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### Two steps forward, one step back: Where do we go from here?

Steve Carr

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UNM Newsroom (/) / News (/news) / Two steps forward, one step back: Where do we go from here?



### There's still a lot of work

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# Two steps forward, one step back: Where do we go from here?

Keeping the conversation going

By Steve Carr August 22, 2020

**Categories:** [Front Page \(/categories/front-page?c=26410\)](/categories/front-page?c=26410) [Division of Equity & Inclusion \(/news?c=20269\)](/news?c=20269)

The path to change is often difficult to navigate and that is especially the case with the civil rights movement in the 60s and the present-day Black Lives Matter movement. In fact, many have said, 'two steps forward, one step back.' While progress has been made over the last 57 years, there is still much work to be done and that fact has been highlighted over and over since the needless deaths of George Floyd, Breona Taylor, Tony McDade, and other BIPOC and Trans folks, and through the many subsequent protests.

"I talk about this sort of 'two steps forward, one step back' framework in my book, *Intersectionality in Intentional Communities: The Struggle for Inclusivity in Multicultural U.S. Protestant Congregations*" (2016), said University of New Mexico Vice President for Equity and Inclusion Assata Zerai. "Progress towards creating a more inclusive culture, is incremental; and sometimes progress is made in one area and then there's this period of retrenchment, such as Reconstruction and then the rise of Jim Crow laws."

In the 60s the civil rights movement was focused on voting rights, economic freedom and access to jobs, while the current Black Lives Matter movement, originally a reaction to police violence, has broadened to the issue of systemic racism, and is about creating a world free of anti-Blackness where all Blacks have the social, economic and political power to thrive. The Civil Rights Act (CRA) of 1964 was designed to end segregation in public places and banned employment discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex or national origin. That piece of legislation is considered one of the crowning achievements of the civil rights movement.

A key area that has seen progress is the growth of the Black middle class where opportunity was created through a variety of initiatives that helped to enable more opportunities. That progress was influenced in part by the passing of Brown vs. the Board of Education of Topeka. The landmark U.S. Supreme Court case from 1954 was one of the cornerstones of the civil rights movement. The unanimous ruling deemed racial segregation of children in public schools unconstitutional. It helped to destable the legitimacy of the precedent set by Plessy v. Ferguson (1896) that "separate-but-equal" education and other services were constitutional.

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"One of the influences on the creation of the Black middle class was the passing of Brown vs. the Board of Education and the subsequent creation of Affirmative Action and related programs, which created an infrastructure to begin to address structural racism in the U.S. government, state educational institutions, and among businesses and scientific agencies that contract with the federal government," said Zerai. "For example, my father was a contract compliance officer with the Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs (OFCCP). OFCCP set it up so both federal agencies, and any contractor with the federal government had to have certain affirmative action requirements in place."

"While those policies were and still are helpful, today we're beginning to tackle the importance of the cultural and structural change required to create an inclusive climate at work and in educational institutions. In the 1960s-1990s, it was really about setting up some rules so that people could operate on a fairer playing field. The rules established through programs like affirmative action, fair housing through HUD, and equal opportunity programs in higher ed, helped to build the Black middle class."



Dr. Assata Zerai, vice president, UNM Division for Equity and Inclusion

***"I talk about this sort of two steps forward, one step back in a book I wrote. It's like super incremental in terms of the progress that's made and sometimes progress is made in one area and then there's this period of retrenchment. Progress towards creating a more inclusive culture, is incremental; and sometimes progress is made in one area and then there's this period of retrenchment, such as Reconstruction and then the rise of Jim Crow laws." - Dr. Assata Zerai, vice president, UNM Division for Equity and Inclusion***

Affirmative action in the United States includes laws, policies, guidelines, and administrative practices "intended to end and correct the effects of a specific form of discrimination." Current affirmative action policies tend to emphasize not specific quotas, but targeted goals designed to address past discrimination in particular institutions or broader society through good-faith efforts designed to identify, select and train potentially qualified minorities and women.

“If you think about Housing and Urban Development (HUD) regulations and addressing the problem of housing discrimination, for example, Senator Cory Booker explains that the fact he attended Stanford University, and possibly the whole reason his path took him to the Senate as one of the few Black men there, resulted from his parents’ ability to integrate a suburban neighborhood with excellent public schools. Access to high-quality education has helped to build and to grow the Black middle class,” said Zerai. “Another indicator of progress since the 1960s has been a long era of ‘firsts’ in higher ed, inclusive of the first Black students to graduate from baccalaureate programs in various predominantly white institutions, and the first Black students to earn master’s degrees and doctorates in many fields, and of course, the first Black tenure-track, tenured, or full professors in multiple disciplines.

