

## Diversity + Equity + Inclusion 2020-2021 Strategic Plan



The Northwestern University School of Communication enjoys the reputation of being a global leader in the communication arts and sciences, with alumni, faculty, and students excelling at the top of their fields. Yet our recent national conversation around anti-Black racism and injustice, while viewed through the lens of our community's many achievements, shows us that access to our resources and opportunities for advancement are not equal. Not on the national level, and certainly not at the University and School level.

I am making the pursuit of diversity, equity, and inclusion a central tenet of my deanship. Expanding access to opportunities, thinking critically about our established curriculum and its implications, engaging in thoughtful conversations with scholars outside of the academy, and pushing for institutional change is to the benefit of everyone, but especially our BIPOC students, faculty, and staff who have long been kept at the margins.

By elevating our BIPOC community and committing to celebrating their voices, we will shift not only the School's culture, but the functions of the professions we study, our government, and society at large. The School of Communication will be a leader in systemic change.

It is through the following initiatives, as well as ongoing evaluation of our work in this space, that I hope to create a School that leads not only through our achievements but the breadth of voices actualizing our excellence.

Warmly,

E. Patrick Johnson  
Dean, School of Communication



Cast, crew, and faculty gather with playwright Tarrell Alvin McCraney (top row center) after a Wirtz Center performance of *In the Red and Brown Water* in 2017

## Dean's Initiatives:

**Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Task Force:** We are launching a School-wide DEI Task Force that will include students, faculty, and staff. This group will be charged with ensuring that we all embrace the urgency of this moment, that we are communicating with one voice, that we are listening, learning, and are prepared to do the work of authentic, impactful diversity, equity, and inclusion. The task force will also work in consultation with leadership and staff in the Office of Institutional Diversity and Inclusion to create and implement best practices in the School.

**Black Arts Consortium (BAC):** Formerly the [Black Arts Initiative](#), my flagship Northwestern multidisciplinary collaborative of Black artists and scholars, is growing. We now have work, meeting, and performance space on the 18<sup>th</sup> Floor of Abbott Hall on the Chicago Campus. Longtime BAC contributor Professor Ivy Wilson is our new director, and Sheridan Tucker Anderson is the new assistant director. BAC will enjoy expanded programming, more artists in residencies, more on-campus (and virtual) screenings of Black films, additional Black Arts in the City excursions, new undergraduate and graduate opportunities, and more. (At right: participants in a poetry slam at the 2017 conference "Black Arts International: Temporalities and Territories.")



**Dialogue with the Dean:** Both to raise the visibility of the dean's office and, in many instances, to keep the DEI conversation moving forward, I am hosting quarterly events with scholars and art-makers both inside the University and well beyond. For my inaugural "Dialogue" on October 14, I was joined by John L. Jackson, dean of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania (below) and co-director of my award-winning documentary, *Making Sweet Tea*. The conversation



explored media making as a form of community building and knowledge production and the impact of mass media on urban life. The second Dialogue of the academic year, to be held on February 18, will welcome Ruha Benjamin, Associate Professor of African American Studies at Princeton University and the founder of the Ida B. Wells Just Data Lab; and the third event on April 22 will feature Safiya Noble, an Associate



Professor at UCLA and author of *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*.

**Pathways to the Professoriate Postdoctoral Fellowship Program:** I am creating a pipeline for Northwestern postdoctoral scholars to advance seamlessly into tenure-track faculty positions here—a program that will be the first of its kind at the University. This will allow us to support efforts

to search for and hire BIPOC and intersectional scholars while also ensuring that these candidates feel at home and empowered in our School. (Left: Lily Santiago (C18) and Felicia Oduh (C20) perform at the Black Lives, Black Words short play festival in 2018.)

**CommFutures: The SoC Mentoring and Development Initiative:** While an invitation to teach in the School of Communication is a coveted honor, for postdoctoral fellows, PhD candidates, and early career faculty the process can be fraught with questions about resources, pathways to advancement, and research funding. To address these concerns, we launched CommFutures, a program of conversations and workshops designed to provide guidance and support to those just beginning their university teaching journeys. This will establish a culture of equity and accessibility across all ranks and contribute to extraordinary learning outcomes for our student populations.

