

MOSAICS

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Our Racial Justice Network: Inviting change, working toward justice for *all*

By Jana Eisenberg

Across the country and around the world, universities, and in particular schools of social work, are among the institutions now taking hard looks at themselves through a lens of racial justice and anti-racism.

Our school is no exception, and, with the 2020 formation of the Racial Justice Network (RJN), we join others in seeking to “cultivate racial equity in our academic programs, research agendas, administrative policies, and informal culture” (from the UB School of Social Work website, socialwork.buffalo.edu/RJN).

Unlike the more traditional model, where the school’s administration would designate a committee and/or a leadership role to drive any strategy or actions, the RJN has an intentionally decentralized model. In the words of Professor Laina Bay-Cheng, associate dean for faculty development, it is taking a “cooperative, pluralist approach.”

“We felt that we needed to be responsive to calls for racial justice,” Bay-Cheng said. “But clearly, business as usual approaches weren’t cutting

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it. We wanted to find a new way to make real progress. We don’t have a steering committee or a person calling the shots, we don’t have a plan or path plotted out. Our network consists of autonomous nodes, created and constituted by diverse school members—each mobilizing in various ways to move our school toward racial justice in the ways that feel most urgent and meaningful to them. This allows all of us to work on many fronts at once.”

The network visually and conceptually symbolizes itself through a map of those connected “nodes,” each representing the actions, activities and

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Why I'm Here:

Meet Sarah Richards-Desai, PhD Candidate

Embracing change and remaining focused are two kinds of experiences Sarah Richards-Desai (PhD [anticipated] '22, MSW '16) navigates as she completes her graduate work at the University at Buffalo.

Richards-Desai initially chose UB because the Buffalo area supports several refugee communities. As she advanced through her MSW studies, she realized that she could evolve her research interests through a concurrent PhD program. As an MSW student, she led a study of students' and faculty's perceptions of human rights curricula, and assisted in an R01 longitudinal addictions study. These experiences solidified her passion for research—particularly among marginalized populations. Her activity with grassroots organizations informs her direction and even provides opportunities for recruiting participants.

"An important aspect of my research is exploring refugee women's capabilities and social capital—the resources they access through community networks. People who are forcibly displaced have also been separated from key assets, information, and support," said Richards-Desai. "While the current crises have been unexpected for us all, they may have offered an opportunity to understand how people—particularly refugees—network and build connections."

Through the pandemic, Richards-Desai realized its increasing impact on refugee families. She shifted to videoconference interviews, noticing how many women were trying to manage children's remote learning, household tasks, and their own work. "US resettlement policies promote almost immediate self-sufficiency for refugees, without much attention to the quality of available jobs, access to childcare, or the refugees' own desires. Many points of connection, such as



“I feel lucky to work with Sarah—she is passionate about refugees, especially refugee women. Her current research on the population expands our understanding; her dissertation topic, relationships among gender role ideology, social capital, and economic integration among refugee women, is an exploration of the delicate social contexts where refugee women live and work, using a mixed-methods approach. I look forward to seeing what she does in her career; I'm positive she will have major impact in the fields of social work research and education.”

~ Associate Professor Yunju Nam, Richards-Desai's dissertation chair

houses of worship and community centers, were closed due to COVID-19, disrupting support networks. As I reconnect with these individuals, I expect my future research will confirm a gendered experience of pandemic-related disruption—and a need for more services to help families in these communities.” There were many windows into communal resilience and strength as well; Richards-Desai upholds this as a critical research and practice element.

Richards-Desai's investigations compare advanced statistical analyses using large public data sets about refugee populations alongside the qualitative data she collected herself through interpreters. “I am curious about how multifaceted gender roles and policy environments impact integration,” she said. “The literature often constructs refugee women as homogenous, but we are seeing how diverse their backgrounds can be.” Another goal of Richards-Desai's work is to focus on women's self-identified social and economic goals without replicating oppressive colonial mentalities in US immigration policy.

Now as she approaches her dissertation defense, Richards-Desai is exploring communities, literal and academic, which will allow her to share her worldview, and teach others to engage more fully with families who have refugee backgrounds. “I hope to continue my research in an inclusive, diverse academic environment—one that prepares social work students to engage in practice critically and with cultural humility, while also building social welfare science to inform evidence-based practices and scholarship,” she said. “For me, anti-racist social work practice and emancipatory pedagogical methods go hand-in-hand.”

– Catherine Donnelly

DEAN'S COLUMN



I am honored to address you as your new dean. I am eager to move further into my work here; to continue the effective work of my predecessor, Nancy J. Smyth, and our talented faculty, staff, and students.

While I've spent my career as a social worker, academic leader, and researcher focused on culturally specific mental health service delivery to children and families, child welfare practice, and contemporary rites of passage programming for African American youth, now as your dean, and considering our current conditions and environment, my gaze continues to broaden by way of the macro humanitarian challenges of today.