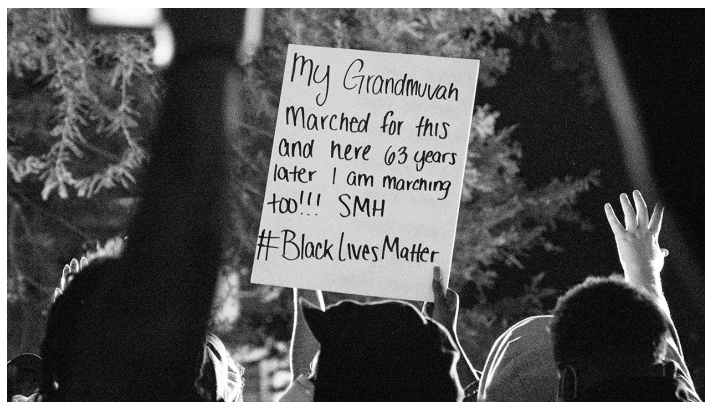
“This has been partly facilitated by Special Equal Opportunity Programs (SEOPs), that grew after the death of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, through which many higher education institutions voluntarily adopted policies to increase recruitment and retention of underrepresented racial/ethnic minority students.”

“On the other hand, I think the Black Lives Matter movement has brought attention to the necessity of an analysis of systemic racism into the mainstream and has motivated students and employees to think through how structural racism manifests in their universities or places of work, and to think about how to go about dismantling these structures.”

While Affirmative Action helped to level the playing field somewhat, there’s still much work to be done and it starts with job discrimination says Zerai.

“That sounds like a simple thing, but it’s complex,” she said. “It includes the impact of structural racism on criteria for applying for jobs, recruitment and interview processes, hiring; it includes onboarding, and creating diverse and inclusive cultures within organizations; and it also includes retention, professional development, pay equity and equity in job advancement.

“These are all issues I actually could talk all day about, because this has been really the centerpiece of the work that I have done at UNM in my short year here. It’s been focused on faculty hiring and trying to create a better experience for our faculty members of color. That’s the first thing, job discrimination.



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Nearly 60 years later, African Americans continue to fight for equal rights and fair treatment.

“The second is to address access to culturally responsive education at all levels. Many of the items I mentioned under job discrimination are going to be relevant here. Several questions come to mind involving culturally responsive education including: What are the criteria for applying for a baccalaureate, graduate, or professional programs? What kind of inclusive culture is there in the classroom and in the department? What kind of lab culture is being built? To what extent are Title IX issues considered in building an inclusive culture, and also to what extent are labs and classrooms friendly to women and all students, taking into account disability, sexual orientation and gender identity?

“The third issue is addressing racism in health and healthcare,” says Zerai. “Many of the issues I addressed in the first two are going to be relevant here as well. It is crucial that not only is your workforce diverse, including medical professionals, but we must ask, can they see their patients/clients as whole people? It is essential that medical staff receive culturally relevant education to help them appreciate and understand their patients’ social context. And medical professionals require support to help them expand their repertoires of cultural sensitivity and respect, so when they’re seeing a patient they can really hear their stories and health concerns, and not dismiss them or their culture.”

### Work at UNM

At The University of New Mexico, the Division for Equity and Inclusion, under Zerai’s leadership, has undertaken a variety of efforts to address those issues at the state’s flagship institution and has developed an Anti-Racism Action Plan (<https://diverse.unm.edu/assets/docs/unm-anti-racism-action-plan.pdf>) that includes a list of initiatives to intentionally, methodically and systemically address inclusion and equity through an antiracist lens.

***“We don't see our antiracism action plan as something that's a reaction to the George Floyd protests or any other movement. We see it as ongoing intentional work that happens every single day. We're looking at our role in this work as change agents who labor to positively influence campus climate generally to enhance equity and inclusion.” - Dr. Assata Zerai, vice president, UNM Division for Equity and Inclusion***

**A few highlights include:**

- Enhancing UNM's Campus Climate
- Increasing faculty diversity, equity and inclusion
- Creating a more equitable and inclusive climate for learners
- And a variety of additional efforts involving campus and community partners

“We are so fortunate because President (Garnett) Stokes has communicated that diversity, equity and inclusion are central to UNM's values; it is so helpful to have that message communicated from the top,” said Zerai. “That's a best-practice in terms of what works most effectively to create culture change towards an inclusive climate. Further evidence of the centrality of DEI is that we are embedding our diversity planning into the UNM 2040 strategic plan.

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There are other areas of concern among various campus constituent groups that are also being addressed in accordance with University Policy. Three examples include a new University seal, addressing certain building names associated with various individuals of notoriety and the Adams mural at Zimmerman Library, in response to campus concerns of racism.

The previous official seal came under intense scrutiny over the past decade, after Native American students, including members of the UNM Kiva Club, and The Red Nation, an off-campus Native American advocacy group, said the old seal was offensive in glorifying the violent treatment of Native folk. UNM has one of the highest populations of Native American students in the U.S.

To address the issue, the University Seal Committee recently undertook the rigorous process of recommending a new seal design due to those concerns. The process included coordinating a seal design competition. Over 40 designs were submitted. Five designs were selected as finalists. And over 8,000 participants provided feedback on their favorite designs. Currently, the Board of Regents is making a decision on the new seal on the basis of this inclusive input. For more information, visit UNM Seal Design (<https://sealdesign.unm.edu/index.html>).

