

# Reflecting on a Year of Promises: A Conference Assessing Organizational Antiracism Journeys

Institutional Antiracism and Accountability Project

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MAY 2022

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Dear friends and colleagues,

This year's convening opened with a land acknowledgment, one that reminded us that the land we sit on is not only the traditional and unceded territory of the Massachusett people but also that which has long served as a place of meeting and exchange of ideas among nations. The annual Truth and Transformation convening is meant to foster exactly that, an exchange of ideas framed by the history that borne them.

This annual convening is a quest for solutions, to critically examine the existing body of work on structural and institutional racism and explore what works, what doesn't work, and why. We believe this year's conference speaks to the urgency of the moment, the seriousness of the work. History is a powerful tool to diagnose problems and to benchmark progress. With hindsight and perspective, organizations are better positioned to redesign discriminatory and/or exclusionary systems.

Despite 50 years of "post-civil rights" advancement, our institutions have not been solving for systemic racism. Most leaders and managers of institutions across every sector of society believed that civil rights legislation and antidiscrimination policy would level the playing field. They were solving for individual skill acquisition and access. But institutions are more powerful than individuals. And racism is a compounding injury, and an intergenerational transfer of liability, that has never been addressed on a structural level. Structural racism does not require individual bias or bigots; it is baked into the algorithms and infrastructure of everyday life: the credit report, the police department, the neighborhood school, the patient profile, the curriculum. All you have to do is follow the rules, and the systems will adapt and shift to maintain the status quo. We must critically examine, through a historical lens and with the wisdom of practitioners addressing these issues, what has come before to hold up these inequities, and actively look for and implement solutions.

This convening is meant to bring together those working in this space to learn how people are developing tools, workarounds, new policies, practices, and procedures meant to transform organizations and institutions.

Thank you for joining us, and I hope you find the discussions and take-home learning as engaging, important, and useful as I did.

Khalil Gibran Muhammad  
Ford Foundation Professor of History, Race, and Public Policy  
Harvard Kennedy School  
Director, IARA Project

## About the Conference Sponsors

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The Roy and Lila Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation advances excellence and innovation in governance and public policy through research, education, and public discussion. By training the very best leaders, developing powerful new ideas, and disseminating innovative solutions and institutional reforms, the Center's goal is to meet the profound challenges facing the world's citizens. The Ford Foundation is a founding donor of the Center. Additional information about the Ash Center is available at [ash.harvard.edu](http://ash.harvard.edu).

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#### **A PUBLICATION OF THE**

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## Executive Summary

The annual Truth and Transformation Conference is convened by Professor Khalil Gibran Muhammad and hosted by the Institutional Antiracism and Accountability (IARA) Project at Harvard Kennedy School's Ash Center. This is the third installment of the conference, which began in 2019 and was established to focus on drivers of antiracist change in private, public, and academic institutions.

During this free virtual conference, the IARA team invited fellow advocates, organizers, scholars, students, and community members to engage in challenging and thoughtful conversations centered around the 2021 theme "Reflecting on A Year of Promises."

This year's event focused on examining the prior year of institutional promises and publicly stated intentions to improve diversity, equity, and inclusion in the United States and globally in the wake of the "George Floyd" moment in American history. This year our organizers asked; Did organizations keep their promises? What more work is there to be done to follow through on these public commitments?

The conference was organized in four parts around the question; How does historical reflection and reckoning move the public conversation and lead to policy and institutional change?

In the opening Institute of Politics Forum, Professor Muhammad was joined by a leading scholar and practitioner, Dr. Ibram X. Kendi and Heather McGhee, to discuss ways to understand and measure change at this moment. The opening panel situated the conference and theme in a historical and contemporary context that served as a reminder that the history and politics of racism must be viewed in tandem as mechanisms to measure change.

Three additional panels featured leaders in academia and professional practice in discussion on transformative change beyond performative statements into actionable, institutional shifts. The first panel examined the validity of an economic argument for improving diversity and brought insights to the discussion from bankers, economists, and philanthropic directors. The second panel emphasized the importance of board membership as a conduit for enacting or inhibiting organizational change in relation to equity and inclusion. The final panel challenged the notion of risk as a measuring tool for organizational change and offered alternative perspectives on ways to identify and value humanity in the work across industries.

The conference and its proceedings serve to remind us that if we are truthful about racism in our politics and policy making, then we must accept that it has a cost for all of us.

## TOPIC DISCUSSIONS

### **Money Left on the Table: Does the Economic Argument for Diversity Make Sense?**

Moderator: Levi Sumagaysay, Reporter, MarketWatch

Speakers: Dana Peterson, Chief Economist, The Conference Board  
 Lisa Cook, Professor of Economics, Michigan State University  
 Michael McAfee, President and CEO, PolicyLink  
 Jarik Conrad, Executive Director, Equity at Work

Levi Sumagaysay, a San Francisco–based reporter covering technology, economy, and issues of inequality, opened the discussion and introduced the panelists: economists Dana Peterson and Lisa Cook as well as policy leaders Michael McAfee and Jarik Conrad.