Of social work's core values—service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence—right now, the *dignity and worth of the person* resonates deeply with me. In fact, I often expand this notion to include the *dignity and worth of humankind*. Our focus needs to encompass a global connectivity.

As social workers, we continually address the value of life; work hard daily to promote the antithesis of violence, and to uplift humanity.

I refer to these times as a “pandemic trifecta,” since they combine multiple crises: a health pandemic, cultural trauma and injustices including racial, ethnic, and gender-based, and economic inequities. This point of reckoning calls for us to do the introspective work that must be done to elevate a more diverse, equitable, accessible, and inclusive world.

This is not a job I can or will do alone. I embrace collaborating to build on our strengths; we have too many to ignore. We will need to continue to co-create, dialogue, and listen to each other. There is an urgent need to understand and accept lived and felt experiences; it is necessary to move our world toward genuine transformation.

In camaraderie and solidarity,

Keith A. Alford, PhD, ACSW
Dean and Professor

Q&A

In addition to the dean's letter, here is a brief q&a to share snippets of the “conversation” that will characterize his work with us and our school community. Contributing editor Jana Eisenberg interviewed him for Mosaics; answers have been edited for length.

What else would you like people to know about you?

Keith A. Alford: I appreciate and value interaction, so that I can fully embrace the lived experience of “the other.” That is how we get to know each other—cross-culturally and where we find commonality. Dialogue is about growth—gaining and learning from each other once we open ourselves with empathy, authenticity, and patience. Dialogue offers the opportunity for moments of realization, that proverbial “aha!”

What has impressed you in your first semester here?

KAA: The first piece that comes to mind is the trauma-informed, human rights perspective that permeates our curriculum and daily practices. This is an impressive strength of our program. I fully support our emphasis on socially embedding both faculty and students' incredible research into the community. Our commitment is to make sure that, beyond the actual research methodology, we are doing positive work with the findings in our local area, as well as in the broader society.

Why do you feel that the school's Racial Justice Network (RJN) is necessary now?

(See main story, cover)

KAA: As I've said, we live in transformative times, times that demand responses in the moment. When we can be proactive, we should. Real-time experiences and thoughts associated with racial equity are critical; people need and want solutions and answers.

Why is the decentralized nature of the RJN appropriate?

KAA: It provides a constructive and critical lens for looking at racial equity, in a way that we probably have not done before. It opens the door for our appreciation of contextual reality; race is critical in everything and anything we do. The network model offers anyone who wants to take an action—to form what the network calls a “node”—the power to express themselves. It serves the school well; transformation can be more difficult with bureaucratic layers; it's not impossible, but it can take longer. The cooperative network model provides real-time experience, as well as feedback—the ability to share, connect, and process; hence, real-time change.

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efforts being taken. Within the RJN, a large and inclusive Racial Justice Coordinating Committee, according to the RJN’s description, “functions as a hub to circulate resources among network nodes, relay information beyond the UBSSW, support the creation of new nodes, and unify our diverse community and efforts to move toward racial justice.” Again, rather than a leadership body, it works in the background to support the individuals nodes comprising the network.

(See sidebar for an example of a student-driven node that began before the network was established. This, said Bay-Cheng, exemplifies the idea of individuals feeling moved and empowered to simply act on what they feel is most important and meaningful to them.)

“We think this model is efficient; it honors the diversity among us,” said Bay-Cheng, who, along with Associate Professors Shaanta Murshid and Diane Elze, associate dean for academic affairs, is active in the network and serves as a facilitator. “We don’t all start from the same place—with a networked approach, we are rolling as a system toward a shared goal. The three most important values within this system are diversity, autonomy and cooperation.”

Michelle Fortunado-Kewin, who will earn her DSW in Spring ’22, is active within the RJN; as a social worker in the field for over 15 years, and a person of Filipino descent, she said that students want and need to see their schools acknowledge and address racial injustice in all aspects of their institutions.

“As a student, it can be hard to get involved in school efforts around race and racial justice. Anti-racism is a sensitive topic; conversational...” Fortunado-Kewin said. “Students in general—want their schools to be more accountable; to make ac

and a working professional, I may feel more comfortable speaking out and speaking up, versus an MSW student, who may still be figuring out their role.”

Fortunado-Kewin agrees that RJN’s ground-up, inclusive approach is important at this moment—particularly in the profession of and education around social work. She is so impassioned about the work, and its impact in the larger context, that she changed her capstone project topic; instead of focusing on suicidal ideation in Filipino youth (a population

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she works with in the San Francisco public school system), she will now explore the idea of using restorative practices to address students’ experiences of racism and oppression within the UB School of Social Work itself.

She and some network node members are looking such varied elements within the school as the makeup of the admissions committees and the doctoral program curriculum.

