



GAEDE INSTITUTE

for the Liberal Arts

**LIBERAL EDUCATION CULTIVATING RACIAL JUSTICE: A
GENERAL EDUCATION CASE STUDY**

Elaine Meyer-Lee, Regine Jackson, and Gundolf Graml,
Agnes Scott College

*Delivered at the Nineteenth Annual Conversation on the Liberal Arts
February 27–29, 2020 | Westmont College, Santa Barbara, CA*

Liberal Education Cultivating Racial Justice: A General Education Case Study

Elaine Meyer-Lee, Associate Vice President for Global Learning and Leadership Development and Professor of Psychology; Regine Jackson, Faculty Coordinator for Global Learning and Kathy '68 and Lawrence Ashe Associate Professor of Sociology; and Gundolf Graml, Assistant Dean for Global Learning and Professor of German Studies, all from Agnes Scott College

Abstract:

Agnes Scott College serves an unusually diverse student population with no racial or ethnic majority (about a third African-American and a third White European-American). For decades, the College has had a general education requirement intentionally related to racial justice. Like other schools, we acknowledged and committed to our responsibilities to address equity and inclusion structurally in our strategic plans, with goals around assessment, proportional representation among our faculty, exempt staff, and trustees, as well as continued learning for all. However, in 2015 the College reinvented its liberal arts education for the 21st century to prepare all students to be effective change agents in a global society through an initiative called SUMMIT. Since then we have discovered new possibilities and practices for how our distinctive curriculum and pedagogy can itself promote racial healing and transformation.

SUMMIT provides **every** Agnes Scott student with a curricular and co-curricular experience focused on global learning and leadership development which builds the digital and other competencies necessary for post-graduate success, supported by a personal Board of Advisors. This paper outlines how this liberal arts curriculum creatively pursues racial inclusivity through:

- An approach to global learning that centers a critical focus on both “self/culture/other/identity” and “colonialism/imperialism/diaspora” as examples of

“contact, power, and systems that cross or transcend national borders” in our core curriculum

- A required, first-year interdisciplinary faculty-led study away course that explicitly acknowledges that the U.S. is part of the globe
- An approach to leadership development rooted in the liberal arts disciplines which equips students to reflect on their strengths, identity, and power, analyze evidence, perspectives, and systems, and act authentically, ethically, and boldly
- Taking into account the intersectional effect of students’ race, gender and sexual identity in all of our programming including co-curriculars, pre-departure orientation and other preparations for study abroad, faculty development, leadership immersion sites, and our own assessment and research.

The authors share sample learning outcomes, course topics, activities, assignments, faculty development strategies, and lessons learned for cultivating racial justice through liberal arts general education.

Institutional Context

Agnes Scott College is a private, women’s college in Decatur, GA about six miles from downtown Atlanta. Our intentional approach to global learning builds on the college’s long and strong track record in providing access to education abroad for one of the most diverse student populations in the country. The college now enrolls 1,000+ students representing 43 U.S. states and territories and 28 countries. 42 percent of the college’s students are Pell-eligible and 34 percent are first-generation college students. There is no racial or ethnic majority; about a third of the students identifying as African-American and a third white. And while Agnes Scott

embraces its identity and mission as a women's college, it welcomes students who were assigned male or female at birth, but who now identify as female, transgender, agender, gender fluid or non-binary. A significant number of students also identify as members of the LGBTQI+ community and as belonging to various religious groups. Up to 15% of incoming classes have been international students and the college continues its proactive international enrollment efforts despite the current geopolitical climate. Finally, Agnes Scott faculty diversity is on par with, or exceeds, that at most national liberal arts colleges and issues of diversity and inclusion have been prioritized in faculty development in recent years.

For decades, the College has had a general education requirement intentionally related to racial justice. In ours, each student takes a course in which the central focus is the critical examination of relationships, interactions and outcomes among dominant and marginalized cultures, subcultures or groups. Like other schools, we acknowledged and committed to our responsibilities to address equity and inclusion structurally in our strategic plans, with goals around assessment, proportional representation among our faculty, exempt staff, and trustees, as well as continued learning for all. However, in 2015 the College reinvented its liberal arts education for the 21st century to prepare all students to be effective change agents in a global society through an initiative called SUMMIT. SUMMIT provides **every** Agnes Scott student with a curricular and co-curricular experience focused on global learning and leadership development which builds the digital and other competencies necessary for post-graduate success, supported by a personal Board of Advisors. Since then we have discovered new possibilities and practices for how our distinctive liberal arts curriculum and pedagogy can itself promote racial healing and transformation.

