Remarks for Faculty Retreat 2021

Thank you, Jackson Wilson and Wei Ming Dariotis for organizing this timely retreat. The question of “how to be an antiracist university” feels more urgent than ever today. Even as we celebrated yesterday’s inauguration, just two weeks ago, the insurrection of January 6 was both a wake-up call and, for many, a confirmation of what they already knew and feared—that many white Americans, as Black Theologian Bryan Massingale put it, “would rather live in a white dictatorship than in a multiracial democracy.” In many ways, we are the caretakers of democracy—this is what the CSU’s founders believed. In 1939, when white supremacy threatened democracy in Europe, one system administrator, J. Hershel Coffin, insisted that California’s “state colleges” (as we were then called) were better prepared than any institution in the nation to uphold what he termed “the spirit of democracy,” because of our egalitarian social values. (In contrast, he faulted the UC for its “aristocratic” mindset.) In 1968, San Francisco State showed the system and the nation that racial equity was critical to democracy, and that achieving it would take radical change —starting with the university itself. Today’s retreat invites us to reaffirm our commitment to the core value of multiracial democracy, and to the hard and ongoing work it asks of us.

So how can we “be an antiracist university?” I believe it starts with very terms that CEETL unites in its name: equity AND excellence. Pairing them asserts a profound claim: that equity and excellence belong together. The dominant paradigm assumes the opposite: we can have excellence or equity, but not both. As long as educational excellence is viewed as a privilege and not a right, a private and not a public good, it becomes exclusive—an aristocratic value, not a democratic one. By contrast, at the celebration of the strike’s fiftieth anniversary, alumus Danny Glover challenged us to embrace “radical inclusiveness” as our institutional purpose. Or, to put it in the words of alumna Rebecca Solnit, to work “for a society in which everyone is important.” Inclusive excellence is easy to say, but humblingly difficult to achieve—yet our students so often tell us that they find it here, where faculty make their classrooms places of welcome as well as high-level engagement, of challenge as well as support. It’s also a goal that we can never stop trying to reach: by actively tracking how our students are succeeding, and by asking how our practices and systems can advance our goals even further. As Ibram X. Kendi writes in the book that gives this retreat its name, “self-critique allows change.”

Kendi’s book, How to be an Antiracist challenges us to recognize that racism is a system, and one that’s been too long bound up with the educational system itself. In Kendi’s powerful analysis, racism manifests as an inequitable distribution of resources, opportunities and support that shape the conditions in which students learn. Perniciously, this systemic inequity comes disguised as the aptitude, achievement or failure of individuals or groups—rather than the effects of social systems and power: of institutional underfunding on the one hand, or, on the other, of what economist Richard Reeves calls “opportunity hoarding” by white families of privilege. This is why Kendi insists that we change the way we think about student success itself, starting with the terms we use. Here at San Francisco State, we’re striving to eliminate the gap in graduation rates between white students and students of color, which currently stands at
nearly ten percentage points: when we call it an achievement gap, we project it onto students. When we call it an opportunity gap, we recognize its racist origins—and open the possibility of change.

Here at San Francisco State, the Black Lives Matter movement has galvanized many of our departments to take action—like our English Department, which has pledged (quote), “to change our courses, our curriculum, and our classrooms (regardless of modality) to address the injustice of this particular moment and of a longer history of racism.” This approach goes against the grain of how many of us were trained as graduate students—in isolation from other fields within our disciplines, let alone from others, we were discouraged from asking how our courses connect with others to form a larger curriculum, how our curricula connect with our historical moment, and how courses, curriculum, and classrooms—connected—can address and intervene in the histories of racism of which we are all a part. Insisting on this interconnection, as the English Department is doing, changes everything. If racism is a system, antiracism demands a systemic perspective—starting with questioning what we do and why it matters.

Other departments are following similar lines of inquiry and action. The College of Ethnic Studies is examining course-taking patterns in students of color who persist; the College of Science and Engineering is asking how equity-centered curricula encourage retention; the Lam Family College of Business is redesigning courses to address racial disparities in grading; the College of Health and Social Sciences is exploring how pedagogy advances inclusivity; and the Graduate College of Education is asking how it can diversify enrollment—and the future teachers it prepares. This is powerfully transformative work, and it shows that a commitment to antiracism isn’t an add-on, it changes us at our core.

Before he wrote How to be an Antiracist, Kendi’s first book was about the Black Campus Movement, whose “ultimate aim [he writes] was to revolutionize higher education.” Of course, San Francisco State plays a prominent role in both the book and the movement it records—of which we can be rightly proud. But Kendi also points out that that revolution is unfinished, and I believe that its next chapter may be written here, just as its first chapter was. In 1968 the strike called for “relevant education,” that engages our students with the realities of a world that urgently needs their leadership. It’s a call that bears constant self-renewal. What does “relevant education” look like for this age of our shaken democracy? I’m inspired by our departments’ self-reflections to believe that there’s no better place to ask the question than here.

Thank you for this opportunity to speak to you today.

It’s now my distinct honor to introduce President Lynn Mahoney and Chancellor Joseph Castro.