



A Practical Guide to Planning Initiatives for Working Together To Advance Racial Equity

Divided Community Project, Moritz College of Law
and Mershon Center for International Security Studies



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- For Communities
 - Divided Communities and Social Media: Strategies for Community Leaders (2nd ed., 2020).
 - Key Considerations for Leaders in the Face of Community Unrest (2nd ed., 2020).
 - Planning in Advance of Community Unrest (2nd ed., 2020).
 - Identifying a Community Spirit (2019).
 - Community Resiliency Initiative Case Studies (2018).
- For Campuses
 - Key Considerations for College and University Leaders: Preparing the Campus at a Time of National Polarization (2020).
 - Key Considerations for College and University Leaders: When Conflict and Divisive Incidents Arise (2020).
- Simulations for Leadership During Crisis are available upon request. Contact DCP’s Deputy Director at Froehlich.28@osu.edu.
- Hosting American Spirit Conversations: A Brief Guide with 18 Ideas (2019), www.AmericanSpirit.osu.edu.

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Cover art: The background painting is predominantly in the sky blue color range to represent optimism. But it is partially out-of-focus, representing the challenges in a process with no preconceived notions. The ascending lines intersect to represent the sharing of ideas and converge at the top of the page to represent successful collaborative efforts. Illustration by Brian Deep Art & Design



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Executive Summary

A confluence of events, including a pandemic, protests, and business and school closings disrupted our country in 2020 and, despite deep political differences, there is broadened support for structural changes to advance racial equity. This may be an ideal time for Americans to pursue this goal at the local, state, and national levels. A multi-pronged, sequenced approach has a mutually reinforcing effect. Whether it is called a truth commission or something else – that process facilitates the collaborative problem-solving over a period of years to achieve the equitable society that will afford each person the opportunity to thrive.

There is no single blueprint for the kind of transformative process that seeks to provide equity and “raises all boats.” Planners will tailor the process to the context and their goals. Promising ideas for planners dealing with the inevitable challenges that arise in an initiative to advance racial equity include:

- 1. Now:** Seize this ripe moment by beginning the planning and the initiative quickly but acknowledge publicly the determination to be flexible as those involved continue to learn more, encounter rough spots, and find new opportunities (Chapter 1).

advancements in racial equity when choosing projects, members, language, support for community members to engage, participation options, and sequencing (Chapter 4).

This may be an ideal time for Americans to pursue this goal at the local, state, and national levels. A multi-pronged, sequenced approach has a mutually reinforcing effect.

- 2. Sequencing:** Prioritize important and urgently-needed changes that can be implemented quickly, while exploring the levers for deep and broad change in economic, policy, and legal structures that can be achieved with persistence over the long term. In addition to structural change, goals might include racial healing, a shared narrative on racial injustices, advancement of public understanding of the realities faced by fellow Americans, a reckoning for the past, and recommendations for a path to pursue beyond the life of the initiative. Sequence these objectives over the years of the initiative so that they will be mutually reinforcing, reach the most important aims, and maintain broad-based enthusiasm and momentum (Chapter 2).

- 5. Develop priorities for dealing with the past, present, and future:** Define what a future with racial equity will be like and develop a strategy for keeping that in focus. Agree on the initiative's goals regarding understanding the past and present injustices, dealing with injustices, and educating of the public regarding them. Sequence initiatives to reflect practical issues and priorities (Chapter 5).

- 6. Determine the approach to past injustice:**
Decide whether this or a separate initiative will deliver justice for past racial injustice and, if undertaking this initiative, the timing, framing, focus, and resources for doing so (Chapter 6).

- 3. First steps:** Select a thoughtful, knowledgeable, and representative planning group. Identify values that will guide the planners' work. Establish communications with allied groups. Identify opportunities and challenges. Define tentatively the deliberative group and how others can fit into that process. Create the starting model in terms of leadership, members, name, institutional home, funding, and initial projects, leaving flexibility to adapt during the early process (Chapter 3).

- 7. Plan and begin the racial healing:** Define goals. Consider the means to reach these goals that might include reducing racial separation, storytelling, reconciling discussion groups, creating rituals, transformation of symbols, and developing aspirations for a shared future (Chapter 7).

- 4. Engage a coalition for change:** Consider the need to listen, learn, and gain support for

- 8. Review a checklist:** The list of questions in Chapter 8 reminds planners of choices they will make to fit their context and achieve their goals to advance racial equity.





1. Getting started quickly

Communities and regions may lose the current momentum to create a collaborative process that enhances racial equity if they do not act quickly, although they will also need to act with determined flexibility. As discussed below in this chapter, an unusual window of opportunity to advance racial equity has opened because of broader public support, deeper corporate support, and additional federal government attention to advancing racial equity, but that window may close if attention wanes. Beginning quickly seizes this moment, building on the important work and engagement of people who have been listening to and examining their community's history, traditions, current context, stakeholders, goals, and priorities. To take advantage of the moment, planners will need to engage these listeners and experts and be open and prepared to modify the process and goals as they learn more. Engaging people quickly in a peaceful process that produces ongoing change may maintain that enthusiasm to continue with the careful planning that results in deep change.

