

James Madison College faculty senators have heard from colleagues within and beyond the college with concerns about the issues of academic freedom and teaching about race. We are requesting that faculty senators reach out to their constituents who teach about race and racism to find out about their experiences and concerns. Our goal is to learn more about and to discuss the state of academic freedom in relation to teaching about race and racism at MSU at the November Faculty Senate meeting. We may then choose to take action based on the breadth of faculty experiences and concerns at a following meeting.

In addition, JMC faculty have expressed concerns about academic freedom and teaching about race in light of recent legislative initiatives nationally and in Michigan. Here, we propose a resolution in support of academic freedom and teaching about race and racism (see attached).

In one incident at the May 2021 Spring Conference on Teaching and Learning, conference organizers initially decided to create optional affinity groups to provide space for interested individuals “to work with their own identity groups.” These two sessions, one for white people and one for people of color, were part of a much larger program “to leverage the campus community’s collective skills and knowledge about teaching, learning, assessment, research, and administrative processes to advance student learning and benefit the entire university community.”¹ However, apparently in response to conservative news outlets deriding the conference itself and identifying these groups as segregation, the decision to have affinity group sessions was reversed.² In a statement, MSU Deputy Spokesperson Dan Olsen that “we regret the impact the invitation had on some. We are examining and updating the format of the two optional facilitated discussions to be more inclusive. All conference participants are welcome to attend either discussion and we are no longer inviting individuals to join based on identity.”³ Regardless of your opinion of affinity groups, it is very concerning to some faculty that a decision to hold race-based discussions at a conference would be overturned due to outside publicity. At a minimum, this may have a chilling effect. More seriously, it may undermine the academic freedom of MSU faculty to hold discussions about race and racism in the ways that they believe most appropriate.

Previously, faculty senators raised concerns about the administration’s lackluster defense of the freedom to discuss and teach about race in response to the Trump memo on DEI training. Additionally, faculty who engage in teaching about race and related topics have experienced racist threats from outside the university on social media and in emails. We welcome discussion of these incidents and faculty concerns at the November Faculty Senate meeting.

¹ [Spring Conference on Teaching, Learning, and Student Success, May 4-7, 2021.](#)

² Ashe Schowe, “[Michigan State University Teaching Conference Includes Discussions Segregated By Race, With White People Forced To Accept Their ‘White Privilege’](#),” *Dailywire.com*, April 14, 2021; Mark J. Perry, “[Michigan State University gets caught illegally segregating ‘affinity groups’ by skin color, then conceals it, and then backtracks](#),” *AEI.org*, April 20, 2021; Ophelie Jacobson, “[University decides to segregate educators based on race during teaching conference...then changes its mind](#),” *Campus Reform*, May 17, 2021.

³ Jackson Walker, “[‘Student success’ conference at Michigan State to segregate participants by skin color](#),” *The College Fix*, April 20, 2021.