and arts can be integrated with the social sciences, public policy, and law in order to create a more socially just future and contribute to the public's understanding of the centrality of the liberal arts in the project of justice.

Advisory Board

The Racial Justice and Abolition Democracy Project is honored to work closely with a unique national advisory board that brings together academic and community leaders from organizations and institutions around the country. The advisory board includes the following members: Vivian D. Nixon, the Executive Director of College & Community Fellowship (CCF), a nonprofit dedicated to helping women with criminal convictions earn college degrees; Lorraine C. Taylor, a professor in the Department of Criminal Justice and the Executive Director of the Juvenile Justice Institute at North Carolina Central University in Durham, North Carolina; Barbara L. Jones, the Community Dispute Resolution Specialist and Faculty Instructor for the Center for Peace and Conflict Studies Program at Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan; Pastor Michael McBride (known as "Pastor Mike"), National Director for Urban Strategies and the LIVE FREE campaign; and Jason Seals, the Department Chair of Ethnic Studies and Professor of African American Studies at Merritt College in Oakland, California.

For more information, please visit <https://squareonejustice.org/rjad-curriculum/>.