



NORTHERN ARIZONA UNIVERSITY

OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT

February 1, 2022

Dear Lumberjacks,

Today we celebrate the beginning of Black History Month, and I hope you will join me and our entire NAU community in recognizing the significant contributions of Black and African Americans over the next few weeks and joining the many programs and events taking place here at NAU, in Flagstaff, and in communities throughout the state.

When I was growing up in Puerto Rico, we didn't celebrate Black History Month in school. We did have a "semana de la puertorriqueñidad" when—for one week out of every year—we'd celebrate the notion that the Puerto Rican "race" was the beautiful, harmonious product of the "mezcla" or combination of three "races:" the indigenous Taíno who lived on the island when the Spanish colonizers arrived in the 15th century; the Spanish settlers themselves; and the African slaves they started importing shortly after their arrival. Because we were "mixed" in this manner, we were told, Puerto Rico had no serious issues with racism or racial injustice.

But even as children we intuitively knew that was an inaccurate depiction of the reality we lived. That in the images from our social studies and history books, the Taíno were kind and wise, the Spaniards were brave and entrepreneurial, and the Africans were ... slaves. Always slaves and usually nameless. There was little emphasis or mention of the historical existence of free Black people on the island as early as the 16th century, of the role slave revolts played in bringing about abolition, or of the fact that Africa was an actual continent comprised of multiple countries with complex histories. The chapter devoted to the contribution of "Africans" to Puerto Rican culture was always shorter than the ones that focused on the other two "races." And then there were the daily reminders that the darker your skin was, the higher the likelihood you'd be discriminated against—something I experienced firsthand as I made my way through certain spaces with my Black (and proud) maternal grandmother.

You see, the dominant narrative of "the three races" and their "harmonious mix" may have been an attempt at inclusion, but it had the effect of making invisible or trivializing our blackness. It is a complicated story, one that scholars of Puerto Rican and Caribbean Studies have been deconstructing for several decades now. But my point is that shallow efforts at inclusion—without more knowledge and awareness—are insufficient. One history month isn't enough. But it is important to seize the opportunity to shine a spotlight on knowledge that would otherwise remain in the shadows.

I look forward to joining our NAU community as we seek to become more

knowledgeable, aware, and involved by participating in events and programs offered throughout Black History Month. [Find a variety of events sponsored by the Office of Inclusion, the Black Student Union, and more at IMQ's website.](#)

Black History Month also is a timely opportunity to reflect on our institutional work in advancing diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice. I look forward to some important developments that will be announced later this semester, which are the product of much hard work and thoughtful deliberation on how to spur action and provide resources for our diversity and inclusion initiatives while realizing the bold and important goals of our Diversity Strategic Plan. In addition, I am excited for our next draft of the Strategic Roadmap that will be released in a few weeks, which embeds throughout its goals and objectives our deep institutional commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice, and will propel our work in advancing *equitable postsecondary value*.

In partnership,



José Luis Cruz Rivera
President



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