The opportunity: Two national situations emerged in May 2020 that sparked a marked shift in American public opinion concerning race and equity: the tragic killing of George Floyd under the knee of law enforcement sparked nationwide protests against police violence and racial injustice, and growing public information confirmed that the accelerating, adverse health and economic consequences stemming from the coronavirus was taking a disproportionate toll on Black and Brown Americans.¹ Millions of Americans have become a multi-racial, multi-generational force, demonstrating and demanding an end to the pervasive racial discrimination, structural inequity, unconscious bias, and prejudice that are frequently called systemic racism. By summer 2020, most Americans believed that racial discrimination persisted, a switch from just months earlier when only most Black Americans held that belief.² As of early 2021, a majority of Americans still seem to support the movement for racial equity.³ In addition, it has become evident that advancing racial equity also expands the workforce and increases consumer spending.⁴ Businesses have increasingly announced support for enhancing racial equity.⁵ Because of corporate support and the fact that so many more Americans no longer deny the existence of the problem, change is more likely.

The precarious situation: A nascent reawakening and openness of white domestic extremists has also occurred.⁶ This creates a volatile situation that will not be addressed by a return to “business as usual.”

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Nations around the world have encountered bitter divisions on the basis of race, ethnicity, and religion. The United States has the opportunity to learn from them but also to use its ingenuity to provide an example for other nations. As Dr. Duncan Morrow, Ulster University, Northern Ireland, explained to a gathering of U.S. process experts and leaders during the preparation of this guide:

In failing to follow the [1998] Good Friday accord with substantive efforts to overcome economic inequalities and religious segregation and deal with the unspoken role of the British government in oppression, a crisis emerged that continues to cause problems years later. Northern Ireland was saved by the skin of its teeth from Bosnian-level violence but barely. You know about the lesson and risks. Now act.

Iterative process: Beginning quickly to seize a ripe moment makes sense. Creating an iterative process means that those involved need to keep learning and modifying their work. Typically, those designing processes counsel to begin with an assessment of the context, goals, opportunities, and challenges.⁸ Without the benefit of this beginning assessment, those leading initiatives

A well-organized collaborative process that engages communities, public officials, business leaders, and other institutional forces has the ability to appeal to a broad political spectrum of individuals committed to racial equity even in the face of resistance.

David McIvor, Professor of Political Science at Colorado State University, explains the dilemma faced by planners: “On the one hand, it is reasonable to try to build off the increases in public awareness surrounding racial equity issues; on the other hand, I worry about setting up expectations for quick victories, given the long-term challenge of systemic change. It is a balancing act, for sure.” One way to resolve the dilemma is to be frank with the public that seizing the moment means accepting some rough moments in the launch and the need for long-term persistence and steady progress. Chapter 3 discusses these “build the plane while flying” strategies.

2. Pursuing multiple objectives, sequenced over a period of years

Those creating processes with multiple aims have noted the advantage of working toward some of these goals simultaneously and sequencing others over a period of years. Immediate changes galvanize engagement in the process. Increased public understanding broadens the coalition for achieving deep and broad change. The public that understands more fully may then also support a reckoning with the past, as discussed in Chapter 5. Acknowledging and dealing with past wrongs in turn opens the door to healing. A commission charged with holding discussions, hearing witness testimony and experts, and then quickly issuing recommendations lacks this mutually or self-reinforcing cycle of action. It seems, thus, less likely to promote broad and deep change.

We believe that work in other nations and in the U.S. historically offers hope that a major multi-pronged collaborative initiative – regardless of title and whether national or local – provides a promising model for enhancing racial equity. Several cities have called their initiatives truth and reconciliation commissions, named after the celebrated South African commission.⁹ Two U.S. House bills were introduced during the last Congressional session. One would create a federal Commission on Truth, Racial Healing and Transformation to:

properly acknowledge, memorialize, and be a catalyst for progress toward jettisoning the belief in a hierarchy of human value, embracing our common humanity, and permanently eliminating persistent racial inequities.¹⁰

When discussing a process to enhance racial equity, people have expressed a variety of goals including:

Urgent action: Secure immediate changes, particularly some significant actions toward a long-term effort to address, for example, health disparities or disparate treatment by law enforcement:

Transformative change: Explore and develop deep and broad change in economic, policy, and legal structures;

Racial healing: Help deal with trauma from past and continuing inequities and enhance respect between and among racial groups;

Truth: Create a shared authoritative narrative of the past and/or current effects of inequities;

Change hearts and minds: Increase public understanding of the challenges faced by those suffering the effects of racial inequity and build a determination to eradicate racism;

A commission charged with holding discussions, hearing witness testimony and experts, and then quickly issuing recommendations lacks this mutually or self-reinforcing cycle of action. It seems, thus, less likely to promote broad and deep change.

Justice: Create a public reckoning for the historical and ongoing acts and practices of government and other institutions and their continuing effects in sustaining racial inequities; and

Recommendations and accountability: As the process evolves and when it concludes, recommendations for additional changes as well as a process for keeping track of results, which include direct or shared accountability of those responsible for implementing the recommendations, including public officials and the larger community.

The commission dealing with the World War II internment of civilians,¹¹ which met from 1979 to 1982, provides an illustration of such a multi-project, sequenced initiative. As the commission began its work, there was little support for providing any remedies for those injustices. Then 750 witnesses told their stories, with media coverage, and staff researched and documented injustices. Dr. Mitchell Maki and his co-authors who reviewed the commission's work and results concluded:

The commission hearings were a dramatic theater through which America could come to know the Japanese American experience and through which Japanese Americans would come to know themselves in a new way. . . . The commission hearings, along with the media coverage of the hearings and the commission's report, changed the nature of the debate. The issue was no longer whether a wrong had occurred but what should be done about that wrong....The hearings were a cathartic experience for many Japanese Americans on a personal, generational, and community level.¹²

After the commission concluded its work, Congress apologized formally, created a public education fund to help the public-at-large understand the injustice to our fellow citizens, and made restitution to discourage similar events and demonstrate the renewed dedication to protecting human rights.