“The seal and other aspects of the virtual and built environment is one huge area that we're addressing,” said Zerai. “We are pleased that the Native American Faculty Council's land acknowledgment statement, is now our official UNM statement, and is proudly displayed on President Stokes's website.”

***The Land Acknowledgement statement reads:***

*“Founded in 1889, the University of New Mexico sits on the traditional homelands of the Pueblo of Sandia. The original peoples of New Mexico Pueblo, Navajo, and Apache since time immemorial, have deep connections to the land and have made significant contributions to the broader community statewide. We honor the land itself and those who remain stewards of this land throughout the generations and also acknowledge our committed relationship to Indigenous peoples. We gratefully recognize our history.”*



“Normally I start any large meeting with a reading of this statement,” said Zerai. “It’s a great example of what helps to create an inclusive climate. But we need a critical mass of faculty to help us with culture change in our academic units. Therefore, we are working to increase faculty diversity and inclusion, by setting goals in terms our proportions of underrepresented minority faculty of color, and women faculty, and then by helping to provide many of the resources needed to support their success.”

### Goals and Other Initiatives

“The Division of Equity and Inclusion has set goals in terms of our percentages of underrepresented racial/ethnic minority (URM) faculty. We have revamped our Inclusive Excellence postdoc program to create a pathway to the professoriate. We are building a companion faculty hiring program, which is a bridge program for recruiting URM faculty in all fields, and women faculty in STEM.

Other initiatives associated with their anti-racism plan include implicit bias awareness training through a program called ‘DiversityEdu.’ UNM is hoping to require all faculty search committee members to complete the online course in an effort to help them to become aware of implicit bias, how it affects our decision making, and reduce its impact on, and who is selected into finalist pools for faculty searches.

Finally, DEI and academic affairs will provide faculty, students, and staff access to memberships in the National Center for Faculty Development and Diversity (NCFDD). NCFDD provides resources and mentoring to help faculty reach their goals for publishing their scholarship and career advancement.



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UNM has developed several initiatives aimed at increasing faculty diversity and inclusion.

We’re going to have a website with the goals listed there and show change over time; we are currently in the process of setting goals for 2027,” said Zerai. “Hopefully we’ll see an uptick in terms of our proportions of faculty of color between now and 2027. That’s all in the faculty diversity area. We’re also working with academic and student affairs to enhance inclusion, retention, and closing race, ethnicity, and gender gaps in graduation rates among our undergrad students; and we’re working with the Office of Graduate Studies to provide better financial support and to and greater retention among our grad students of color.

“Finally, we are working with the Staff Council, and also with our community and statewide partners on a number of initiatives. We are laboring alongside campus partners on all of this. We can’t do it alone.”

For more information on The University’s efforts and initiatives, visit the Division of Equity and Inclusion (<https://diverse.unm.edu/index.html>).

***Special thank you to Vice President for the Division of Equity and Inclusion and Professor of Sociology at the University of New Mexico, Dr. Assata Zerai (<http://diverse.unm.edu/about/assata-zerai.html>). Dr. Zerai’s research interests include African women’s access to mobile technology, making the work of marginalized scholars more accessible, and environmental justice/health activism.***

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### Racism: An Educational Series (previous stories)

- Racism in Healthcare (<http://news.unm.edu/news/racism-in-healthcare>) - August 14
- Black student excellence springs from historic inequalities (<http://news.unm.edu/news/black-student-excellence-springs-from-historic-inequalities>) - August 7

- The complicated history of environmental racism (<http://news.unm.edu/news/the-complicated-history-of-environmental-racism>) - August 4
- Recognizing anti-blackness in media and other institutions (<http://news.unm.edu/news/recognizing-anti-blackness-in-media-and-other-institutions>) - July 31
- Transformative education as the key to dismantling racism (<http://news.unm.edu/news/transformative-education-as-the-key-to-dismantling-racism>) - July 24
- Addressing new forms of racism Part II: Preventing Microaggressions (<http://news.unm.edu/news/addressing-new-forms-of-racism-part-ii-preventing-microaggressions>) - July 21
- Addressing new forms of racism Part I: Defining Microaggressions (<http://news.unm.edu/news/addressing-new-forms-of-racism-part-i-defining-microaggressions>) - July 17
- Identifying, understanding and combatting complex inequality (<http://news.unm.edu/news/identifying-understanding-and-combatting-complex-inequality>) - July 10
- Conversation with the Becknells: Careers, Racism and Black Lives Matter (<http://news.unm.edu/news/conversation-with-the-becknells-careers-racism-and-black-lives-matter>) - July 3
- Meaning Behind the Movement: Black Lives Matter (<http://news.unm.edu/news/meaning-behind-the-movement-black-lives-matter>) - June 26
- Learning from the Past: A Brief Historical Background (<http://news.unm.edu/news/learning-from-the-past-a-brief-historical-background>) - June 19

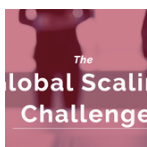
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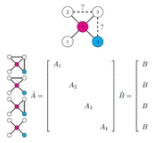
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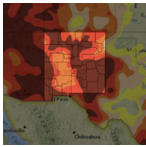
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