**New additions to the Dean's Office:** I am pleased to introduce our community to the School's new Associate Dean for External Affairs and my chief of staff, Roderick Hawkins (right). Roderick joined us in August from his post as communications director at the education nonprofit Advance Illinois. Previously he served as the Deputy Chief of Staff for Public Engagement in the office of former Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel. He has extensive experience in civic engagement, communications, and advocacy. I am thrilled that he will be assisting me in enacting our agenda and strategic priorities, DEI being top among them. Since his arrival, he has made an enormous impact on our culture and productivity.



**Staff Advisory Board:** I want to ensure that our staff recognizes its role in furthering the excellence of the School. To that end I will be assembling an advisory board that will explore ways to facilitate pathways to promotion. This may include mentorship and/or professional development opportunities.

**Anti-Racist Syllabus Statement:** The Office of the Dean is working with departments to develop an anti-racist syllabus statement. This will convey in no uncertain terms the



urgency of creating a supportive and inclusive community and ensuring that we are committed to dismantling systemic racism and injustice from the inside out.

## Schoolwide Events and Guests:



**Hope Abelson Artists:** We are thrilled to announce that this academic year we will be welcoming two distinguished artists to guest teach classes and be featured event speakers. In the Fall Quarter, we will host Moises Kaufman (left), prolific Venezuelan theatre maker and a 2016 recipient of the National Medal of Arts from President Barack Obama. In the Winter Quarter,

we'll be joined by Michael R. Jackson (right), a playwright, composer, and lyricist and creator of 2020 Pulitzer Prize for Drama-winning musical *A Strange Loop*.



**Kelsey Pharr, Jr. Speaker Series:** Spearheaded by theatre faculty Masi Asare and Roger Ellis, the series will host artist-scholars who represent diversity and inclusion in the performing and media arts. We're delighted that our inaugural speaker was Jeff Award-winning theatre artist and alumna Lili-Anne Brown (below left), who joined us



virtually on October 16. In winter we will welcome director and alumna Jess McLeod, followed by composer Brian Quijada in the spring. The speaker series is named after Kelsey Pharr, Jr., who was among the first Black actors to grace a Northwestern stage. The son of a Miami civil rights leader, Pharr performed in *The Waa-Mu Show* in 1937 and 1939, was featured in four Broadway shows, and achieved great musical success with the group the Delta Rhythm Boys.

**Mellon-Sawyer Seminar Series:** Made possible by a grant I was awarded in 2019, the series comprises three graduate seminars taught over the course of a year all bearing the theme "Black Arts Archive: The Problem of Translation." Visiting scholars will hail from all corners of the globe, and each series of symposia will cover a different geographic region: Fall will be Chicago, winter the Caribbean, and spring South Africa. For the fall event, Associate Professor Aymar Jean Christian (Department of Communication Studies) and Mary Jane Crowe Professor Rebecca Zorach (Department of Art History) are offering their graduate seminar on "Black Arts Chicago: The Forgotten Story." The corresponding symposium will occur November 6 via Zoom. This winter, Professor Ramón Rivera-Servera and I will offer a graduate seminar on "Black Caribbean Waters: Decolonizing the Archive." The corresponding symposium will occur February 5 and 6, 2021 via Zoom. This spring, retired Department of Performance

Studies Professor D. Soyini Madison and visiting scholar Athi Joja will offer a graduate seminar on “Black Arts in Anti-Black Worlds: From Chicago to Cape Town.” The corresponding symposium will occur April 30 and May 1, 2021; modality to be determined. The summer institute, “(Im)material and (Trans)mediation in the Black Arts Archive,” will take place June 21 through 25, 2021. The summer institute will be co-sponsored by the Black Arts Consortium.

