

Creating Safe Spaces for Anti-Racist Dialogue in Academia

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Scholars for Anti-racist Fellowship in Education at Utah State University (SAFEatUSU) was founded earlier this year by USU faculty, students, and staff. The goal of the organization is to create a safe space for critical anti-racist dialogue and self-reflection in academia.

On May 25, 2020, a Black man named George Floyd was murdered by police officers. Floyd's death, along with the unjust deaths of many other Black Americans, including Breonna Taylor, sparked nationwide protests and conversations surrounding the Black Lives Matter movement.

During this time, Shardé Davis, an assistant professor at the University of Connecticut, and Joy Melody Woods, a PhD student at the University of Texas at Austin, started the hashtag #blackintheivory to share their experiences and stories about systemic racism in academia.

This growing movement has created countless opportunities for institutions and individuals to examine their efforts to promote inclusivity and equality in academic spaces. On June 10, the hashtags #ShutDownAcademia and #ShutDownSTEM encouraged the research community to refrain from regular meetings and classes for one day and dedicate that day to educating themselves and defining a detailed plan to eliminate anti-Black racism.

Dr. Breanne Litts, assistant professor in the Instructional Technology & Learning Sciences department in the Emma Eccles Jones College of Education and Human Services, invited faculty, staff, and students from USU to gather on June 10 to discuss how they could foster sustained

anti-racist efforts and action at the university. Part of their solution: the creation of SAFEatUSU. The organization hosts a speaker series, which is now cosponsored by the ITLS department and the Center for Intersectional Gender Studies & Research. This series allows the promotion of ongoing and intentional conversations around equity, inclusion, diversity, and anti-racism at USU. Devon Isaacs, USU PhD student and member of the Cherokee Nation, stated, "Listening to these speakers in the series has made me, as a Native American, feel more heard and seen."

Along with the speaker series, Litts and her team have created a Slack space to connect existing efforts across the USU community and give people a place to collectively reflect and share resources. "This space is important because it's a place where people can grow together with the understanding that no one has this figured out," Litts said. "We wanted a space where everyone in our community can share their experiences and viewpoints, especially in relation to their lived experiences here at USU. The discussions can be awkward and uncomfortable for many, but ultimately we all want to learn and take action to make our community better."

Isaacs also discussed the benefit of the Slack space as a dedicated judgement-free zone where people can share their experiences. "People feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and opinions in this space, because they know that the others that have also joined are there to listen," Isaacs stated. "Here we can exchange dialogue and have real, two-sided conversations, allowing people that oftentimes don't speak up the opportunity to speak their mind and tell of their experiences. This, in turn, allows us all to stop, listen, and take the time to consider others' perspectives, building empathy and understanding. This is the more equitable way of having these types of conversations."

As an assistant professor at USU, Litts cares deeply for the well-being of her students. "My students are what hits closest to home," she said. After having taught and mentored many students in her five years here, Breanne called the experiences of many minoritized students "truly sad."

Kenden Quayle, USU graduate student and member of SAFEatUSU, said, "Our hope is that SAFEatUSU can become a space where USU students, faculty, staff, and even members of the Cache County community can talk about hard things and can learn how to become an advocate."

“SAFEatUSU is meaningful for all of us,” said Isaacs. “We all want to do more than simply discuss the topic; we want to see change occur. We need this more than ever.”

Learn more about the mission of SAFEatUSU as well as their Speaker Series at usu.edu/safe-at-usu.