“My ultimate goal is that BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and people of color) and all students feel safe at UB, and where we are both talking about and learning interventions and ways to address racism in the profession,” she said. “Social justice is one of the core values of social work. How do you expect us as social workers and students to be able to address this in society if we can’t talk about it ourselves



Prof. Laina Bay-Cheng, associate dean for faculty development
RJN co-facilitator, member of the Racial Justice Coordinating Committee and the Racial Justice Projects elective. She researches how racism, misogyny, and age-based oppression.



Michelle Fortunado-Kewin, DSW candidate
RJN involvement includes the Restorative Process node, to address students’ experience of or witnessing racism, sexism, and/or oppression.



Josh Hine, director of academic success initiatives
As part of the Data Support node, is assisting other nodes to analyze data to detect racial bias patterns and priorities for change.

INTERESTED IN LEARNING MORE ABOUT THE RACIAL JUSTICE NETWORK OR COORDINATING COMMITTEE?

Visit socialwork.buffalo.edu/racial-justice-network.

WANT TO GET INVOLVED?

Contact sw-racialjustice@buffalo.edu.

or within our educational institutions and professional environments? Once we have the experience of questioning and interrogating the systems we are in, we can possibly do it in other places.”

Pat Shelly, MSW '95, a member of the school's staff as the director of community engagement and expansion, saw herself as having a place in the RJN. Her role within the school echoes the micro-actions she's taking in the network, sharing resources and information through a node called "Action Beyond the UBSSW." Her personal beliefs and sense of wanting to be accountable drive her to be active in the network.

"To be anti-racist is to be a social worker and vice versa," said Shelly. "We must promote social justice, with clients as well as with communities. Also, as a white person, being part of the advantaged group, it's my responsibility: I share the need to address racism; to take this on with other white people. That's part of my motivation; to step up and say 'I'm here, and to want to be part of it.'"

With no assignments, no steering committee, no one telling anyone else what to do, the Racial Justice Network envisions progress when more people from the school community see a place for themselves within it.

"Social change is fundamentally about organizing and inviting an ever-broader group of people into that change," iterated Prof. Laina Bay-Cheng. "Our school opted for practices of community organizing and movement-building on the ground. We aim to create and work as a diverse network connected by shared principles and investment rather than formal authority and status. We know that those best positioned to make meaningful change in a system are those living within it."



Pat Shelly, MSW '95, director of community engagement and expansion
Part of the RJN node "Action Beyond the UBSSW," to increase external awareness of the school's anti-racist activities.

Assoc. Prof. Diane Elze,
associate dean for academic affairs
RJN co-facilitator; part of the Restorative Process node—the process builds community, strengthens relationships, and repairs harm through participatory decision-making.



Asst. Prof. Noelle St. Vil, faculty liaison for racially underrepresented students
Part of the Racial Justice Coordinating Committee; research focuses on Black male-female relationships, including the impact of structural racism.



Gloria James, an MSW student, saw a need to start a UB chapter of the National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW). After initial challenges connecting with the Buffalo chapter, she learned about university-specific chapters and took action. That's a piece of Racial Justice Network's intent, said Prof. Laina Bay-Cheng: highlighting the work that people were already doing; helping ensure that others are aware and can participate if they'd like. Mosaics spoke briefly with James about her work.

What is the general importance for universities to have organizations like ABSW?

Gloria James: Forming the chapter felt reactive—which, as social workers, we shouldn't be. We should be aware—from UB's point of view, it should have been happening already; social workers should be working against injustice. The university should look to and network with places like historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs); how they model their programs. From my macro social worker perspective, I want to look at things like admissions and how some requirements may limit Black students' access to education.

Why did you start UBABSW?

GJ: After learning that neither Buffalo State College (where I got my undergraduate degree) or UB had a chapter, I felt like we were behind in addressing the disparities between students who are Black, white and other ethnicities. It was a way to push forward, especially in the academic environment. The UBABSW is now affiliated with the Buffalo chapter, which is on a path to grow. When I complete my MSW, I will transition to the Buffalo chapter.

How does being affiliated with the RJN help?

GJ: When I started developing the chapter, I was unaware that the RJN was happening at the same time. I learned about it, and that Noelle St. Vil was an advisor. Laina Bay-Cheng contacted me, and after meeting with student services staff and Prof. St. Vil, everybody agreed that the UBABSW fit within the network.

UB is so vast. Especially during this time of social injustices, the RJN connection and support gives us insight and access to what's going on. This includes other offices and groups, like the Graduate Students Association, the Student Association's People of Color Council, and other racial justice projects, so we can collaborate and bounce off each other; set up opportunities to strengthen and facilitate our chapter.

To get involved in the UBABSW, email ubuffaloabsw@nabsw.org; they are seeking members, sponsors, and other types of support.

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