## Faculty Achievements:

**Puerto Rican Arts Initiative:** Professor and Chair of Performance Studies Ramón Rivera-Servera launched this artistic residency program in 2017 to support, empower, and mentor Puerto Rican artists affected by Hurricanes Maria and Irma. The initiative was made possible by University and School funding as well as a sizable grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Rivera-Servera recently received additional significant funding from the foundation to expand the program. The focus of this second phase of the project will be on curatorial practices in performance art with a focus on environmental politics, rights to the city, and community affects and infrastructure.

**OTV | Open Television:** Aymar Jean Christian, associate professor of Communication Studies, has enjoyed a banner year in advancing the mission and reach of his distribution platform, OTV | Open Television. (Christian, standing at right, with his OTV team in 2019.) It was nominated last spring for a Webby Award in the category of Video Series: Public Service and Activism. In August 2020, OTV launched new mobile and TV apps, and their new subscription website launched June 15. OTV picked up the popular drag show *Black Girl Magic* from The Vixen. In Fall 2020 it will bring a MacArthur Foundation-funded 48-hour film festival to Brooklyn, Atlanta, and Oakland.



**Center for Latinx Digital Media:** Professor Pablo Boczkowski launched in September a new center aiming to “create knowledge about digital media in Latinx and Latin American countries.” The center will conduct research, teach classes, and organize events that will draw an interdisciplinary group of scholars, practitioners, and students. Its virtual speaker series launched this fall and will feature a new guest each Tuesday at noon central to explore a different facet of Latinx digital media.



**New Faculty:** We're delighted to welcome two new theatre faculty in 2020-21: lecturers Detra Payne (top, left) and Tasia Jones (below, right). Detra is an award-winning actor and educator who joins us from the University of Texas, Arlington. Detra's experience, pedagogical mission, and expansion into other forms of theatre work will be a boon to our program and a welcome addition for our

students. Tasia is a recent alumna of our MFA in Directing program and memorably directed the 2019 Wirtz Center production of fellow alumna Lydia Diamond's *Voyeurs de Venus*. Tasia will teach the new course "Black Women in American Theatre" and will co-teach the first-year 140-1 course required of all theatre majors.



In Performance Studies, visual artist, scholar, and assistant professor Bimbola Akinbola (left) will lend to the department her expertise in art, literature, and performance being produced by women throughout the African Diaspora.

And we look forward to Fall 2021 when Tracy Conner (lower right) will join our Roxelyn and Richard Pepper Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders. Tracy's research focuses on identifying differences versus disorders, particularly in the syntactic variations of children who speak African American

English, which is often misdiagnosed as a language impairment. Tracy's work will bring exciting and much-needed attention to an underserved and under-researched population. Tracy will be the first-ever Black tenure-track faculty member in the department.





## The Student Experience:



**New MFA Directing Candidates:** We're proud to welcome this academic year our inaugural all-Black first-year cohort in the MFA in Directing program: Manna-Symone Middlebrooks, Tor Campbell, and Jasmine B. Gunter (above). The three exceptional candidates (boasting high-profile international and domestic professional experience) released a joint statement on the news, saying, "We see in this painful moment of reckoning a moment of opportunity to finally uproot the racism that is still embedded in the world of theatre—a world that many would assume is open, diverse, and welcoming. The all-Black cohort at Northwestern is an important victory for Black artists during this tumultuous time. This cohort is a part of a movement toward greater representation, more autonomy for Black artists, and more opportunities for Black voices to be heard."

**Vision and Voices, a Black Playwrights Reading Series:** The Black Playwrights Reading Series presented by the Virginia Wadsworth Wirtz Center for the Performing Arts features first-year MFA directing students and undergraduate and graduate actors. Three plays were chosen from hundreds of scripts by the directors in consultation with faculty and the center's managing director. The stories center around racism in America, police brutality, anti-Blackness, the fight for justice, and the celebration of Black lives. Play readings include:

**Nov. 6:** *Wine in Wilderness* by Alice Childress, directed by Jasmine B. Gunter

**Jan. 22:** *A Few Short Plays to Save The World and What You Did* by Steve Harper, directed by Tor Campbell

**Feb. 12:** *Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* by Suzan Lori-Parks, directed by Manna-Symone Middlebrooks

