

"Do not expect to be taught or shown. Take it upon yourself to use the tools around you to learn and answer your questions." [Guide to Allyship](#)



Handbook

2023-2024

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August 2023

Available online at <https://www.naacpberkshires.org/white-learning-programs/>

Getting Started as a White Learning Partner

Welcome to the NAACP Berkshire County Branch White Learning Partners program (WLP).

The program is intended to encourage and support you in your journey towards anti-racism and allyship, whether you are a beginner or a seasoned traveler, by giving you ideas, resources, and personal connections with fellow travelers with whom to share the challenges and rewards of this journey.

Designed by white learners in consultation with Black Branch leadership, the program is built in the context of these **“Key Understandings:”**

- White people need to take responsibility for their own learning about whiteness and racism;
- Central to that learning are the voices of Black people as found in print and online publications, online sites, and through broadcast media;
- White people need to respect the degree to which Black people are exhausted by having to explain racism to white people and refrain from seeking out Black people for that purpose; white people need to do their own research before seeking out Black people for information.
- Learning can improve outcomes - reducing the daily race-based insults and micro-aggression Black people experience from well-intentioned but uninformed white people;
- White people need to commit to a **life time of learning** and **informed activism** to counteract entrenched, persistent systemic racism and white supremacy and to recognize their own racist thinking and behavior.

“The history of slavery is the history of the United States. It was not peripheral to our founding; it was central to it. It is not irrelevant to our contemporary society; it created it. This history is in our soil, it is in our policies, and it must, too, be in our memories....[There] must be a collective endeavor to learn and confront the story of slavery and how it has shaped the world we live in today.” Clint Smith, *How the Word is Passed* p.298.

You will learn independently using resources of your own choosing at your own pace. You will have **one or two partners** with whom you engage on a regular (at a minimum monthly) basis to share what you each have learned and to support each other’s progress and challenges. Details about partnerships are below.

Learning (as opposed to “action”) – quite intentionally – is our focus, through resources that center the voices of Black people. It is not unusual to find these Black voices lament the lack of interest or commitment among white people to learn the history we were never taught and its lasting impact on every aspect of our society. They want us - white people - “to do the research.”

So first and foremost this program is about:

- **acquiring new information** to expand your understanding of race; followed by
- **self-reflection** through which you examine your own experiences, assumptions, and behaviors; and
- **practicing change** by trying on new thinking, new ways of speaking, and new ways of behaving in your every day life and sharing these changes with your partner(s)

Black voices are at the heart of this learning. It is impossible to move toward anti-racism without centering and listening to Black voices. The extensive “White Learning Resources” (a separate document) will give you ample choices of material from some of the leading Black voices of our time. You may discover other Black-created resources in the course of your learning that you wish to explore.

Discomfort is a big part of this work which perhaps is why many white people resist it. When we do this learning it disrupts our assumptions about the normality of whiteness. When we experience discomfort with what we are learning, we need to take it seriously, lean into it and interrogate ourselves as to why we are uncomfortable. This is where mutual support and encouragement kicks in to help each of us - at whatever place we are in – to face the discomfort, seek to understand it, persist in learning and resist giving up.

We also need to consider, prioritize, and respect the discomfort of the Black creators of the work we learn from. They have lived “less than” and “less of” and then re-lived “less than” and “less of” in the process of creating their work.

Learning – ongoing learning – is essential, but not sufficient. Ultimately it must be accompanied by **action - informed action**. **But learning comes first**. As our learning deepens our understanding of how systems and personal interactions work to sustain white supremacy, we must set aside our discomfort and interrogate ourselves about our own complicity so our actions are not a perpetuation of that complicity. Good intentions are not enough; good outcomes are the goal.

There are many **actions** white people can take to help; it is important to have done enough research to understand **what kind of action is helpful and what may cause more harm than good**. Anti-racist activist and writer Reni Eddo-Lodge speaks explicitly to this issue.¹

Often white people ask me, very earnestly, what I think they should do to end racism. Anti-racist work – the logistics, the strategy, the organising – needs to be led by the people at the sharp end of injustice. But I also believe that white people who recognize racism have ... a part to play. That part can't be played by wallowing in guilt. White support looks like financial or administrative assistance to the groups doing the vital work. Or intervening when you are needed in bystander situations. Support looks like white advocacy for anti-racist causes in all-white spaces. White people, you need to talk to other white people about race.