Designing a multi-pronged initiative working over years requires addressing several challenges that shorter-term, more focused efforts do not face. Sustaining momentum will be important to success and will require a series of small and large successes and reminders of the urgency of the work to maintain

the commitment of participants and larger communities. Clearly, it will also be important to find sufficient and ongoing public, private, and social sector resources to support the work and a stable institutional home that won't be lost with changes in political leadership. These issues are discussed in more detail in Chapter 8.

3. Ideas for starting quickly while building in flexibility

Creating a planning group: An informed, thoughtful, and service-oriented planning group with varied backgrounds becomes critical when a quick start is contemplated. There may not be time for staff to survey and interview widely in the community and research its history, traditions, concerns, goals, and stakeholders. Nor can the planners afford to include those who do not listen and consider the views of others.

Though the group can evolve over time, there are advantages to making the best choices at an early point.

People will be deciding whether to

trust the process based on what they first hear of it; some trust may be lost if the membership does not represent the racial and other diversity of the community. The initial membership list may also communicate to the public whether this will be a serious endeavor in terms of having the power to bring about needed change.

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Broad public support for the process will depend on whether varied constituencies believe the initiative worthwhile based on the composition of the planning group and the way that it works together. New media coverage of “squabbles” will potentially divert the public and undercut the seriousness of the initiative.

People who are posturing to serve private interests or have prickly personalities can cause other members to quit. To avoid these results, two over-arching questions might usefully be weighed about potential members:

Broad public support for the process will depend on whether varied constituencies believe the initiative worthwhile based on the composition of the planning group and the way that it works together.

- Is each member a thoughtful person who cares deeply about residents of the geographic area encompassed by the commission and the problems or concerns of each community within the larger whole?
- Is the group selected adept at and committed to problem-solving together to benefit the community, and to do so efficiently? Even with a skilled facilitator, personal frictions can divert a group from achieving its goals.

In addition, the following questions might assist in both deliberations and public confidence that someone who understands their views will be involved:

- What combination of people will together bring an understanding of the history, traditions, concerns, and goals of smaller groups within the pertinent area?
- What combination of members will encourage people to trust the seriousness of the process and believe both that they are represented and that their views will be heard? Who will be taken seriously by those who (1) must approve or provide resources for the new process and (2) provide support for the changes it identifies to be successfully implemented?
- Who has expertise in structuring such a commission, including dispute resolution, administrative, legal, and mental health expertise?



Tentatively list goals for the process: A planning group might fruitfully find someone to listen to their discussions and map the concerns and goals of various groups, how they overlap and differ, and priorities among them.¹³ To surface ideas of overall goals, they might create a series of questions, such as the following suggested by the Kellogg Foundation:

- What will your community look and feel like after racism has ended?
- What are the current racial realities of your community and how did you get here?
- What are the key leverage points of change in your community?
- Who are the key stakeholders and beneficiaries not at the table? How can they be engaged?
- What specific actions can be taken to achieve your vision of a community without racism?¹⁴

Examining tentative answers to these questions, the group might then consider the importance of and practical barriers to dealing with the identified concerns and goals and determine those that could be achieved early in the process. The Kellogg Foundation has published comprehensive background materials on the levers that are likely to produce change and practical approaches to promoting racial healing and public understanding,¹⁵ and these can serve as a checklist for groups making similar assessments based in the realities of their own communities.

Identify various values and assumptions that will guide the planners' work: People will work together more effectively if they share and embrace the values they will employ in the process. For example, they might agree: "We will listen to each other with a deep desire to learn." "We need to start and there is never a perfect time." "We need to involve as many residents as possible in the work of the group, but current crises cannot be ignored and we must immediately reduce residents' fears." "We will meet people where they are and work on changing hearts and minds." This discussion may help the group work together effectively as they make more narrow decisions.


Establish networks: Whether this planning group is working in a small community, statewide or nationally, it will be important to cooperate with and learn from allied efforts. A national initiative does not displace a state or local initiative. Ultimately, all are necessary to enhance racial equity and such efforts will have much to learn from one another.

Identify opportunities and challenges the deliberative group will face: Opportunities might include broad awareness of the need to enhance racial equity, a desire to reduce polarization and achieve mutual respect. Some predictable challenges are discussed in subsequent chapters.

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Define preliminarily the deliberative group and how others will fit into the process: The focus here should be on “preliminarily.” The initiative’s name can be tentative. The initial list of members of the deliberative body can be augmented later. Leadership can change. New methods can be developed to involve a broader segment of the community in the work of the deliberative group. The scope and mission can be modified. Even the appointment body, staff, funding, and host can shift over time. Chris Carlson, founding director of the Policy Consensus Initiative, suggests, “If there are many issues that need to be taken up, it might be useful to think of the process as having multiple stages. At each stage when a new issue is taken up, it could require the involvement of additional people. That could slow things, but it could broaden the reach of the process.”

Despite the iterative nature of the planning process, the deliberative group will reach substance more quickly if the planners provide a preliminary model for process – provisional leadership, potential members, possible name, institutional home, outreach possibilities, and initial funding—so work can begin; then they can reassess and adjust as the initiative proceeds.



