“Genuine and effective talk about race and racism requires friendly antagonists not just amen corners.”

John L. Jackson, Jr., *Impolite Conversations*

University Dean of Recruitment and Diversity Arlene Torres welcomed all to the first Faculty Diversity Dialogue of the spring 2018 semester, adding that Dean Jackson, a fellow anthropologist and social scientist, shared her interest in both exploring and exposing the roles played by diversity, equity and inclusion in the academy. Dean Jackson was moved by her kind words and recognized that the overall nature and value of this work is much bigger than simply publishing books, reinforcing the need for mentoring and multi-modal work.

He asks, how to move beyond the optics of diversity to an embrace of everyday forms of engagement?

Dean Jackson focused on how faculty and administrators can fall into the trap of seeing themselves or being seen by others as experts on identity and diversity. In fact, he noted identity still confounds us. As academics we can and do rally around the mission and lofty benefits of diversity. However, dragging diversity down to the brick and mortar of policy and practice is where we can and do observe fissures. It’s hard work to talk about the concepts of identity and diversity when we are metric based. We want to make it about the optics. True diversity he argued, requires ways of being and doing that are sometimes off-putting. Exploring forms of difference including radical difference may engender new roads, new stones, new possibilities for excellence and change. These inclusive possibilities if attended to can and will allow us to reconfigure the edifice of the academy.

Professor Jackson then detailed a series of assumptions that contributes to this identity/diversity conundrum from his perspective as an anthropologist, faculty member, and university administrator.

1. Anthropologists have focused on convincing the public that race isn’t biological. Race is a cultural construct. In other words, racialized beliefs are informed by culture. We failed to emphasize how the power of culture continues to inform the persistence of race and racism.
2. Difference continues to be perceived as a threat. We might consider difference as an option of success.
3. A “national conversation” on race is just talk. It’s far superior to have engaged dialogue that is supported by proactive listening.
4. We know the formulation, “If you don’t know your history, you’re doomed to repeat it.” History alone will not get us in touch with the present. A greater potential for understanding and
enhanced knowledge exists when we examine our past in context. It allows us to manage the complexities of our emerging, global and interconnected world more readily.

5. Noting that this is the 150th year anniversary of W.E.B. DuBois birth, we need to recognize that many in our society still feel unaccepted. It’s easy to develop a ‘why bother’ attitude when faced with the privilege or lack thereof of others. By drawing on a piece published in the Chronicle of Higher Education https://www.chronicle.com/article/What-It-Feels-Like-to-Be-a/151323, Dr. Jackson observed that highly successful Black faculty across the nation still feel undervalued, disrespected, and marginalized. What are the real ramifications of this for the future of us all? To be committed to diversity and inclusion means being committed to seeing and valuing other people.

He concluded his remarks by asking us to cultivate a way of seeing that recognizes that talents and humanity of others and their potential for multi-modal ways of producing scholarship that is generative and transformative.

The presentation was followed by questions and comments from the audience.

*****

Dr. John L. Jackson, Jr., is Dean of the School of Social Policy & Practice University of Pennsylvania, and Richard Perry University Professor and Penn Integrates Knowledge (PIK) Professor. He has served as Associate Dean of Administration, Annenberg School for Communication, Senior Advisor to the Provost on Diversity, University of Pennsylvania and Associate Dean of Undergraduate Studies, Annenberg School for Communication.

As co-founder of two critical initiatives in film and communications, Dr. Jackson’s work also explores how film and other non-traditional or multi-modal formats can be most effectively utilized in specifically scholarly research projects, such as ethnographic methods in media analysis, the impact of mass media on urban life, mediamaking as a form of community-building and proselytizing among religious organizations, globalization and the remaking of ethnic/racial diasporas, visual studies and theories of reality, and racialization and media technology.