Have uncomfortable discussions. Take accountability. Be committed to change.

SSRI Director Don Taylor opens up about how he plans to lead the institute and address racial inequality

“Only recently have I come to understand that more people are harmed by racism that is not noisy and in-your-face, but by the idea that “white” is the default or quiet standard.”

As a leader of an interdisciplinary unit at Duke, how do you promote an inclusive environment?

I try to remain intellectually curious about research outside of my area, to listen and appreciate perspectives that are different than mine, and to be direct when communicating with staff and faculty. I believe that the most important task of leadership is to correctly define reality, both for yourself and the organization you are seeking to lead. Being truthful and direct with people is important. Being opaque as a leader implies you do not believe staff and faculty are capable of dealing with the difficult tasks ahead.

Why is fighting to eradicate racism important at SSRI?

Only recently have I come to understand that more people are harmed by racism that is not noisy and in-your-face, but by the idea that “white” is the default or quiet standard. This idea is deeply embedded into our minds and the structures that we have created at SSRI, Duke and our society, generally. As a research university we make claims about being interested in truth, evidence, knowledge and education that ring hollow if we do not address the structures and systems that harm those who cannot pass as white, without any hollering, shouting or Klan robes.

How do you plan to get SSRI faculty and staff to engage in this issue?

I called several SSRI meetings the week after the George Floyd killing to talk and to get a conversation going. SSRI had already been discussing some of these issues given our new initiative to focus on the American South in a research context, but I am responsible to see that we address what we can most directly change—how we run SSRI. From these initial discussions, a couple of SSRI staff said they would like to identify a community activity that we could do together to help others and I am supportive of this. We are also going to have a group of staff and faculty join with a
similar group at the Margolis Center for Health Policy, to talk both about naming and
tearing down racism and racist structures in the workplace, while also discussing how
our research agenda should reflect both the longstanding issues of race as well as the
moment. I think that we need to integrate these two tasks and not only turn our
bright lights of analysis on broader societal issues. We need to look in the mirror.

Is diversity and inclusion enough?
Inclusion is better than exclusion, but what we need at Duke and in SSRI is a more
just, generative environment and culture. Inclusion implies that the structures that
now exist are what needs to exist to thrive as a research institute—we need to instead
create the culture and work systems that best helps us achieve our goals, while
treating each person who works here as a full member.

What message would you like to share with Duke community?
I recently had a meeting with SSRI staff who self-identified as Black and heard a
message that some of them feel that there are “Black people jobs” and “white people
jobs” at SSRI and across Duke. That cannot be allowed to stand, and I believe that I,
as the director of the institute, am ultimately responsible for seeing to needed
change.

What are your reflections after the Living While Black Symposium?
When I first heard the title, I was worried that this was simply another application of
“the Black tax” where we look to Black colleagues to fix problems that have been
imposed upon them. And some of my Black colleagues felt this way and did not
participate, which is of course, their right. However, I was able to participate in most
of the event and I think that it was different because it was not adding a sidecar of
diversity to check a box at an event, which often happens at Duke and in our society,
but it was a day of giving the floor to our Black colleagues. I learned a lot and I
believe that the event can and should be remembered as an important catalyst for
trying to live into the ideals of this nation at Duke.

What are your thoughts for moving forward?
SSRI is blessed to have the leadership of Professor Charmaine Royal (African and
African American Studies) who leads the Duke Center on Genomics, Race, Identity,
Difference (GRID) within SSRI. Professor Royal and Dr. Jayne O. Ifekwunigwe have a
great team at GRID that includes programs like a Kellogg Foundation funded Truth,
Racial Healing and Transformation Center that builds upon the foundational work of
Dr. Gail Christopher. I participated in a "Racial Healing Circle" and it was a useful
learning experience for me, and introduced me to the language of Race as a
marker of a "hierarchy of human value." Most people would demure when asked if
such a hierarchy should and does exist, but I see it everywhere now that I know
to look, including in myself and in the original United States Constitution. It
is an old idea, that I have only recently acknowledged. Universities are places
that value ideas, and this idea is perhaps the most damaging and pernicious in
the history of the world. Naming it when we see it and replacing it with ideas
that can help to create a generative culture is what we need to do if Duke is
to be the best that it can be.