While the college has always centered study abroad through extensive participation in direct exchanges and a small set of faculty-led courses every year, the creation of SUMMIT expanded and deepened global learning by connecting the college's general education curriculum with a range of campus-wide co-curricular programs and establishing a set of college-wide global learning outcomes:

1. Identify, explain, and analyze examples of global themes, processes, and systems
2. Demonstrate knowledge and skills essential for global engagement
3. Critically examine the relationship between dominant and marginalized cultures, subcultures, or groups

All Agnes Scott students begin their global learning in the first year by taking two semesters of a four-semester language requirement and, in the Spring, a semester-long, four-credit global learning course with a one-week faculty-led immersion experience in March (at no additional cost). In subsequent semesters, students expand their global learning by taking at least one required interdisciplinary global elective course. The courses that meet this breadth requirement of the general education (SUMMIT in STEM, Social Sciences, or Arts & Humanities) must centrally address contact, power, and systems that cross or transcend national borders, and at least one must focus on the critical examination of relationships, interactions and outcomes among dominant and marginalized cultures, subcultures or groups. Faculty members who design these global elective courses go through a rigorous course development sequence where they learn about and share pedagogical perspectives and teaching activities rooted in the pedagogical positions of Paulo Freire and the decolonizing teaching approaches that have been developed through feminist, postcolonial, poststructuralist, critical race, critical linguistics, and cultural studies. Within the same global learning framework, students also still have access to a

wide range of subsidized semester-long study abroad experiences at affiliated universities and colleges on all continents and are encouraged to seek out global internship experiences. Students who take at least two more global elective courses beyond their global breadth requirement and participate in independent study abroad or a global internship can declare a global specialization, awarding them a global learning medallion and a transcript notification.

Global Journeys: Teaching Decolonization through Interdisciplinary Faculty-led Study Away

Journeys, the semester-long, four-credit course required of all first-year students, forms the cornerstone of Agnes Scott's global learning curriculum. The college usually offers 15 sections each Spring semester and all sections feature a one-week, faculty-led global immersion experience in the middle of the semester. Taught by faculty from across the college, this course forms an entry portal into how liberal arts learning lends itself to the critical analysis of globalization. While faculty members bring their respective disciplinary approaches to each section, the overall course structure adapts the above-mentioned college-wide global learning goals for all sections:

- Identify, explain, and analyze global themes, processes, and systems:
 - Students will be able to identify and describe through at least two different examples how globalization relates to the particular section topic and analyze its impact on the Journeys destination.
- Critically examine the relationship between dominant and marginalized cultures, subcultures or groups:
 - Using specific examples from their journeys course and the immersion experience, students will be able to compare and contrast the impact global processes have on dominant and marginalized cultures.

- Demonstrate knowledge and skills essential for global engagement:
 - Students will be able to evaluate some of the historical, political, economic, scientific, and cultural forces that shape global processes and outline topics for future research and analysis.
 - Students will develop their ability to engage across differences.
 - Based on their interactions with and their learning from community members at the Journeys destination students will critically reflect on their own values, ethics, and assumptions.

Additionally, four common interdisciplinary topical clusters create content cohesion across all sections:

- Identity: self/culture/other
- Imperialism/colonialism/diaspora
- Globalization
- Why Travel? The ethics of travel.

With the various sections addressing topics and sites as varied as “Music and Identity in the Navajo Nation;” “Cultural and Political Crossroads in Central Europe;” “Fashion and Globalization in Milan, Italy;” “Marine Biology in Croatia;” and “Arts and Political Resistance in Chile,” the common topics prompt faculty to address how imperialist and colonialist legacies shape the manifestation of globalization regardless of the particular site and disciplinary angle of specific sections.