4. Engaging a broad enough coalition to listen, learn, and achieve change

A high priority for Americans asking for truth commission-types of processes has been to develop and implement a narrative of a just and shared future. To create the narrative, members of the initiative's deliberative body will want to listen to those who can help them understand what must change for everyone to thrive and to feel safe and respected. In that regard, the racial justice movement protests called attention to

racial inequity and disparities in law enforcement, housing, education, and health care, among others. Economic experts have made the case that

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advancing racial equity results in expanding the workforce and consumer spending.¹⁶ The deliberative body may want to hear as well from experts who can help identify the opportunities to achieve change¹⁷ and connect that with the evidence and insights derived from lived experience.

It will also be vitally important to engage and persuade those with the power to implement desired changes. Thus, despite local protests in many communities that awakened and shook the public, private, and social sectors alike, as one truth commission expert pointed out, “It won’t help to have agreement at the community level if politicians are not aligned with that outcome.”

Providing an illustration of the joint gains of combining this broad array of members, the Lansing, Michigan Truth, Racial Healing and Transformation Commission (TRHT) identified the problem that Black youth were 70 percent of arrests but only 20 percent of the youth population:

The local prosecutor, a member of the TRHT Law Design Team, heard the data and said she was in a position to do something. So, TRHT of Metro Lansing has been working with the prosecutor’s office and about 30 assistant prosecutors for the past year. They started by exploring implicit bias. . . . From there, the prosecutor’s office began using their power to produce more racially equitable outcomes. . . . Based on this work and the deep commitment of the prosecutor to racial equity, the Vera Institute of Justice awarded Ingham County Prosecutors with a technical assistance grant. . . . All members of the Law Design Team, including the prosecutor, have participated in racial healing circles, helping them deepen trust and strengthen relationships.¹⁸

The public-private collaboration that seems important to achieving broad and deep change creates some of the tensions discussed in this guide. Government involvement may make it more difficult to be nimble and/or achieve the trust of all groups. The combination may also add time-consuming requirements for approvals

and may be more politically challenging if opposing parties fear losing power in a zero-sum game. All that extra effort will

Economic experts have made the case that advancing racial equity results in expanding the workforce and consumer spending.

seem worth it, though, if it helps to advance racial equity in deep and lasting ways. Though this guide is directed toward initiatives that engage public officials, or are convened by them, in addition to involving others in the community, the process considerations in this guide may also be useful to initiatives in pursuit of racial equity that have narrower membership or aims.

Low hanging fruit: Securing a few important changes early in the life of a commission may provide the necessary motivation to continue with a process that seems initially uncomfortable either for those who typically work at the grassroots level or for those holding powerful positions. Illustrating the importance of securing some changes while pursuing others, Sanford, Florida has been engaged in an extended process to advance racial equity, following the Trayvon Martin killing. Early discussions led to community participation in the choice of a police chief and changes in police practices. City officials learned that residents of west Sanford resented an action taken by Sanford at the state level a century earlier to dissolve and annex what had been the African-American city of Goldsboro, re-name the streets for whites, and offer inferior city services to that area. Sanford returned the street names and improved city services in that area. Andrew Thomas, Community Relations and Neighborhood Engagement Director, City of Sanford, Florida, explained, “The city continues its work, recognizing building trust, creating positive relationships and fostering a healing process takes time and resources. It’s critical for local government to approach community relations the same as other city services like public works, parks and recreation, code enforcement, planning, etc. All these services require maintenance and constant attention to prevent a major expensive situation from occurring.”

It will also be vitally important to engage and persuade those with the power to implement desired changes.

Word choice and framing: Using word choices that adequately convey meaning but reduce alienation from the initiative might help retain a broad enough group to achieve change. While in 2021 it is difficult to avoid discussing racial equity and racial justice without words like “systemic racism” or “white privilege,” for some communities these terms trigger strong negative reactions. Careful consideration should be given to when and how to address “the elephant in the room” without preventing the conversation from taking place.

Their findings can help frame issues as important for attention and action and avert immediate rejection of the initiative as partisan. Checking the wording and framing with various constituent groups can help maintain broad engagement.

Support: Providing support and preparation will help people with lived experience contribute to the initiative. Discussions of race can evoke painful memories and some will experience trauma. For example, the Japanese American Citizens League allowed the witnesses for the World War II internment commission to practice their testimony beforehand, and social workers provided emotional support for them. Trauma-trained facilitators may also help. Other considerations may be whether some members of the deliberative body may need help in preparation for their roles or require compensation to be able to participate.

Developing a means to stay in touch with those groups objecting to either the initiative's work or recommendations may reduce the likelihood of unexpected resistance and prevent opponents from acting on false rumors. If there are racist or violent groups, rather than reaching out to engage them, it may be possible to find intermediaries, such as the Justice Department's Community Relations Service or law enforcement, who know

Combine with healing: Combining the concepts of change and healing may engage those who want to achieve unity but do not agree on the need or urgency for or direction of change. The Kellogg Foundation refers in its publications to both change and unity, calling the initiative a “truth, racial healing and transformation” commission and noting throughout their documents the connection among the aims.

As American politics have become increasingly polarized, any public conversation about public issues incurs risks of becoming mired in partisan division. Theorists and practitioners of deliberative democracy can provide some guidance in how to avoid these pitfalls. This process will be more likely to be productive if it is based in a widely shared understanding of a public problem, considers a broad set of potential approaches, and includes frank discussion of the tradeoffs of each of these approaches. These suggestions will help to ensure that participants with diverging opinions can all see a role for themselves in the conversation.²³

5. Dealing with the past and present without losing momentum toward a better future

Dilemmas will likely emerge regarding how extensively to focus on the past and its continuing effects in a commission seeking change, public understanding, and healing in the future. Change is by its nature forward-looking, and people often can agree on changes even if they do not agree on why they are needed. Examples of this future orientation include public policy planning (Name the problem; solve it.) and mediation (Hear the parties' stories, state the issues, reach consensus on the future.).

