

Otis LAS August 2020 Statement on Decolonizing our Curriculum

This is an educator-to-student statement. We will integrate it into our syllabi department-wide so that students have a more concrete sense of our current efforts to decolonize our curriculum.

College students throughout the country are asking for more robust education in structural inequality. In the wake of George Floyd's murder,¹ and as the devastating, disproportionate impact of Covid-19 on Black and Brown people in the United States mounts – here in Los Angeles in particular – Otis has striven to be responsive.² The Department of Liberal Arts and Sciences has long worked to expand our department's representation of diverse cultures, but we must do better. From this point forward, expect your LAS courses to analyze the legacies of structural racism (especially white supremacy), sexism, classism, ableism, transphobia, and homophobia that our society has inherited and unfortunately perpetuates. We believe that such engagement will not only be crucial to your career as an artist or designer; it will also give you an important conceptual framework for understanding the world you have inherited and why you want to change it.

To that end, your faculty are updating their syllabi in two meaningful ways, if they had not done so prior to this moment. First, in each of your courses, we will introduce more work by artists, designers, makers, and thinkers of color, as well as those working outside the Western tradition. We will also be thinking expansively about the very definition of "work" and "canon," and how we value who does what work. Second, we will also grapple with histories of inequality – how we got here and why. Each faculty member will address this in their own ways and to the best of their unique abilities. We will all be learning from one another. And we hope you will become our collaborators as we redesign course content and translate Otis' signature face-to-face classroom experience onto online platforms. Your faculty will tell you the most effective ways of offering feedback in their respective courses.

This process of "**decolonizing the curriculum**" (one definition below) is both personal and collective. While it cannot be completed in one

semester, we can begin to make improvements. Throughout your time at Otis, we hope you will share what this process means to you and participate in discussions about realizing it.

What does it mean to decolonize a curriculum?

"A curriculum provides a way of identifying the knowledge we value. It structures the ways in which we are taught to think and talk about the world. As education has become increasingly global, communities have challenged the widespread assumption that the most valuable knowledge and the most valuable ways of teaching and learning come from a single European tradition. Decolonizing learning prompts us to consider everything we study from new perspectives. It draws attention to how often the only world view presented to learners is male, white, and European. This isn't simply about removing some content from the curriculum and replacing it with new content – it's about considering multiple perspectives and making space to think carefully about what we value. Decolonizing learning helps us to recognize, understand, and challenge the ways in which our world is shaped by colonialism. It also prompts us to examine our professional practices. It is an approach that includes indigenous knowledge and ways of learning, enabling students to explore themselves and their values and to define success on their own terms."³

What does decolonizing mean?

Two definitions:

*"My personal definition of Decolonization: The process of accepting that the view of the colonizer is only one perspective of a story and the other perspective, which is that of the colonized is equally (if not more) important in telling the whole story."*⁴

“My friend Sheila once said to me, ‘I don’t trust anything that comes outta my mouth.’ Meaning that we have been raised under conditions of white supremacy, ableism, heterosexism, capitalism, and misogyny. Everything that is within this body, this body’s thoughts, this body’s words, the way I hold this body, has been conditioned by systems that tempt me to destroy this body.

“Decolonization is a gentle but consistent practice of interrogation.

“It is a practice of finding the right in my wrongs, of developing comfort with the unknown, of unlearning and relearning in collective.”⁵

¹ George Floyd is only one of 598 people who have had fatal encounters with American police in 2020 alone. See: <https://mappingpoliceviolence.org/>; and <https://theirnames.org/>.

² See: Richard A. Opiel, Jr., Robert Gebeloff, K. K. Rebecca Lai, Will Wright, and Mitch Smith, “The Fullest Look Yet at the Racial Inequality of Coronavirus,” *New York Times*, 5 July 2020. Rong-Gong Lin II, “[California Latino, Black residents hit even harder by coronavirus as white people see less danger](#),” *Los Angeles Times*, 27 June 2020.

³ Ferguson, R., Coughlan, T., Egelanddsdal, K., et al. (2019). [Innovating Pedagogy 2019: Open University Innovation Report 7](#). Milton Keynes: The Open University. p. 3.

⁴ Ravista Mehra, “[Questioning, Dismantling & Rebuilding the Institution](#),” Royal College of Art and Design, School of Communication, Zoom event, 22 July 2020.

⁵ meenadchi, *Decolonizing Non-Violent Communication*, CO-Conspirator Press, 2019.