

ACADEMIC INITIATIVES

Mark Sargent, Provost

The Book of Micah offers one of the most eloquent passages from the Hebrew Bible on the duties of the faithful—the call “to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly your God.” The famous verse, written at least five centuries before Christ, comes near the end of a prophetic book filled with oracles of judgment and cries of lament, entreaties to care for the poor and disadvantaged, and reminders of communal failure and broken covenants. In the sixth chapter, the admonition on justice, mercy, and humility is given to a powerful man who, when told of his people’s failures, asks to know what God expects of him. What he hears is that traditional actions and offerings are not enough.

The ancient context helps us see how the passage can provide a compelling theme for this current historical moment. Ours is a season of acknowledgment, lament, and response. The killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor and other violence against Black individuals have provoked sorrow and stirred widespread protests. These events are not without a long chronicle of precedents; they become part of an enduring history of violence and injustice that has disproportionately impacted Black persons.

Calls to remove certain monuments from public squares also voice a desire to revise the narratives about history and values in order to make them more accurate and capacious. The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated the disparities in the world related to wealth, race, and regions, as Black and Latinx communities have borne a more severe cost than others while Asian Americans have increasingly been subject to racist incidents. Many of the covenants and laws designed to address these injustices have been abandoned or have faltered, and many inequities persist due to our own complicity and silences.

As a Christian liberal arts community, we have a responsibility to understand more fully how systems of privilege have created inequities and injustice, and we need to devote considerable energy to preparing ourselves and our students to lead the efforts for racial understanding in this moment and for a new generation.

I know our faculty believe in the capacity of the liberal arts to prepare students for just action, but with that potential comes responsibility. We must be concerned with both personal responses and systemic reforms. Higher education, with its various guilds and traditions, has its own systems that continually require reappraisal, and integrity calls us, especially as Christians, to self-reflection and re-evaluation of some of our own pedagogical tendencies and curricular choices and how they impede or advance justice. As Bryan Stevenson recently observed, the path toward reconciliation and justice requires regret and remorse. Several months ago more than 120 Westmont faculty and staff signed such a [statement of lament, repentance, and commitment](#) addressed to those in our community, past and present, who found their experiences at Westmont either “hostile, alienating, or excluding because of racial injustice.”

I appreciate that a number of faculty have devoted significant energy last summer to reading, reflection, and conversation about what changes they might make in their curriculum this fall. Below is a summary of some current initiatives related to the academic program.

As we undertake these efforts, I have been thinking of words from Toni Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye*. At the outset of that story, the narrator observes that "*since why is so difficult to handle, one must take refuge in how.*" Indeed, within the academy and the church, we have often found the *why* of injustice difficult to face—difficult to comprehend, admit, or overcome—and far too often we have left those on the margins to tell their own stories about *how* they have suffered and endured.

Above all, we all need to be sure that we don't take refuge simply in our good intentions—either past or prospective. This work requires patience and persistence as we continue to pursue and envision curricular and programmatic changes in a deliberative and civil way, but without getting lost in disruptions or stalemates. We think that the Christian liberal arts can give us the courage and grace to address racial tensions, yet more of our conversations about social injustice need to translate into actions in our curriculum and community. The plans that we offer, as imperfect as they are, are not ends in themselves, but new steps on a journey that will require many to ache, to listen, to reorient our thinking, to redress harm, and to walk with greater humility with one another and with God.

SELECTED ACADEMIC INITIATIVES

Ethnic Studies Minor

Last spring the Academic Senate approved the revised [Ethnic Studies](#) minor, and we are continuing to expand and refine it. The work this fall includes crafting the core interdisciplinary seminar for the minor (to be offered in spring) and shaping new courses for inclusion in the curricular options. Political Science, for instance, is working on one new offering on Race and Politics.

General Education Appraisal

Westmont's general education program was crafted almost two decades ago and places a clear emphasis on diversity and culture, but less on understanding race and injustice. Building on some groundwork done last spring, the Academic Senate—the college's curriculum committee—will be appraising our criteria for approving courses and considering new courses or requirements that will ensure graduates have a fuller understanding of Christian perspectives and new disciplinary research on race, equity, and inclusion.