Talk to other white people who trust you. Talk to other white people in the areas of your life where you have influence. If you feel burdened by your unearned privilege, try to use it for something and use it where it counts. But don't be anti-racist for the sake of an audience.

¹ Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People about Race Bloomsbury. 2018 p.215

Being white and anti-racist in your private or professional life, where there's very little praise to be found, is much more difficult, but ultimately more meaningful.

Also

*"Black people are not responsible for white supremacy. That is white people's job. Black people can take care of themselves. White people need to get out of our way; they need to do their own work."*²

Learning and Action

This is a learning program; learning **is** a form of action. We encourage you, however, to use your learning to inform other anti-racist action you take in each of the communities to which you belong, especially in your white spaces. Seek out like-minded allies in those spaces to build your own anti-racist action teams in your communities.

² A paraphrase of Hawke Newsome, BLM Activist, speaking via Zoom to Black youth in Berkshire County, 2020

Program Commitment, Outline, and Calendar

Timing

The program will run from **October 1, 2023 through June 2, 2024**.

Commitment

Each partner commits to:

- engage in personal learning about racism at some level on a **weekly** basis;
- meet with their learning partners at a **minimum of once per month**;
- attend **3 plenary Zoom sessions** of the entire learning cohort (Oct., Jan., May)

In committing to this program you are joining with other learners. Your sharing with your partners and participation in the plenary sessions are part of the learning experience. Your presence and engagement in all aspects of the program are important for everyone's learning. **If you are absent you limit the learning of others – as well as your own.**

All participants meet together as a group **three times** by Zoom from 6:00-7:30 PM on a **Sunday afternoon**:

Introductory meeting (**Oct. 1, 2023**);

Check-in (**Jan. 28, 2024**)

Wrap-up (**June 2, 2024**)

Plenary Meetings

Each Plenary meeting is used to share learning and challenges across the entire group. The “breakout room” feature of Zoom will be used – particularly at the first meeting, for partner teams to get acquainted, share their Plans, give each other feedback, and agree on how they will manage their meeting times.

A **Black Mentor** will be present at a portion of each plenary meeting. This person will be a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) professional.

Preparation for the October introductory meeting)

- **Subscribe** to the [Anti-racism Daily](#) and **get in the habit of reading it daily**. It is free (donations welcome); each issue is delivered to your email each morning and covers a specific topic succinctly with links to additional sources. It is most informative and timely.
- **Read** completely and **bring** the “White Learning Partners Handbook” to the first plenary;
- **Choose** the book you plan to use to start your work and come to the introductory plenary meeting **prepared to share** its title and the reason for your choice;
- **Bring** your calendar to the first plenary.

Working in Partnership

The focus of this work is on personal learning about how race operates in our society, systemically in all our institutions and in the hearts and minds of each of us.

As you may have already discovered, this is not easy work to do.

As white people we have not had to think about our whiteness; it is easy to see race as something that relates only to other people – those who are not white. As we learn more about what it means to be Black, we come to realize that “white” too is a racial construct with its own meaning; that white supremacist thinking is not just the purview of violent, far-right radicals, but is everywhere, including within us.

It is common to experience denial, resistance, anger, shame, and guilt. It is common to not want to finish difficult texts, to feel overwhelmed by the enormity of this country’s “original sin” and despair at it ever getting any better.

Learning in partnership provides **reciprocal mentoring** and a **mutual support system** in working through all these emotions, to keep us from getting stuck, or giving up - to keep us committed to doing the work as so many have been committed for generations before us.

Though you are working on your individual plans, there will be much overlap in what you are learning and feeling. As partners you:

- **maintain confidentiality** to create a brave space for courageous sharing.
- **share your learning** and respond to each other with openness, compassion and curiosity;
- **ask questions of each other** to assist each other in “seeing” the way we each have internalized white supremacy;
- **encourage each other in taking risks** to disrupt racist ways of thinking, speaking, and behaving.
- **speak honestly**, even when it makes you feel vulnerable.
- **help each other to identify blind spots**, in order to make space to choose change.
- **look for the learning opportunity** in whatever situation you find yourself.
- **approach this work and each other with humility and gratitude**; we each have our own experiences and insights to share and this learning is never done.

