

# VCU cancels upcoming racial literacy course requirement

**ANDREW KERLEY,**  
Audience Editor

VCU announced the installation of a racial literacy general education requirement starting in the fall 2023 semester would be indefinitely delayed in a letter from the Provost at the end of July.

The racial literacy general education requirement was first proposed by Mignon Guy, Chair of the Department of African American Studies, at a panel in 2019. Demand for the requirement increased after the events of summer 2020 and George Floyd's murder, according to sociology professor Susan Bodnar-Deren.

Bodnar-Deren is a member of VCU's Committee on Racial Equity, or CORE, a group that began developing course material for the requirement alongside scholars in the Student Advisory Group, or SAG, in 2020, according to Bodnar-Deren.

"We were working through, not just the pandemic, but this critical space we were at with the murder of George Floyd and the public gaze at structural, racist practices," Bodnar-Deren said. "Dr. Guy was running a regular listening group with students who were just like, 'we need to do something.'"

Faculty were prepared to begin teaching an early iteration of "CSIJ 200: Introduction to Race and Racism in the United States," in the fall of 2021, according to Bodnar-Deren. However, progression was halted in a faculty meeting after VCU appointed Fotis Sotiropoulos Provost and Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs at the beginning of August 2021.

"Our task force presented the findings that we were ready to go, and then they [university leadership] were like, 'well, before this goes further, we need these assessments,'" Bodnar-Deren said. "We were like, 'we've got the assessments.' It was always vague. Nobody from university leadership was giving us guidance of what those assessments looked like."

Bodnar-Deren said the Provost drove a discussion amongst VCU Shared Governance about adding courses that could fulfill the racial literacy requirement. This led to the creation of "AMST 216: Reading Race," which is now being offered for the first time in the fall 2023 semester.

"We're talking about almost three years of adherence to the principles and philosophy of shared faculty governance," Bodnar-Deren said. "This was something that students initiated with faculty that then went out into the broader space with really robust discussion. It went through all the stages from Faculty Council at the College of Humanities and Sciences, to Faculty Senate, to University Council, to the Board of Visitors."

"CSIJ 200" was offered to students for the first time in the fall 2022 semester.

The rollout of the racial literacy requirement was ultimately decided to

begin in the fall 2023 semester, according to Bodnar-Deren.

The Provost's letter cited a need for "more courses and more course sections" as a reason why the requirement could not yet be fully implemented.

"If those reasons were true, then we had two years to come up with solutions for those particular problems," said Amy Rector, co-chair of CORE. "The fact that those didn't seem to come across the Provost Office as real concerns until three weeks before the start of the semester is an indication that they're not real barriers"

VCU expects to take in over 4,500 freshmen this year, which would make it the largest incoming class in the university's history, according to a report by the Richmond Times-Dispatch.

"We never intended for every incoming freshman to take the class in their first year," Rector said. "Right now, we have 1,600 seats available. Even if the freshman class is the largest we've had in a long time, the idea is that we would ramp up each year and have more and more seats available."

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On a daily basis, as a Black woman, I think about race every day, when I'm in a meeting where I'm the only Black person in the room there are things that I have to think about that other individuals don't think about. So, consider what the student thought process is on a daily basis.”

**Winn Bryan**  
assistant professor in the  
Department of African  
American Studies

CORE made a plan that would allow any professors who wanted to teach the course to be trained on the course material beforehand, according to SAG member Marie Vergamini.

A survey conducted by CORE SAG revealed that around 60 to 70 professors said they would like to teach the courses, according to Bodnar-Deren.

"It's not like this course was just added to the books one day," Vergamini said. "There were a lot of discussions, a lot of planning. We did everything that they told us to do, and it felt like they just took everything

away in a snap."

Vergamini said she was burned out by constant meetings with different faculty, administrators and student organizations, but by the end of course development, felt validated to see students were opting to take the class, and continue to take it to this day.

The Provost's letter revealed 700 students are enrolled in either "CSIJ 200" or "AMST 216" for the fall 2023 semester.

Lisa Winn Bryan, an assistant professor in the Department of African American Studies, said she was part of the group that taught "CSIJ 200" for the first time in the fall 2022 semester.

"I've had very positive experiences with the students," Winn Bryan said. "They're anxious to talk about it [race relations], students of all different orientations and colors, from different states and backgrounds. It's an opportunity for students to have the conversations that they've been wanting to have."

Winn Bryan said the class is a safe space for students that may feel uncomfortable having conversations about race and that everyone is respected, regardless of their differing opinions.

"Something is happening in the media every day that speaks to the issues that students are interested in talking about," Winn Bryan said. "Sometimes the class would go longer, students were really enjoying it."

Discussions in the class ranged from the origins of the concept of race and the historical impact of racism to "why everyone was upset over the new Little Mermaid being black," Winn Bryan said.

"I was teaching the day the Queen of England passed away," Winn Bryan said. "It sparked a conversation immediately about how we felt about the Queen. I had students in my class who were from the Caribbean, who would understand [the implications] immediately."

Winn Bryan said that she believes teaching "CSIJ 200" is something that we have to do, that is going to make race relations in this country better for students that are getting degrees and going out into

the workforce as leaders.

"On a daily basis, as a black woman, I think about race every day," Winn Bryan said. "When I'm in a meeting where I'm the only black person in the room there are things that I have to think about that other individuals don't think about. So, consider what the student thought process is on a daily basis."

Winn Bryan said she had a white, male student in his 70's that she is good friends with to this day.

"We meet every few months to continue the conversation," Winn Bryan said. "He said he wants to influence his grandchildren. People ask, 'How do we start breaking down these barriers?' I said, 'Have you been to the Caribbean festival? The Folk Festival? An African restaurant?' All these things are right here in town. Have you tried worshipping at a black mosque or a black church? We live in a more diverse community than we think."

Clyde Ledbetter, a visiting Assistant Professor in the Department of African Studies, taught "CSIJ 200" in the spring 2023 semester.

"Any class that goes into the discussions of our time is incredibly important because we live in a time period where information is readily available, but not always analyzed," Ledbetter said. "Classes like these need to be at every university. This is the space where we train people to debate using empirical evidence, to test theories. We're not just pumping people out to get jobs."

Ledbetter said he isn't convinced that the postponement of the racial literacy course requirement will be indefinite.

"My faith lies in the students and the community of VCU," Ledbetter said. "We're used to these types of struggles. African American Studies, as a discipline, was pushed into the university by students and faculty. At every single college institution around the country, when the students want something, they get it. I believe that our students are up for the challenge and they're not afraid of ideas."

Infographic by Solimar Santoyo