Unlike these situations, however, an initiative to improve racial equity operates in the context of centuries of slavery and discrimination, creating an imperative to acknowledge the tragic history and continuing legacy of inequities in America. Kyle Strickland, Deputy Director of Race and Democracy, Roosevelt Institute and Senior Legal Analyst at the Ohio State University Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity, said, “For too long, we’ve ignored the truth of racism. There will always be the rush to get to change, but without truth we will not get there.” Such a record may also be required to build broad public understanding of what fellow Americans faced and face with a call to end and not to repeat these injustices. As truth commission experts Eduardo Gonzalez and Howard Varney put it, “The truth can assist in the healing process after traumatic events; restore personal dignity, often after years of stigmatization; and safeguard against impunity and public denial.”²⁴ Local and even state commissions can draw on the work of others to portray the national context but can more manageably take on understanding the nature and history of racial inequity “locally.” For example, the Evanston, Illinois city council engaged with others to write a well-documented history of its own community, detailing the lingering economic and other effects of that discrimination, particularly in housing, services, and financing.²⁵

In addition, developing a clear picture of the current barriers to achieving racial equity is a prelude to identifying strategies for change. This picture will include careful descriptions of the nature of those inequities, for example, in health care, housing, policing, and education

and analysis of the data, policies and practices that sustain them. Attention to the present, thus, can usefully be interwoven with efforts to define a better future and routes to achieving it. Description and analysis of contemporary inequities need not dwell on attribution of motivations or blame, however, when doing so may build barriers between advocates for change and those who may be reluctant to embrace those changes as noted below.

Change is by its nature forward-looking, and people often can agree on changes even if they do not agree on why they are needed. But an initiative to improve racial equity operates in the context of centuries of slavery and discrimination, creating an imperative to acknowledge the tragic history and continuing legacy.

But the necessary narratives on the past and present may also raise challenges to agreeing on what should be the nation's, state's, or city's shared future. One challenge may be how to make the account authoritative so that it is widely accepted.²⁶ Another is that some people—typically those who have not experienced the injustices—will resist what they view as shaming or divisive discussions leading to the historical and current account.²⁷ (Desires for a reckoning for past or current wrongdoing raise additional, and overlapping, issues that will be the focus of the next chapter.) These differences may claim much of the attention and resources for the initiative and sow dissent among those participating in the deliberations, diverting them from working toward change.

Though there are no simple recipes for dealing with these counter pulls, illustrations from other initiatives may inform planners as they make choices for initiatives for their communities:

Understanding the reasons for examining the past: The Kellogg Foundation has found phrases that may be helpful: “how to create a more complete and accurate narrative that will help people understand how racial hierarchy has been imbedded in our society” and “a new narrative about who we are as a country and as interconnected individuals.”²⁸

Restorative justice: The Nova Scotia Restorative Inquiry regarding a home for children of African descent described what occurred in the past and its effects, explaining, “The Restorative Inquiry looked back, not to ascribe blame, but to shed light on the history and experience of the Home in order to learn from it and move forward into a brighter future. The Report reflects this commitment to look back and learn to make a difference for the future.”²⁹

Findings of injustice and individual stories: The U.S. commission dealing with World War II internment issued unanimous findings about what occurred to Japanese Americans and Aleutians, concluding that the government denied justice. In addition, the commission held hearings at which hundreds recounted their personal stories.³⁰ (For a discussion of the care taken to help those telling their stories, see Chapter 7.) Reaching the public is hard work. This healing will be hard work. Justice Murray Sinclair, chair of the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission, told the New York Times that reaching people on an individual level was like “climbing a mountain.” “The Canadian people need to see what it is that they could be doing, that they have a role to play here,” Justice Sinclair said.

Historical commemoration: Some groups, such as “Facing History and Ourselves,” are already at work in the U.S. to educate young people particularly on the connection of history to current events.³¹ Canada recognized a distinct continuing role for keeping the history alive by creating a new federal agency that, even today, continues to award funds for commemorative activities regarding Canada’s tragic mistreatment of its indigenous peoples. In addition, the government funded the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission with instructions for it to recount this history. In its final report, the commission spoke to the healing value of historical findings and stories for both indigenous and settler peoples:

To the Commission, reconciliation is about establishing and maintaining a mutually respectful relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples in this country. In order for that to happen, there has to be awareness of the past, acknowledgement of the harm that has been inflicted, atonement for the causes, and action to change behavior.³²

Sequencing: If an initiative begins by imagining a shared future drawing on members' values, it can then look backward to understand continuing barriers to that shared future. Thus, the necessary examination of extent, character, and sources of racial inequities might follow agreement on a shared vision of an equitable future.

6. Justice as part of the work

People often seek a truth commission-style approach with the idea that it will help to achieve justice for past and present racial injustices. A commission in the United States might be expected to offer vindication, acknowledgement and/or economic reparations for past injustices. Dr. Nomfundo Walaza, a South African psychologist and truth and reconciliation scholar, passed on the following story to illustrate why it just feels wrong to leave justice for past and current wrongdoing out of the work of a commission:

Once there were two boys, Tom and Bernard. Tom lived right opposite Bernard. One day Tom stole Bernard's bicycle and every day Bernard saw Tom cycling to school on it. After a year, Tom went up to Bernard stretched out his hand and said, "Let us reconcile and put the past behind us." Bernard looked at Tom's hand and said, "And what about the bicycle?" "No," Tom said, "I am not talking about the bicycle. I am talking about reconciliation."