"Advancing Racial Equity" Workshop

At a midpoint in the semester we will launch a year-long workshop for faculty on "Advancing Racial Equity," designed to equip faculty to assess their own work through a

racial equity lens and maintain an inclusive and welcoming environment for students of all social identities and cultural backgrounds. Led by [Carmel Saad](#), Associate Professor of Psychology, the program will help us develop a shared language and shared vision and urgency for racial equity, and acquaint faculty with field-tested tools and strategies for integrating equity and inclusion in their work. The workshop will examine themes of privilege, internalized racism, implicit bias, and explicit bias, and biblical themes related to truth, justice, and reconciliation.

Student Focus Groups and Diversity Assessment

Over the summer, several members of the faculty leadership held listening sessions with students to learn about their experience and perspectives, and their observations and critiques have yielded a number of good insights that will shape our curricular conversations and our faculty development program. We will be following up on the questions raised in these conversations with more surveys and focus groups as part of our annual Institutional Learning Outcome assessment, which is focused this year on diversity and global engagement.

Gaede Institute Conversation

Last spring the Gaede Institute for the Liberal Arts hosted its annual “Conversation” on the topic “[Still Dreaming: Race, Ethnicity, and Liberal Arts Education.](#)” In the coming academic year, the new Conversation (scheduled in May 2021 when we are hopeful for in-person dialogue) will focus on the impact of the pandemic on the liberal arts, including the way that the pandemic has exposed inequities in our society and services.

Several Specific Course and Departmental Projects

Several faculty and departments have undertaken curricular revision projects this summer. At a recent Faculty Forum, eight faculty gave short reports on their own efforts, so here’s a sampling of some initiatives and changes undertaken by our colleagues. We will be updating this list throughout the semester.

[Steve Julio](#), Professor of Biology, has reassessed the narratives of the history of science covered in his physiology course to ensure that students encounter the contributions of women, people of color, and scientists outside of the West.

[Rebecca McNamara](#), Assistant Professor of English, who teaches medieval literature, has emphasized how the label “Anglo-Saxon” is not an accurate representation of the cultural and ethnic make-up and artistic production in early Britain. She is reframing the introduction to familiar texts, such as *Caedmon's Hymn* in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, to underscore their multi-ethnic predecessors and influences.

[Enrico Manlapig](#), Assistant Professor of Economics and Business, is helping students encounter the range of perspectives among economists on race and the economy.

[Meredith Whitnah](#), Assistant Professor of Sociology, who teaches sociological theory, is placing the work of W.E.B. Du Bois as a centerpiece in her theory courses in order to

underscore his significance for the field and to move beyond the traditional heavy emphasis on European theorists.

Tom Knecht, Professor Political Science, is developing a new course on race and politics, which will explore the intersection of ethnicity, demographics, social policy, political action, racial politics, ideology, and public opinion.

Helen Rhee, Professor of History of Christianity and Religious Studies, who teaches church history, looks at race as a social construct in the ancient world, particularly examining the ways early Christian texts made use of the concept of race in their characterizations of Christian identity. Her courses decenter Western Christianity and enable students to understand the broader history of the church throughout the world, particularly in the eastern Mediterranean world.

Michael Everest, Professor of Chemistry, and his colleagues in the Chemistry Department examined data on educational outcomes in their courses and upon discovering that students of color were not succeeding at proportional rates, spent several months researching the chemistry educational literature to learn more about the possible causes. Faculty in the department are implementing a number of evidence-based practices found to reduce inequity in educational outcomes, including peer-led team learning sessions and “wise feedback.”

Mitchell Thomas, Professor of Theatre, and his departmental colleagues are drafting an anti-racist statement for the program, auditing all courses to ensure reading lists that are diverse, inclusive, and equitable, and creating reading groups with colleagues from music and art to facilitate conversation around race and the arts at Westmont.