Thanks to the Circle, I am working on my own humility when talking about race with other white people. It's still uncomfortable to admit that I started the Circle believing I was "more advanced" in my anti-racism journey. I now understand that that perspective serves no one, least of all me.

Former White Learning Circle member

Partnerships

You may choose your own partner(s) prior to registering. Each partner must register individually for the program. As part of the registration process you will identify your partner(s) if you have chosen them yourself.

OR

You may register individually and we will partner you with one or two others based on questions we ask as part of the registration process.

It is quite likely that partners are in different places in their individual journeys and are working with quite different resources. This can enrich your experience – providing opportunity for mutual mentoring and expanding perspectives. **What is essential is that you keep your commitment to weekly learning, even if only at a minimal level, and to the monthly partner meetings to discuss that work.**

Planning Your Learning

Here are some pointers to consider as you decide your course for this journey:

1. **Set a realistic weekly commitment** of time that you can spend on this work and **stick to it**. It may be no more than the 30 minutes it takes to read *The Anti-Racist Daily* every day or to read 1 chapter of a book each week. This will ensure that when your monthly partner meeting arrives, you will have something to contribute to the discussion.
2. **Scan the headings in the extensive “White Learning Resources”**; they provide a framework for thinking about the many facets of racism and are intentionally arranged as a progression for learning.
3. **If you are new to this work** or have not engaged with learning about racism in a long time (e.g. 10 years) **consider starting with one of the three basic areas most critical to understanding how race operates** in the world: history; the perspectives and experience of Black and other people of color; what it means to be white.

There are key recent titles in each of these areas that are widely acknowledged to be important works. If you have not read at least one of these titles in each area, choosing from among this group is a good place for you to start. No single work captures the full picture and integration of the content into one’s mindset takes repetition, so reading multiple works on the same topic will greatly enhance your understanding.

History

The 1619 Project (book) Nicole Hannah-Jackson, editor
Caste by Isabel Wilkerson
The Half has Never Been Told by Edward Batiste
How the Word is Passed by Clint Smith
Stamped From the Beginning by Ibram X Kendi
The Warmth of Other Suns by Isabel Wilkerson

Being Black

Between the World and Me by Ta-Nehisi Coates
Eloquent Rage by Brittney Cooper
Heavy by Kiese Laymon
Letters to My White Male Friends by Das-Devlin Ross
When they Call You a Terrorist by patrice khan-cullors and asha bandele

Being White

Nice Racism by Robin D’Angelo
So You Want to Talk About Race by Ijeoma Oluo
Tears We Cannot Stop: A Sermon for White America by Michael Eric Dyson
Waking Up White by Debbie Irving
White Fragility by Robin D’Angelo
White Rage by Carol Anderson

4. **Take some time to reflect** on what kind of learning you have done in the recent past. What gaps in your understanding do you feel you have? What really interests you? If you have covered the basics through some of the titles above, you already may have lists of topics or titles you want to explore. “Resources for White Learning” can also be used to identify different avenues of approach.

5. **Return to a book on race you put down** because you did not like it. Interrogate yourself as to why you did not like it. If the content made you uncomfortable, it may be the book you have the most to learn from.

6. Keep it simple! **Start with one book** of interest and use it to raise new questions which can lead to other books and media sources.

7. **Consider keeping a journal** for each of the blocks of time you work. Jot down the ideas/quotes that really caught your attention, brief notes about why they were meaningful to you and questions they raise for more exploration.

Guiding Questions for your work

The guiding questions are intended to promote self-reflection and personal examination as you consider the material you are studying. Partners may find them useful as queries to each other.

- What surprised you and why?
- Did anything make you uncomfortable, defensive, or angry and why?
- How did what was presented line up or not line up with your own experience / view of the world?
- What did you learn about white-centering? How has it operated in your personal relationships and the opportunities you have had?
- Are you reconsidering any of your assumptions, behaviors or actions? What changes are your thinking about?
- Are you seeing things about yourself and how you lead your life - beliefs and behavior - that you hadn't noticed before?
- What questions are you interested in exploring further?