USU teachers workshop discusses racial injustice

By: Lyndi Robins, CHaSS Communications Journalist

USU’s Mountain West Center for Regional Studies hosted its annual Bennion Teachers’ Workshop for the Perpetuation of Democratic Principles on June 21-25. This workshop was held virtually and featured discussions about racial injustice in the classroom.

The event, informally known as the Bennion Teachers’ Workshop, began in 1994 and has been held annually since 2000. It was created by Ione Bennion, a teacher and community activist, who intended to “provide an atmosphere and the educational resources to explore the concepts upon which democracy is built, the conditions under which it flourishes, and the dangers to its existence.”

Each year, the workshop features a different topic relating to the foundation of democracy. Considering the current racial injustice movement and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on racial minorities, the title of the 2021 workshop was “Hidden in the Shadows of Democracy: Engaging and Teaching the Strength of Race and Difference.”

The 2021 workshop was directed and facilitated by Dr. Marisela Martinez-Cola, then a USU professor of sociology. Martinez-Cola’s goal was to foster a safe, non-judgmental space for teachers to gather and discuss topics about racial injustice in a constructive way.

“Dr. Martinez-Cola wanted to provide a brave space for participants to engage in difficult conversations and to ask questions they may have had in the last year regarding anti-racism, LGBTQ+ issues, disabilities,” said Julia Gossard, Bennion faculty fellow and assistant professor of history at USU.

The workshop featured nine guest speakers who spoke about different aspects of social injustice in classrooms and communities based on their research and personal experiences, as well as a student panel. The panel was made up of five USU students who shared stories of positive and negative experiences with teachers in their fight against racism.

“With the realization that our teachers in Utah are ready to face challenges of this century with their students,” Gossard said. “They are ready to have difficult conversations and they want to have greater equality and diverse perspectives in their classrooms.”

17 teachers and administrators from all over Utah attended the workshop. Participants ranged from elementary school teachers to college administrators.

“The guest speakers were incredible,” one participant said. “I loved the activities. All the readings were relevant and meaningful, and the extra books were excellent choices.”

The 2022 Bennion Teachers’ workshop will discuss religious freedom and will be led by Patrick Mason, the Leonard J. Arrington Chair of Mormon History and Culture and an associate professor of religious studies and history. Sign-ups will be held spring 2022.

Addition Information

More information about the 2021 Bennion Teachers Workshop, including a list of speakers and their topics, can be found at The Mountain West Center’s website.

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