This can be read as a story about an individual wrong and the absence of redress for it in the quest for reconciliation, but it can also be read as a tale about collective wrongs and the importance of dealing with those wrongs before reconciliation can occur.

property and were incarcerated in prison camps during World War II, often for years, received \$20,000 in reparations more than 45 years later. In addition, talk of cash reparations at the launch of an initiative may alienate some of those

Reparations have had a rockier road in past commissions than vindication or acknowledgements of past wrongs. Calls for monetary reparations to individuals seem to create such

controversy that those potential allies needed to achieve change may resist the initiative's work. The amount of such cash reparations may seem ridiculously low (or excessively high), the target group may seem too narrow, broad or ill-defined to some observers, given the level or duration of injustice. Japanese American civilians who lost

A commission should do its best even though it can never do enough to satisfy fully those who have suffered from the injustice.

who might otherwise engage, and the subject creates a controversy that could swallow the energy that might be devoted to deeper change. Still, the increase over time in the number of Congressional members who support reparations for slavery and continuing discrimination indicates that goal may be achievable.



A few illustrations may offer ideas for those initiatives seeking to pursue reparations:

Timing: One way to reduce the likelihood of immediate opposition to creation of a commission is to allow reparations to grow out of rather than be the initial basis for such a process. The downside of this approach of allowing reparations to grow out of a research initiative though is that some may not take the process seriously if reparations are not part of the stated starting aims. Evanston, Illinois's 2020 decision to award reparations in the form of housing grants of \$25,000 arose from a long-term and publicized study of the effects of housing discrimination and related practices on wealth accumulation. The city will begin later this year to consider applications for the grants to African-American residents who resided in Evanston from 1919 to 1969 or their descendants. The tax will create a \$10 million fund for this purpose over the next decade by imposing a new 3% sales tax on marijuana sales.³³

In a similar vein, when the U.S. Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians began its work, there was little Congressional support for reparations for the Japanese American citizens interned during World War II. But after the Commission issued its reports detailing the injustices and hundreds of compelling stories on the effects, Congress overwhelmingly approved the reparations.³⁴

Separating the initiatives: Canadians took yet another approach to former First Nation students forced to attend “Indian Residential Schools.” It separated the issue of financial reparations to individuals and families from the creation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. Thus, the commission could proceed without the controversy. After the Commission issued its final report, the Canadian government provided the reparations.

Framing: Language matters here as elsewhere. Reparations suggest individual compensation, but, as the bicycle story suggests, compensation can be viewed as collective rather than individual. Focusing on repairing the inequities that were created over generations opens up the possibility, for example, of allocating resources for communities left behind by racial inequities. And describing that compensation as investments in communities to reduce racial inequities has a different ring than cash payments to individuals as reparations. Massive financial investments will be required to buttress asset development among African-Americans and strengthen communities -- a Marshall Plan of assistance for communities to facilitate change, such as investments in economic development, job training education, child care, local businesses. A narrow application of this idea was Georgetown University's decision to provide preferential admission and scholarships for descendants of the enslaved people who were forced to build the university.³⁵ Such economic aid is less likely to produce backlash and may allow greater positive contributions to those suffering from the continuing effects of injustices.

Local focus and securing a new source of funding: Evanston, Illinois also provides an example of how a local reparations initiative may be more quickly successful than one at a national level. The research and report documented the damage caused by housing segregation and related policies in their own community between 1919 and 1969. Evanston residents were more likely to hear about the research and report than would be all Americans in a national initiative. Evanston residents may have observed the segregated housing or known fellow residents or their descendants who suffered from this injustice. Also, it was easier to sign on to the assignment of new funds created by a tax on marijuana sales.

This chapter proceeds under the assumption that U.S. initiatives to enhance equity and healing will focus on collective justice as opposed to finding individuals culpable for acts of violence, exploitation, or other wrongs. As the example below makes clear, a focus on individual culpability can divert attention from the larger and much more impactful effort to achieve collective justice. This collective approach may surprise some who have heard about truth commissions that acted as war crimes tribunals in nations dealing with abuses during a prior regime. The proposals to improve racial equity in the U.S. criminal and civil justice systems have taken on importance for the very reason that they provide the vehicles for individual accountability in the United States context. If during the course of hearings/proceedings, an injustice comes to the attention

of those involved in the racial equity initiative, it can make appropriate referrals to agencies to address the injustice. An Irish truth commission tried a middle ground of naming, and therefore shaming, priests who had abused children, but became mired in expensive and time-consuming procedures after affording the right to counsel and cross-examination that were deemed to be fair to offer for someone who might be shamed by a government-formed commission.³⁶ Ultimately, the commission did not name any offenders, but the effort consumed over a year of the commission's focus.³⁷

As one truth commission expert pointed out, with regard to the quest for justice, a commission should do its best even though it can never do enough to satisfy fully those who have suffered from the injustice.



Planners must decide how to define healing. Definitions of “healing” or “reconciliation” (some resist the latter term because it seems to imply a return to better times) may include increasing:

- there is extensive interaction over a period of time in which people enjoy each other and work toward common goals with equal status.⁴¹ This seems more likely to occur naturally in situations such as schools and universities with diverse student bodies and programs. But people tend to find housing, join faith communities, and place their children in schools that are more racially homogeneous, where they feel “comfortable” rather than challenged to meet people with different experiences and backgrounds.