## Departmental Goals and Initiatives for 2020-21

### Theatre and Dance:

- The further diversification of the core curriculum to include more representation of Black writers, directors, musicians, performers, choreographers, and more
- For the Acting Sequence, students will study more representative, noncanonical, and nonwestern works, particularly texts by Black writers, alongside their immersion in the works of Shakespeare, Chekhov, and the Greeks
- Continued equity, diversity, and inclusion training for theatre faculty, including more workshops (two successful workshops took place last summer)
- The creation of a mentorship program matching Black students with Black alumni leaders
- A continued commitment to hiring additional BIPOC faculty, as positions become available
- Theatre management faculty will track and remove harmful language from rehearsals and performance spaces; establish protocols and pathways for formal complaints; create informational packets of resources for BIPOC artists and best practices; and reevaluate schedules in terms of work/life balance for students
- Coordination with the Virginia Wadsworth Wirtz Center for the Performing Arts for



continued diversification of Mainstage production selection and casting, as well as work with outside artists (Left: The 2020 Wirtz Center Production of *Julius Caesar*, featuring color-conscious casting)

- A continuation of town hall-style meetings with students to discuss new opportunities for equity, evaluate the efficacy of new and established initiatives, and increase trust and accountability
- A Spring Quarter residency and course focusing on “Creating the Hip-Hop Musical”

### Radio/Television/Film:

- An anti-racism syllabus for faculty and staff that will include summertime reading, screening, and training; this work will be ongoing and extended to onboarding new faculty
- Monthly anti-racist faculty reading and discussion group



- A new undergraduate Black student affinity group, Black Screens, coming online this fall, as well as its graduate program counterpart, Black Masters
- A comprehensive review of RTVF curriculum around issues of anti-racism and transformation in 2020-21
- Drafting hiring proposals to address persistent issues around faculty diversity and inclusion
- Sponsoring and cosponsoring a number of BIPOC conferences, screenings, festivals, and guest artists this academic year, including a partnership with the Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art that will engage the work of Black British filmmakers as well as an SoC series on Black documentary films



### *Communication Studies:*

- A plan for the year to better educate the community (i.e., faculty, staff, students) on racial inequity and inclusion
- Researching racial disparity at all stages of the academic trajectory (i.e., post-secondary completion, PhD program admissions and completion, hiring, and retention of faculty) and how that disparity is manifest in the department
- Rethinking curricular offerings
- Working with students and impacted faculty directly to create an environment of inclusion



### *Communication Sciences and Disorders:*

- Continued partnership with the Searle Center for Advancing Learning and Teaching to address issues of bias and access; this will include a series of faculty workshops on diversity and teaching
- A new CSD diversity, equity, and inclusion committee, which includes faculty, staff, and students
- Town halls with students to hear their concerns and ideas
- A new course, "Incorporating a Racial and Ethnic Equity Perspective in CSD Research," is being developed and will be offered this year
- Drafting hiring proposals to address issues around faculty diversity

- A greater emphasis on diversity and inclusion in our student recruitment and admissions processes
- Increase research experience opportunities for students of color, including increased funding support

### *Performance Studies:*

- Continued recruitment and hiring of BIPOC faculty; the department has long been the School's vanguard in this area
- Continued curricular and research support for students studying the people, institutions, and cultures deeply impacted by racism and oppressive regimes
- Continued embrace of students, faculty, and staff who identify as BIPOC and LGBTQIA

### *The Virginia Wadsworth Wirtz Center for the Performing Arts:*

- Created quarterly conversations to address and understand student concerns at Wirtz Center regarding operations, DEI, and others
- Developing clear statements regarding the Wirtz Center's mission and commitment to anti-racism
- Reviewing and updating policies regarding outside directors and casting for Wirtz Center productions
- Committed to diverse design teams throughout our productions
- Conducting DEI training for Wirtz Center staff by academic year's end



Allie Woodson (C18) performs at the 2018 Black Lives. Black Words short-play festival in the Ethel M. Barber Theater at the Virginia Wadsworth Wirtz Center for the Performing Arts