Good afternoon and welcome to the first of several virtual gatherings that Community, Equity and Diversity will be hosting beginning this summer. My name is Mary Grace Almandrez and I am the Associate Vice President and Chief Diversity Officer. I have the honor of moderating today's panel.

Last Friday, a group of 19 faculty and staff met to share our reflections and experiences with the injustices, oppression, and murders of Black people in the United States. We spoke openly about our pain, grief, and anger. We also discussed how to provide opportunities for our University community to process, heal, and strategize around the systemic racism and violence against Black communities that have occurred for centuries but have been further amplified during the COVID pandemic. The policing of Black bodies, Black empowerment, and Black protest has a long and sordid history throughout the globe. We say, "Enough is enough."

Today’s program is titled, *Black Lives Matter: Navigating Institutional Racism in the New Normal*. We did this intentionally to center and privilege the experiences and perspectives of Black people and Blackness, particularly as they intersect with other forms of subjugation during this “new normal.” We use the phrase “Black Lives Matter” to show our solidarity with Black communities, focus on lives in juxtaposition with deaths, and acknowledge the dignity and humanity of all Black people. We also recognize that the liberation of minoritized communities is intimately intertwined with the liberation of Black people.

In planning for this first gathering, we held in our hearts the sentiments that were expressed by our community members:

- Some shared that a gathering this week, at the heels of recent media coverage concerning the blatant disregard of Black lives and untimely deaths of Black people would be too soon.
- Others shared that a community conversation about Black lives and Blackness is long overdue.
- Some said they would like to gather in spaces that were for Black people only.
- Some said White allies need to have the hard conversations.
- Students and colleagues asked when the curriculum and faculty training would include anti-racist pedagogy.
- We heard a desire for all sides of controversial or polarizing issues to come together and engage in meaningful and productive conversations.
- We also heard that Black people have come to the table repeatedly without seeing real change.
- Our community members said faculty and senior leaders must allocate the necessary resources to ensure that Black excellence, achievement, and success are a top priority.
- Our Black community members say they are in too much pain, are experiencing perpetual trauma, and are enraged by the silence and complicity of people in positions of power.

We want to acknowledge and honor that there are community members who are not present at this gathering in order to prioritize their self-care, healing, and safety. The compounding effects of continuous injustice makes it difficult for Black staff and faculty to perform “business as usual.” How can we expect them to care for others when they, themselves, are in dire need of care?
Black students have shared that they are exhausted. They are tired of telling their stories for the benefit of University officials without seeing concrete changes that positively affect their lives on campus. For these reasons, our student panelists decided not to participate in this afternoon’s program. The weight that our Black student leaders carry is a heavy one and we must do better to disrupt the systems that continue to negatively and disproportionately impact our Black students.

We asked ourselves, “If not now, when?” We ultimately decided to hold space this week for those who were in need of community and to facilitate future conversations so that those who needed time could join us when they had capacity. We take seriously the concerns that our community members raised and will make every effort to address them.

We also know that CED and people of color in general should not be the only ones to heed this call to action. We must change our narrative of diversity, equity, and inclusion at URI so that we take seriously our shared responsibility and accountability to this work. One way we can demonstrate our Rhody pride is to dismantle the structures that perpetuate the oppression of Black people. We challenge our colleagues who have influence, position, power, and privilege to call out racism in our workplaces and take action immediately to hold people accountable for these egregious acts. We invite you to examine the compositional diversity within your departments and enact real change to hire Black faculty and administrators. We expect you to educate yourselves, to confront the biases that have prevented real progress, and to model a true commitment to social justice. Our solidarity is our strength and we look forward to doing this work with you.

This afternoon, we will hear from staff and faculty who will discuss their personal experiences, scholarship, and activism as they relate to teaching, learning, and leading within a predominantly White institution. Our panelists will share according to their comfort level and have been invited to speak with the larger community rather than speak for Black people, Black staff, Black faculty, or any particular group or identity.

At this time, I am pleased to introduce our esteemed colleagues: Dr Carnell Jones, Dr. Vanessa Quainoo, and Dr. Joanna N. Ravello.