

# Black History is American History

UNH faculty on studying race

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It started with one week in February in 1926.

“What we need is not a history of selected races or nations, but the history of the world void of national bias, race hate, and religious prejudice,” historian and author Carter Godwin Woodson said of founding “Negro History Week.”

Forty-nine years later, President Gerald Ford urged Americans to “be mindful of the valuable message conveyed to us during the celebration of this week,” and the following year, extended Woodson’s proclamation. Black History Month is now observed every February. And while that is progress, many see a need for going beyond those 28 days.

“Black history is important to study but I can’t imagine American history in which that history is not central, from slavery to Jim Crow to racism today,” says Petar Ramadanovic, who teaches *On Race In Culture And Society*. “It’s important that students understand this is American history and there is no other.”

Casey Golomski, associate professor of anthropology, takes it a step further.

“There’s a saying that Black history is American history. And it is, but it’s so much more than that. It’s world or global history,” says Golomski, program coordinator of *Africana and African American studies*. “Black studies and history are powerful because it forces documentation, careful multitasking and ethical practice. It forces you to behold things simultaneously. It means not erasing the past because some are uncomfortable talking about it—and not talking about race and racism doesn’t make it go away. It means you have to openly sit with both that past and difficult present issues, while actively looking for ways to bring people joy, well-being and prosperous lives.”

Harriet Fertik, associate professor of classics, humanities and Italian studies, teaches *Race, Ethnicity, Class, and Classics*, where students explore how ancient Greeks and Romans thought about race, how anti-Black racism has shaped the way we learn about the distant past, and how Black Americans have interpreted and imagined the ancient world.

In recent history, racism in America has been shaped by the Civil Rights Movement and the teachings of Martin Luther King. And these principles have brought us forward. But Americans need a broader understanding of the movement and King’s teachings, Fertik says.

“The picture that popular culture gives us of Dr. King’s thoughts is very oversimplified. For example, we hear something about nonviolence and a few lines of the ‘I Have a Dream’ speech, but very little about his critiques of capitalism or the Vietnam War,” Fertik says. “It’s crucial that students have the opportunity to engage with the rich tradition of Black intellectual history by studying the sources, not just slogans.

“There is a growing movement in fields like classics and medieval and early modern studies to center race in our work, although this movement is often met with substantial resistance,” Fertik says. “I hope students will leave my course more attentive to anti-Blackness in our world and more open to a lifetime of learning about these issues.”

Many difficult issues overflowed across the country in 2020 as racial tensions prompted protests and marches led by supporters of Black Lives Matter. It was a critical year in our history. One that reinforced the need for action as well as reflection and discussion.

“To have informed conversations about race and racialized violence, we need to understand the historical context of anti-Blackness. We need to understand the histories of resistance and protest,” says Alexis Broderick, assistant professor of history.

“Learning about the deep history of racial violence in this country does not alleviate the brutalities of anti-Black violence today. This kind of learning, however, can spur conversations about the systemic societal changes that are necessary to address the consequences of racism.”

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Ramadanovic, an English professor, takes those conversations to another level; for several years now, he has invited a member of Black Lives Matter in to teach his class.

“Black Lives Matter works to change people’s heart and minds, person by person. The goal is to reach people, to help change our classroom, then our town, then New Hampshire — the snowball effect. And to bring theory and activism together,” he says “It’s about how we related to one other. It’s about being inclusive.”

Addressing the consequences of racism means studying racism, it causes, its history. Black History Month is a step in that direction, but it is still just one month. It will take more. At UNH, two course proposals are in the works, according to history professor Jason Sokol. The Discovery Program committee has a measure before the Faculty Senate to make the course Diversity and Inequality in U.S. History part of the Discovery requirements. And the College of Liberal Arts (COLA) is working on a similar measure.

“We are in the process of drafting a proposal which will require students in COLA to take two courses on race,” says Sokol, a member of the college’s committee on equity, inclusion and justice.

Ramadanovic sees community building as a critical component to educating people on racism. To that end, he would like to see the university hold more forums where people just talk about race.

“I’m not thinking of having an invited speaker, I’m thinking of something like a town hall meeting,” Ramadanovic says. “Where once a month, for example, you bring your concerns —even if you think they are stupid or biased — and talk about them. So people can begin to understand not only other points of view but also their own. ”

And then there are the words we use.

“Changing the language we speak is important. Addressing racism and dismantling it means moving on in protest, practice and care for ourselves,” Golomski says. “Some will never understand or never try to, but we have to keep moving, reframing issues that evidence peoples' lived reality of oppression and dispossession and voting in people who devise antiracist and equitable policies.”

Adds Ramadanovic, “It’s about the values we want to have, those we are building here and now at this place, at UNH.”

A list of events celebrating Black History Month at UNH can be found [here](#).

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