These common topics also form the basis for the central role of community engagement in course design and itinerary development. The faculty leaders and the college’s faculty-led programs coordinator share with the third-party providers the learning goals and common topics. Given that Global Journeys courses emphasize learning about globalization’s diverging impact

on dominant and marginalized groups, faculty leaders and providers collaborate on identifying interlocutors, presenters, and local guides that represent these different voices and perspectives and enable students to engage with the particular, place-based legacy of colonialism.

Faculty leaders plan their courses and their travel segments in the context of a year-long, multi-part workshop series that enables them to share teaching practices and assignments. Through the discussion of scenarios and peer-to-peer teaching sessions, faculty expand their pedagogical toolkits to integrate the development of intercultural competencies, practices of intentional reflection, and effective on-site teaching activities that allow students to recognize and critique how today's globalized world relies on the spatialized patterns of colonial/colonialist history. A group of fifteen upper-class students are selected through an annual, competitive process to support faculty's work. These students participate in a semester-long two-credit internship course where they learn about intercultural pedagogy, group dynamics, and leadership styles. As student leaders they assist the faculty and co-leader throughout the semester and also help the first-year students to establish intentional connections between their learning experiences in this course and their academic plans for the following three years.

The college-wide global learning goals, the common topics with their focus on community engagement, and the intensive course development process provide the foundation for a faculty-led study away experience that disrupts the traditional divide into service-learning courses in the Global South and culture and civilization courses in the Global North.

The following details from two different courses to European destinations exemplify this approach. The semester-long course "Cultural and Political Crossroads in Central Europe," whose travel segment leads students to Hungary, Slovakia, and Austria, addresses the region's cultural, political, and historical developments, but does so with an emphasis on the

manifestations of colonialism and by centering commonly marginalized voices. Students learn about the colonialist and imperialist practices of the Russian, Ottoman, and Habsburg Empire and study global systems by taking a closer look at how these particular manifestations of colonialism were connected to the more widely known and taught British colonialist practices that shaped much of the Global South. By learning about Central Europe as an important point of origin for mid-19th century mass migration to the United States, students also acquire a richer and critical understanding of the formation of diaspora communities in the US. Case studies telling the experiences of Jewish, Catholic, and Muslim immigrants from this region allow students a glimpse into the dynamic and shifting conversations about religious, ethnic, and racial identity in the US.¹ Although the course does not visit Switzerland, students read and discuss James Baldwin's experiences in the small Swiss town of Leukerbad, captured in the 1955 essay "Stranger in the Village," in order to engage with different manifestations of global systemic racism and with European constructions of whiteness.²

Throughout the semester, students engage with the region's history and culture through the perspectives of Austrian, Czech, Slovakian, and Hungarian authors, filmmakers, and artists. For instance, Czech/Austrian writer Franz Kafka's novel *The Penal Colony* provides a perspective on the common topic of colonialism and, especially, on the violent practices underpinning colonialist regimes.³ Short stories by Roma and Sinti authors offer insights into

¹ See Zahra, Tara. *The Great Departure: Mass Migration from Eastern Europe and the Making of the Free World*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2016.

² Baldwin, James. "Stranger in the Village." *Harper's Magazine*, October 1953.
<https://harpers.org/archive/1953/10/stranger-in-the-village/>.

³ For a reading of Kafka's seminal short story in the context of postcolonial studies see Goetschel, Willi. "Franz Kafka's 'In Der Strafkolonie.'" *The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory* 90, no. 2 (April 3, 2015): 81–86.

social inequality and ongoing colonialist practices within today's European Union.⁴ This awareness of imperialist and colonialist structures also shapes the on-site travel experience, from the choice of tour guides to the travel infrastructure. Participants in this course do visit some of the well known tourist sites in cities such as Budapest and Vienna, but they do so by intentionally and critically identifying and deconstructing colonialist power structures. In Budapest, students learn to see the city through the eyes of a representative of the Roma community. In Vienna, students stay in a hotel operated by recently arrived refugees and asylum seekers and learn about the city's history and architecture through the eyes of a recently arrived migrant.