Even if greater equity is the primary goal, racial healing can be an important step to reach that goal.

So reducing racial separation may need to be intentional; it may mean creating the conditions for cross-racial interaction. In Flint, Michigan, a local Truth Racial Healing and Transformation Commission worked with federal housing officials when a “local public housing complex was to be demolished because it had been illegally built on a flood plain. Families living in the complex now have an opportunity to move into a brand-new housing area made up of mixed-income housing being constructed between two other active neighborhoods in another part of the city.”⁴² Plans include efforts to build trust and friendship among the neighbors. Offering another illustration, Corrymeela, which has been engaged in community reconciliation efforts in Northern Ireland for 60 years, just completed a successful, multi-agency program called PRISM (Promoting Reconciliation & Integration through Safe Mediation). The program aimed to promote positive attitudinal change within the Catholic/Nationalist/Republican, Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist and Refugee Asylum Seeker and Vulnerable Migrant communities. These highly segregated communities were brought together to build trust and strengthen social cohesion through a range of activities, workshops, and weekend retreats.

18



Storytelling: in the U.S. and throughout the world, storytelling has been touted as a means of promoting mutual understanding and catharsis. Commissions often allow storytellers to opt for either a confidential or public account, providing extensive publicity of key public stories. Commissions have created what

they believe to be “safe spaces,” with counselors available both to help shape any questions and to counsel the witness. Questions from the deliberative body to the storytellers may elicit stories that help others to see with “new eyes” the challenges of being targeted or lacking opportunity.

Providing an example of helping others to appreciate suffering and injustice, Japanese American witnesses told the World War II commission about becoming “Gold Star” families while detained, mourning the loss of a child dying while protecting the nation that placed their families in confinement. As the result of the publicity regarding statements by witnesses and the Commission’s report and recommendations in 1983, Congress in 1988 and 1992 apologized formally, created a public education fund to help the public at large understand, and made restitution to discourage similar events and demonstrate the renewed dedication to protecting human rights. The Commission had healing effects on the Japanese American community. Ron Wakabayashi, who in the early 1980s was national director of the Japanese American Civic League, which was the established national advocacy organization within the Japanese American community and occupied a lead position in the creation and work of the commission, said:

[Storytelling] becomes a tool for the formation of a shared public identity. The process becomes replicated in communities in casual conversation. Frequently, public testimony touches on suffering and regret. This transformative outcome of a commission may be the most easily overlooked. And, yet, it may be the most consequential in a restorative sense.

He noted that a telling indication of the healing was that the Japanese American Citizens League was one of the first after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001 to exhort Americans not to target Muslims and 300 Japanese Americans provided written testimony for the U.S. House committees first hearing on convening a commission to study reparations for slavery and discrimination.

The following account illustrates the potential public understanding and cathartic effects of storytelling, and the importance of empathic and well-placed members.

Four South African victims of apartheid were invited to talk about their experiences. One of them was Albie Sachs, who spoke of the trauma of having an arm and an eye blown away by a bomb that South African agents had placed under his car in Maputo, the capital of Mozambique. Then came the turn of Mrs Gcina, the widow of a small town lawyer whose only political activity was representing community leaders who were brought to court under draconian apartheid security laws. She spoke of how the security police had terrorized her and their young children with midnight raids and repeated detentions of her husband. One day after the police had taken away her husband for the final time, she heard on the radio that his bullet-riddled body had been found in a field some distance from their home. When Mrs. Gcina described how her twelve-year-old son came to her and asked when his father would be home, her composure dissolved and she began to weep. No one who was present will forget the scene of Albie Sachs attempting to console Mrs. Gcina with the stump of his right arm.

Storytelling has been touted as a means of promoting mutual understanding and catharsis.

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[T]he following morning at breakfast . . . I complimented her on her courage in coming to speak of her experiences. She responded by expressing her gratitude for having been able to do so: “You know, Judge, last night was the first night since I lost my husband that I have slept through and not been awakened by nightmares.” When I asked her how she explained that, she responded without a moment’s hesitation: “There were so many important people here who were interested in hearing my story.”⁴³



In the United States, stories of racial oppression and inequality have been widely told in literature, news media, and other venues for several hundred years. One challenge had been a lack of wide

The initiative's use of communications professionals can aid in achieving these storytelling goals. Justice Murray Sinclair, chair of the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission, said, "When you come through an event that is emotionally that challenging, a healing moment occurs for the person who has told you their story, but also for you as the one who has accepted the story. So you have to know how to make that moment understood in the proper way. . . . [T]he most important part of it was to publicize the testimony to bring the hearings into the living rooms of the people."⁴⁴

A challenge for a commission will be to make the deeply imbedded sources of racial injustice accessible to a broad audience.

Attention by others to what is missing for some: Once an initiative identifies what is missing for some, the deliberative body's success in ameliorating that problem can contribute to healing. The Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission, convened by residents to look into a mass shooting of anti-Ku Klux Klan demonstrators by white supremacists, devoted eight weeks to a facilitated discussion of how to create a Greensboro in which everyone felt respected, safe, and protected. It then made recommendations of how to achieve those goals. Chapter 4 discusses this focus on building a shared vision of an equitable future as a first step toward achieving change.