Referencing her own co-authored report titled *Closing the Racial Inequality Gaps (2020)*, Peterson projected that \$16 trillion have been erased from the US GDP due to racial discrimination. This economic argument represents a compelling perspective and opportunity to eliminate the racial divide by contributing \$5 trillion to the US economy over the next five years. Peterson explained that the process of innovation (broadly defined) must fully address gender and racial disparities to include as many people as possible, which directly enables a substantial increase in productive capacity and the standard of living for everyone in the US.

Cook described complementary innovative thinking about what investments make a long-term, inclusive impact on equity. Though not traditionally viewed as disruptors to racial inequity, investment in infrastructure and child care are reliably proven to be two of the most equitable ways to increase long-term growth. This analysis builds upon Angela Glover Blackwell’s “The Curb Cut Effect,” which outlines the desirable spillover effect to improve the standard of living for the communities in which those particular investments are made. This approach ensures that, like curb cuts along city streets that improve mobility for the disabled and others, everyone can participate and addresses issues of work-force climate. Cook emphasized that successful workforce management requires proactively eliminating added burdens and stressors that specifically inhibit Black, Indigenous, and other workers of color from navigating an environment designed to maintain discriminatory policies.

While the economic data presented by Peterson and Cook is strong, it requires constant justification that often overshadows fundamental ideas about Blackness and humanity, as McAfee emphasized when he said that “the humanity of Black people must not solely be predicated upon an economic argument.” McAfee also highlighted that this line of inquiry inherently centers whiteness and has the potential to ignore the anti-Black racism that permeates US history and defines our social landscape anchored in inequitable policies and practices. The racial equity landscape must make space for both economic and moral arguments in the face of such profound denial of Black humanity. Or as McAfee reiterated, “no case should need to be made for the value of Black lives. Of my life.”

Conrad and McAfee reflected on what it would mean to inhabit an equitable world in the absence of racist policies. They emphasized that the current state of living in which policies and decisions have created deep inequities and imposed a lack of inclusion in the US must be remade. To that end, diversity efforts are not to be considered “favors” or “charity”; they are a matter of duty and democratic governance.

The panelists also called for deeper understanding of neuroscience and decision-making as explanations for the persistence of tribalism and ways humans operate to make decisions. Solutions should focus on ways to disrupt the influences that encourage people to make decisions that are actively against their long-term well-being. Conrad used a metaphor about diet to drive this point: countless

examples exist where people are aware of the benefits of healthier eating, and yet they still choose the opposite. The panelists indicated it is also important to consider the intended audience for your efforts and whether the language will resonate with them. McAfee described, “this is about the opportunity to redesign the nation to end that cycle.”

To sustain equitable, antiracist change in private industry and philanthropy, real accountability must involve metrics as rigorous as those used for other facets of corporate enterprise. This is how accountability may be established. Peterson referred to game theory work by John Nash as an unwitting “use case for diversity.” Game theory contends that for people to create the most optimal outcomes, they must cooperate.

The panel also presented economic perspectives aligning with moral perspectives to describe the risk in excluding diversity, equity, and inclusion from the redesign of the country. The current design of political, economic, and social systems in the United States does not “even work well for most white folks,” contended McAfee. The speakers concluded that institutions must be redesigned to avoid a zero or less than zero sum gain to the wealth and well-being of American society. Ignoring diversity and inclusion is a decision made “at your own peril.” A major insight, provided by McAfee who pointed to the US as a toxic environment, too, for many white people, even if many have not yet realized it. Regardless of racial identity, everyone, except the extremely wealthy, will suffer under the existing systems.



## Preserving Seats at the Table: How White-Dominated Boards Impact Racial Equity in Organizations

Moderator: Jeff Ginsburg, Executive Director, East Harlem Tutorial Program

Speakers: Trina Jackson, Program Officer, Grassroots International  
 Rebecca Shuster, Assistant Superintendent of Equity, Boston Public Schools  
 Cheryl Mills, Founder and CEO, Black Ivy Group  
 Samantha Tweedy, President, Black Economic Alliance

Boards, in both the nonprofit and private sectors, matter greatly to the work of antiracism. In this panel, Jeff Ginsburg led a discussion to examine the potential impact and strategies of governing at the board level for racial equity in today's organizations.

One of the main reasons that boards matter, Cheryl Mills alluded, is because of their impact on an organization's ability to create standard practices and accountability. She suggested that the audience think of boards as the elders in families who are consulted for final decisions. Boards set the agenda for mission, goals, and strategies for an organization and thus have a significant amount of power and leverage for changing organizational culture and priorities. They also influence what actions are taken, and not taken, and what metrics are considered. Whether explicitly or implicitly, boards set the tone for what truly matters to an organization.