Such forms of intentional community engagement try to proactively undermine a colonialist power structure whereby students from a relatively privileged higher education background 'observe' and 'study' local people. Additionally, for faculty-led tours visiting European destinations the voices and perspectives of migrants and refugees provide a critical lens through which to perceive the historical and cultural sites. Another example of a Global Journeys Course, "Fashion and Globalization in Milan, Italy," emphasizes this shift in perspective by foregrounding the role of migrant North African laborers in the global fashion industry and the cultural appropriation of African design by European and U.S. American fashion companies.⁵ Such intentional course design foregrounds what historian Dipesh Chakrabarty described as the crucial post-colonialist practice of "provincializing Europe," the critical task of exploring how [European] thought -- which is now everybody's heritage and

⁴ Lakatos, Menyhert. *The Color of Smoke*. Translated by Ann Major. New Europe Books, 2015.

⁵ "European Control of African Textile Industry | ANWO." Accessed December 20, 2019.

<https://anwouhuru.org/european-control-of-african-textile-industry/>.

which affects us all--may be renewed from and for the margins.”⁶ These margins can be situated in the Global South, as demonstrated by Agnes Scott’s Global Journeys course “Art and Political Resistance in Chile,” where students identify and engage with forms of political agency expressed through combinations of indigenous and international art forms and artistic collaboration. But, as shown in the discussion of the European-focused courses, they also need to be identified in the Global North. Agnes Scott’s global learning curriculum explicitly acknowledges that the U.S. is part of the globe and that domestic destinations such as the Navajo Nation, New Orleans, Puerto Rico, or New York allow for an examination of the legacies of colonialism closer to home.

Destructive resource extraction and environmental degradation are legacies of colonialist practices that continue in today’s globalized world and demand a particularly urgent response given the rapidly emerging climate catastrophe. Faculty leaders address these topics in intentional ways through course design as well as choice of destination and collaborators on the ground. The common topic of “Ethics of Travel” prompts students to consider their own lifestyle choices and to acknowledge the responsibility that comes with the opportunity to combine traveling and learning. Regardless of their own particular social and cultural background, students’ participation in the global immersion experience generates a carbon footprint that exceeds the annual emissions of a person in less developed countries. Leading up to the Journeys course, students can participate in a series of competitive sustainability-related education activities on Agnes Scott’s campus in which they learn to calculate and compare the carbon footprint generated by their study abroad travel with global emissions profiles. Students also

⁶ Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000: 16.

design ways of mitigating the environmental impact of their travel through lifestyle adaptations such as dietary changes and using public transportation.

Intentional reflection activities before, during, and after the global immersion travel week enable students to develop and practice various approaches to a decolonized global learning experience. Before traveling, students learn about the history and culture of the section-specific global learning destinations and how the legacy of colonialism and contemporary globalization affects its various communities in disparate ways. Students across all sections engage with cultural texts such as Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place* which address the role of identity, traveling, and colonialism. Instead of simply preparing for a critical investigation of the colonialist legacy on site, these readings prompt substantive reflections and discussions about students' own roles in globalized power structures.

Upon return, students meet with peers from other Journeys sections and discuss how they engaged with the common topics in the various locations. For instance, students who traveled to the Navajo Nation, to Chile, and to Central Europe will thus discuss the (post-)colonialist aspects of globalization from the perspective of colonized and colonizing, metropolitan perspectives. For first-year students, these common reflections across sections underscore that their global immersion can only be the first step in a sustained practice of critical inquiry into global power structures. By sharing how colonial patterns manifested themselves in the global patterns and systems they encountered in their various destinations, students also gain an awareness that the meaning of place in the context of the global must be seen not as a fixed and bounded geographical entity but, in the words of feminist geographer Doreen Massey, as "particular moments in [...] intersecting social relations, nets of which have over time been constructed, laid

down, interacted with one another, decayed and renewed.”⁷ Such an understanding enables students to see the global not as antithetical to the local but as a crucial matrix for studying and learning about themselves and their more immediate environment.

Leadership Development Cultivating Racial Justice within General Education

The twin content theme that is infused throughout the curriculum and co-curriculum at Agnes Scott is leadership development. Our approach to leadership development rooted in the liberal arts disciplines is as follows: Within ASC’s mission of educating students to think deeply, live honorably, and engage the social and intellectual challenges of our times, students exercise leadership through processes of **reflecting** on individual strengths, identity, and power; **analyzing** evidence, perspectives, and systems; and **acting** authentically, boldly, and ethically. This emphasis on reflecting on identity and power and analyzing perspectives and systems requires that students take race into account and consider systemic racism as well as ways to address it as an inherent part of all leadership today.

