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USING THE BOOK “*HOW TO BE AN ANTIRACIST*” IN LIBRARY DEI COMMUNITY PROGRAMS

Bringing Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion to the Community

Nakia Hoskins

ABSTRACT

This brief article provides an overview of a program in which the University of North Carolina at Greensboro library hosted a series of book club conversations about racism utilizing the book *How to Be an Antiracist* by Ibram X. Kendi. The article concludes with some observations and suggestions.

KEYWORDS

Discussions about racism, book club ideas, antiracism.

INTRODUCTION

The killing of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, ignited a global uprising in social justice protests and intensified workplace expectations of equity, diversity, and inclusion. On the campus of UNC Greensboro (UNCG) a variety of responses occurred: task forces were formed, websites were created, and statements were released by University Administration denouncing racism with promises to foster environments of tolerance and sensitivity.

PROCESS

The UNCG Alumni and Friends Virtual Book Club (AVF), a partnership between Alumni Engagement, the Bryan Business School, and the University Libraries, made the brave decision to invite book club members to participate in open, honest, and much needed conversations about race in America by choosing Ibram X. Kendi's, *How to Be an Antiracist* as the title for the August through September 2020 club selection.

Described by New York Times as “the most courageous book to date on the problem of race in the Western mind”, *How to Be an Antiracist* takes readers through Kendi's introspective journey of self-actualization as he begins to establish his place in the world as a Black man and come to terms with how he feels towards other Black people and people of color. Kendi's marriage of the history of race to his personal experience invites audience members to reflect upon and discuss race from their own positionality in such a way that the personal lends itself to the general constructively. True to his

purpose Kendi creates space for an open, honest, and informed discussion about the complexities and mythologies surrounding race in contemporary society.

The AFV book club leaders recognized the need to select a moderator knowledgeable not only about applicable content, but someone with the emotional intelligence and endurance to navigate sensitive discussions introduced in Kendi's book. The search did not take long. AFV book club leadership quickly and unanimously decided to ask Dr. Armondo Collins, a Visiting Assistant Professor in African American and African Diaspora Studies and Head of the Libraries Digital Media Commons at UNCG, to serve as moderator. Dr. Collins has proven both through his academic and personal work that he was well-suited to lead the discussions for the sessions centered on *How to Be an Antiracist*.

Dr. Collins, published author and veteran speaker on EDI and race relations in America, skillfully led talks on delicate subjects such as race, racism, history, and sociology. He compassionately created a space for individuals to share personal stories about the effects of racism in their lives. The AFV Book Club successfully engaged over one hundred individuals in four virtual discussions. "Having Dr. Armondo Collins moderate our virtual book club conversations on *How to Be an Antiracist* by Ibram X. Kendy, was truly an honor; his candidness, transparency, and openness made our audience feel comfortable to share and open up to the tough topic of racism", says Yubisela Sandoval, UNCG Alumni Engagement.

When asked to reflect on moderating experience, Dr. Collins shared, "I am an African American studies scholar and *How to Be an Antiracist* brought to fore many of the issues I teach and have been engaging with in my personal research. The book is a minicourse in African American studies. I was also excited by the opportunity to talk about the work with a mixed audience of scholars and non-scholars given the sweeping grip of American racial politics in the wake of George Floyd's public

murder. I have praise and criticism for Kendi's work but whatever its shortcomings his work offers an opportunity to engage in a critically constructive community dialogue about race and its legacy in our daily lives".

"In my open group discussions with community members about the book I heard from a range of community members I hadn't even thought would be interested in having a conversation about race and racism", reports Collins. "I also saw how the construction of narrative in the book allowed audience members to latch on to pieces of the discussion and relate what they read to their own lives and the experiences of their families and friends. The audiences we got to engage with were diverse and lively, and as Kendi eloquently points out, caught in the middle of race as an ongoing contemporary human drama. People attended our book talks because they want to do something about race".

We found that in these discussions people posed the question, "well, what do you do?" This question came from a range of well-meaning "allies", race-battle fatigued colleagues, and many who are weary of experiencing many different types of microaggressions and racist behavior. People really wanted answers and directions as to how to topple systems whose foundations were created and reinforced with centuries of racism. These conversations did not present such answers, nor was it the book club's goal. However, we provided an opportunity for people to release and name their feelings, find community, and begin their paths to self-actualization within the realm of race relations in America-- a driving point of *How to Be an Antiracist*. The book club discussions however did set the tone and equip participants with the tools needed to conduct their own conversations on race with their families, peers, and communities.

Happily, Kendi starts his work with the very practical truth that race is a social construct created over time through legislation and traditions of practice related to violence and inequality. Sadly, he can also be understood as turning this brilliant premise into an institutional

problem with human solutions without getting past the key problem that the system he critiques is held together by the same human saviors he valorizes as our potential vanguard.

We Americans can be recalcitrant in our attachment to the very institutions of oppression that bind us. Many of us rely on systemic inequality for our existential psychological safety. *How to Be an Antiracist* is an ambitious attempt at reprogramming centuries of social conditioning. Kendi's attempt at anti-racism may not be as clearly solved a problem as his title suggests. However, the book is nevertheless an excellent resource for starting a public conversation about the difficult topics attached to the history of race as an American problem. With some sensitive facilitation, we found this book to be an extremely useful tool for libraries seeking to engage multiple groups in a constructive dialogue about racism in these troubling times, something we strongly encourage.