Despite the power and influence boards have (or because of it), the panelists agreed that this level of governance is still lacking real antiracist change. Trina Jackson affirmed that the analogy of a snow-capped mountain model still accurately reflects most boards in both the nonprofit and private sectors; the top leadership is predominantly white, and you only find people of color as you progress further down the organizational chart. On the other hand, the issue of tokenism continues to take a toll when people are brought onto boards because of their racial identity and as "onlys." This empty action overlooks individual experience and expertise and may create a burden of unrealistic and potentially unsupported expectations for people of color to represent their racial identity group and also be responsible for equity work.

Rebecca Shuster emphasized the importance of having racially diverse school boards. One of the most telling indicators of resistance to change that she noted in this context is that when a school board seat is given priority to a parent of color in the community rather than a white parent, there is heightened backlash due to the effects of entitlement and associated "loss" by the white parent. This reaction points to the need for white people to be open to talk and understand how educational administration and the school experience itself continues to fail to meet the needs of all students and, in particular, students of color. Samantha Tweedy cited the work of the Black Economic Alliance she directs, which has published research indicating that the number of board seats in publicly traded companies held by people of color in any given time has remained consistently at 1%. Tweedy further described the process by which board membership is obtained. It is often from within social networks and interpersonal connections, sustaining an old "boy's club" scenario as well as creating an unwelcoming environment to those who do not fit a legacy or expected standard.

Trina Jackson reflected on her decades-long journey in grassroots community organizing as well as the current reality that people of color are in the middle of many different pandemics, including racism. She indicated "we need to keep imagining that things can, indeed, be better." Those with privilege have a role and responsibility to support their peers in imagining and believing that another world is possible and to create this new reality. It was widely accepted on the panel that 2020 was a "once in a generation" call for racial justice to capitalize on it and carry that energy forward in the work that we do to advance racial equity.

## **Equity Takes Time, Commitment & Disruption: Risk & Innovation in Pursuit of Meaningful Change**

Moderator: Mary McNeil, PhD Candidate, Harvard University

Speakers: Carmen Rojas, President and CEO, Margaret Casey Foundation

Eric Ward, Executive Director, Western States Center

Halima Begum, Chief Executive Officer, Runnymede Trust

John C. Yang, Executive Director, Asian Americans Advancing Justice

Since the murder of George Floyd and subsequent protests, there has been a significant shift in the corporate sector regarding the level of attention given to the issue of racism and equity. Carmen Rojas's opening remarks highlighted the fault lines of philanthropy that can skew the representation of equity, race, and leadership in the United States. There is much talk about racism, but it is difficult to see true redistribution of power. John Yang followed up on this point by providing several key strategies to more effectively understand the relationship of the reallocation of resources and equity while pointing to the role that the US Census plays in that distribution. Yang emphasized that the most effective leaders use this relationship inflection point to invite employees with relevant-lived experiences to recommend institutional changes to benefit racial equity at their organizations.

Eric Ward reminded the group that “the idea of a diverse America is over, the real question is what do we do with this diverse America.” This remark demonstrates that the system-level approach to equity is important because the question of “diversity” as a concept is rhetorical. Rather, it is critical to focus on the practice of equity. Ward further emphasized that philanthropy is important at this time of societal and organizational transformation because it can offer a case study for what it looks like to activate leadership governance as the engine for equity.

Rojas offered a critical observation that “in the first six months of 2021, I was invited to 100 panels on antiracism and now I'm invited to 100 panels about ‘how do I get along with my right-wing colleagues.’” The central tension when striving to achieve antiracist transformation is providing leaders the power that is required for actual accountable change and not just “feel-good” relationships. “It wasn't the lack of diversity that led to the murder of George Floyd; it was the institutional and systemic force of racism,” emphasized Halima Begum. While equity is the needed conversation, many people and institutions do not have the tools to have such discourse and continue to rely heavily on the topic of diversity. “Equality of outcomes is more powerful than equality of opportunity,” she noted.

What is the purpose of truth in this moment of transformation? Yang emphasized that there is a need to combat misinformation, citing examples such as pushback to the presidential election outcome in 2020 and the way in which the media often supports extremes that can lend credence to false narratives. The tension between historical narrative and dissemination of truth and knowledge is intensifying US political stakes and even outcomes. Rojas added that it is time to name the political and corporate leaders whose words and actions deepen white supremacy extremism in the US. And this naming ties back to the intersection of addressing two important levels of racism: systemic and interpersonal.

A comparative view of the current movements for antiracist change illustrates the fact that by percentage, white people are more supportive of Black Lives Matter than they were of Martin Luther King, Jr. in the mid-20th century, and this may hold promise for the arc of change in this country. The panelists concluded that accountable white allyship is the first essential step for white people to have an active self-interest in antiracism work rather than simply a supporting role.



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