Parallel to the global learning theme, first year students all take a 4-credit LDR 101: Leadership Prologue course in the fall, and all the sections have common learning outcomes and assignments which grow out of the reflect/analyze/act model. But each section also has a distinct topic related to the professor’s disciplinary expertise, and several of these each year are centered on race. For example the fall of 2019 topics included: Race, Gender and Social Change: Case Studies of Women’s Leadership in US History; Race, Gender and Social Change: Case Studies of Women’s Leadership in US History; Leadership in Atlanta; Language, Culture and Society; Religion and Economic Justice; Sacred Custodians: Conservation in Africa; and Sit-ins, Kiss-ins, and Die-ins: Feminist and LGBTQ+ Activism in the Contemporary U.S..The leadership core curriculum faculty work together

⁷ Massey, Doreen B. *Space, Place, and Gender*. U of Minnesota Press, 1994: 120.

in similar professional development workshops to their global learning colleagues, and wrestle with issues such as racial representation in authorship of the common readings.

After careful assessment, the faculty are now launching a new Sophomore Class Leadership Immersion Experience (SCALE) for all students to take in their second year during Peak Week, the same week in March when all the first-years are traveling. In this course, students revisit the core common concepts from their LDR 101, and then fan out in teams of 3-5 students into organizations in and around Atlanta to observe these concepts in practice. For example, one of the learning outcomes for this course is: Apply concepts (e.g., power, identity, ethical leadership) from LDR 101 to analyze challenges faced by your site organization. This year, when it is not yet required, there were 22 sites for students to choose among, carefully selected to include attention to race and gender. For example they include: Atlanta Music Project which provides music lessons to primarily African-American young people; Girls Going Global which provides international experiences to high school girls of color; Love E Fashion which is a stylist app run by an African-American woman entrepreneur; Morehouse School of Medicine; Refugee Women's Network; Partnership for Southern Equity designing a youth summit for racial equity, energy, health, growth and opportunity; and Tapestri, a non-profit working against human trafficking. The students will be led to reflect on how race intersects with leadership during and after the course.

Beyond this core curriculum, students take breadth courses infused with the reflect/analyze/act model, just as on the global side, and again, faculty work together to hone courses that do so with depth and coherence. In addition, student can elect to complete a specialization in leadership development as well as in global learning. On this side, the anchor course of the specialization (in addition to breadth courses and a practicum) is called Project Leadership, and the whole class takes on a real-world issue and proposes solutions to it in teams. The topics rotate each semester, but they have included what to do about the Confederate

monument in downtown Decatur (for which the team presented their solutions to the county commissioners who adopted one to implement, in part) and this semester's in on "How can Agnes Scott Support and Collaborate with Atlanta's Immigrant Communities?"

Cultivating racial justice beyond the classroom

In the same spirit, in the co-curricular arena, the College takes advantage of the rich international diversity of the greater Atlanta region for students to explore some of the ongoing local impact of racial dynamics, such as the challenges of immigration. For example, on that topic alone, students engage in service-learning projects with Global Growers, a local organization connecting the agricultural talent of the local refugee community to opportunities in sustainable agriculture. Students also worked with El Refugio, an organization supporting ICE detainees, and designed an alternative spring break experience on The Need for Fair Food: Migrant Farm Workers and Human Trafficking that included studying pre- and post-colonial Florida history. Opportunities for advocacy such as a training workshop on Latinx Social Activism in Georgia and honoring "I Stand with Immigrants Day" allow students to put their learning into action. Guest speakers such as Richard Blanco, who read from his memoir *The Prince of Los Cocuyos*, and Isabel Wilkerson, who discussed her book *The Warmth of Other Suns*, connect students' learning with relevant public debates. Films, panels, and opportunities for political advocacy opportunities broaden students' understanding of these complex topics.