8. An Operational Checklist

In the iterative process of planning and modifying the initiative, taking action steps for change, and assessing the racial inequities and measuring progress, it may be helpful to have a checklist nearby. The answers will vary as each community tailors its initiative to its context, goals, opportunities, challenges and more. Ron Wakabayashi, former regional director for the U.S. Department of Justice Community Relations Service, worked closely with both the U.S. Commission on the Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians and with community division. He says about developing a process unique to each community: “There are multiple dynamics that interact. The particular history and legacy; developmental stage and sequence; degree, character and extent of community infrastructure and organization, will shape the path and form of initiative at different locations and levels.”

Ultimately, each initiative will need to be tailored to be responsive to the goals and special characteristics of the community and the state or state in which it is located.

Ultimately, each initiative will need to be tailored to be responsive to the goals and special character of the community or state in which it is located.

The ongoing assessment:

- A. Goals, concerns and problems:** What can the initiative learn about the racial inequities, concerns, and/or goals dividing or uniting residents, their history, the interests and values implicit in them, and the sources of distrust, anger, grievances, perceived injustice and/or division? How can it track shifts in those perceptions over time as the commission does its work? How can it track the implementation and impact of change efforts?
- B. Stakeholders:** Who are the stakeholders and who understands the racial inequities, concerns, and/or goals important to each stakeholder, is effective in conveying them, and is trusted by those involved? Included in “stakeholders” are those groups, bridge-builders, and persons with expertise and other resources needed for major change across a broad spectrum of arenas; who are the decision-makers who can enact (and resist) changes in policy and practice and allocate resources to implement those changes?
- C. Allied processes:** What processes exist and/or have been used regarding racial inequities, concerns, and/or goals and what are the strengths and weaknesses of each? Are there processes or practices that have worked in the past to achieve change? Are there existing processes with capacity to achieve some of the initiative’s goals? Should there be coordination with these or, at a minimum, efforts to avoid competition or conflict?

The planning group:

- D. Questions related to all members:** Is each a wise and thoughtful person who cares deeply about residents of the geographic area encompassed by the initiative and the racial problems or concerns of each community within the larger whole? Is the group selected able to work well and efficiently together? What preparation and support will they need?
- E. Questions to create an effective combination of members:** What combination of members will encourage people to trust the seriousness of the process aimed at enhancing racial equity and believe that their views will be represented on it? Who has expertise in structuring such an initiative, including dispute resolution, administrative, legal, and mental health expertise? Who has influence with those who must approve or provide resources for the new process and provide support for the changes it identifies to be successfully implemented?

Setting goals:

- F. Initial questions:** What is your vision for a more equitable community? What would have to change for each person, regardless of race, to thrive and feel protected and respected? What would you like this initiative to accomplish?
- G. Likely reach:** What is the geographical area and likely subject matter focus of the initiative? Here members of the initiative should trust

Considering opportunities and challenges:

What could go right or wrong as the initiative works to achieve the identified goals? What can be done to take advantage of the opportunities? What shared values will bind the members to their mission when challenges present? How might the initiative meet the challenges?

I. *Convener and host:* What institution(s) should convene the initiative and what institution(s) should house the initiative? Does the institution have the access to and trust of those who have the capacity to bring about change and participate in promoting racial understanding, healing, and other goals? Does the institution, or the individual conveners, have access to and the trust of grassroots leaders in the community(ies) adversely affected by inequity? Can the institution marshal resources for a deep and multi-year initiative effort? Do the institutions convening or housing the initiative convey the seriousness of the effort? Will they bridge political changes? Will the convener and convening institution continue to support the initiative if controversy and resistance develop?

K. Name: What name will clearly convey its mission? What name communicates the seriousness of the endeavor? What name makes it clear that this is about change and not only about racial healing (e.g., the proposed U.S. Initiative on Truth, Racial Healing and Transformation)? What will engage the broadest group of people?

M. Members: What is the decision-making process for selecting the members? What is the optimal size? Who should decision-makers check with before identifying initiative members? See also the questions in D and E related to the planning group.

momentum: What sort of process should be used to prepare members of the deliberative group to understand and clarify roles, become better equipped, minimize rivalries, unite under a shared vision/mandate, work together as a team and support each other? Should there be continuing storytelling and other processes to maintain cohesion and responsiveness to concerns? What should be done to maintain teamwork and personal connections, especially as issues become tense? Should there be transportation or compensation help for those who cannot afford to volunteer their time?

S. Public understanding: Are there means to help a broader group of people understand each other and the challenges each faces

V. Accountability and effectiveness: How will the initiative's progress be measured on an ongoing basis? How will progress be measured for specific desired outcomes and changes? What indicators will be used to assess progress? Who will be keeping records?

From our research, there is no “blueprint” for a successful broad-based racial equity initiative focused on change. Ultimately, each initiative will need to be tailored to be responsive to the goals and special character of the community or state in which it is located. Still, that attention to detailed tailoring may capture the community’s and the nation’s opportunities and avoid the current perils. Those willing to listen carefully and act wisely and with persistence may have the lifelong satisfaction of having advanced racial justice.

Endnotes

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Websites listing truth commissions and other resources:

Local Truth, Racial Healing, and Transformation (TRHT) Commissions (map of past and current initiatives in the US as of December 15, 2020)
drive.google.com/file/d/1Jt0bZxsrbj3FtBvLaKLmUzPKnOIPw4s3/view

The U.S. Truth Racial Healing and Transformation Movement, www.ustrht.org/

Canadians for a New Partnership, Canadian Public Opinion on Aboriginal Peoples (This study was conducted by the Environics Institute for Survey Research, in 2016), www.eiur.ca.

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