On the leadership side, students start with a leadership immersion experience right after orientation called "Legacy", which includes an afternoon on "leading in a global society". In this portion the students take part in activities on identity, diversity, power and privilege, and well as living in a community of respect and inclusions (microaggressions and civil discourse). After that they all go to tour the Center for Civil and Human Rights to learn about leadership in

the civil rights movement in the context of Atlanta. The students also benefit from major guest speakers who come to campus to address leadership and race, such as Stacey Abrams.

Even in the area of research within a higher education context, Agnes Scott College emphasizes culturally-informed assessment as an essential part of promoting equity in liberal arts education through the use of the Global Pathways Study (GPS). The GPS is a longitudinal, multi-institutional, mixed-method study that examines college students growth and change over their college years and one and five years post-graduation. The GPS takes an integrative approach incorporating: 1) students' preexisting traits, experiences, and behaviors, 2) institutional variables, and 3) college experiences. The GPS also compiles extensive demographic and identity-related information, information on self-efficacy, ethnic identity, personality traits, cognitive empathy, academic and occupational outcomes, global experiences, intercultural competence, and mental health. This multi-pronged tool examines the impact of both campus and travel-based exposure to global topics and the intersection between individual and institutional variables. This methodology encourages data-informed decisions that take into account how students with varied identities and experiences engage with and are impacted by their globally-related experiences. Students are involved as co-researchers to center their varied perspectives, and other inclusive practices include interrogating measures of intercultural competences for implicit bias of assumptions of whiteness and examining quantitative, qualitative, and psychometric differences in responses patterns by participants' race/ethnicity.

As a college for women and other marginalized genders, Agnes Scott's approach to both curricular and co-curricular liberal arts learning strives to take into account the intersectional impact of race, gender and sexual identity on global issues. For example, there are numerous student-led panels offered pre-departure on topics like "Black students perspectives on study

abroad”, or for Muslim students, or queer students, and these have contributed to sending students for semesters abroad in proportionate diversity. The college undertook extensive responses to the impact of the travel ban on vulnerable populations, and attends to the specific global learning needs and challenges of undocumented students. Beyond the general faculty development for Journeys described above, both faculty and students have specific preparation to create brave spaces for difficult dialogues to process issues of power and privilege within the context of global learning. The college has sent faculty and staff on their own global learning immersion experience to support their development of innovative student-centered pedagogies, as well as to numerous workshops and conferences offered externally or by bringing experts to campus.

Agnes Scott is learning many lessons for the overall ongoing, never-ending project of cultivating racial justice through liberal arts education which could be transferable outside of the College’s current innovation experience. It is critical to define key terms (*e.g. Global and Leadership*) and outcomes at the outset in a way that takes race into account, and keep those goals in mind as the curriculum is developed. New initiatives do not need to be perfected in the abstract before launch, but can be refined through iterative thinking & adaptive systems: assess, analyze, change, and repeat. In that process, though student experience must be kept central and all perspective heard at each stage. Faculty need to drive anything curricular, of course, but should partner with administrators and break down silos. Every institution has its own culture and history, and can build on past successes and avoid past pitfalls. It will look different everywhere, but a liberal arts education is uniquely positioned to build the capacity for racial healing and transformation, capacities that are more valuable now than ever before.

Bibliography

Baldwin, James. "Stranger in the Village." *Harper's Magazine*, October 1953.

<https://harpers.org/archive/1953/10/stranger-in-the-village/>.

Blanco, Richard. *The Prince of Los Cocuyos: A Miami Childhood*. Harper Collins, 2014.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2000.

Goetschel, Willi. "Franz Kafka's 'In Der Strafkolonie.'" *The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory* 90, no. 2 (April 3, 2015): 81–86. doi:[10.1080/00168890.2015.1038495](https://doi.org/10.1080/00168890.2015.1038495).

Kafka, Franz. *In the Penal Colony*. Sheba Blake Publishing, 2017.

Lakatos, Menyhert. *The Color of Smoke*. Translated by Ann Major. New Europe Books, 2015.

Massey, Doreen B. *Space, Place, and Gender*. University of Minnesota Press, 1994.

Wilkerson, Isabel. *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2010.

Zahra, Tara. *The Great Departure: Mass Migration from Eastern Europe and the Making of the Free World*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2016.