My role today is to introduce you to the School's anti-racism commitment because we have made undoing racism a central part of our work here at Smith.

This introduction comes at a truly complex moment in this country's relationship to justice overall. We are coming to the end of the first presidency of a Black man and are poised to see the nomination to that office, for the first time, of a woman—at a moment when fundamental issues like equal pay and access to reproductive health are still contested. Marriage equality seems about to become the law of the land, while states around the country pass laws to permit and promote bias against that very basic human right. Attention to the issues of Transgender people has never been greater—as Laverne Cox and Caitlyn Jenner and their stories gain public attention and sympathy and Smith College revises its Admission policy—while violence against Trans* individuals simultaneously escalates. And, on the racial front, this past year saw the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the iconic Selma march that brought us the Voting Rights Act that the Supreme Court recently weakened dramatically. Police violence against Black men, women and children has become tragically commonplace leading to increasing public outcry and, perhaps, heightened recognition of the interplay of individual, institutional and structural racism and how they get expressed in the relationships between police, the state, and communities of color.

With all of that as part of the context for our gathering here today, it is important to remember the hopeful words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who reminds us that "the arc of history is long but it bends toward justice." And I have to assume that you believe that. Or, why else would you be embarking on a journey into a profession that, at its core, is about the pursuit of justice.

Some have suggested that President Obama's election marked the beginning of a "post-racial" era, a period when race is no longer a defining fault line in society. Black faces in high places does not mean that racism is just a thing of the past. In fact, there are countless examples to remind us of racism's persistence. As part of this presentation, I've created slide collages reflecting the literally tens of thousands of images on the web that illustrate some of those examples. Several of the images may be upsetting, but I thought it would be useful to include them to provide a visual reinforcement to what I'm trying to convey verbally—and to ground my comments in the larger context within which we approach anti-racism.

When the Tea Party movement and their allies call to "take our country back", they are making explicit whose country they think it is and whom they want to take it back from. And, at the same time, there is an inevitability of change—demographically, culturally, and politically that no backward-looking movement can halt. The future is being made every day and there is a role for all of us in building that future. It is in that spirit that I call upon your commitment and energy to take steps here, this summer and beyond, to challenge racism.

Let me first share some lessons our Smith community has learned over our 20-plus-year commitment to anti-racism. The biggest lesson, I believe, is that as this community is born anew
each year, each class makes its singular contributions to making the anti-racism commitment its own in its own way. Some of the structures to address that commitment we now have in place resulted directly from ideas raised in our community. So, this is an opportunity for you, the class of 2017, to add your contribution to the legacy of those who have come before.

Another thing we've learned is that it is important that you understand how we made the choice to become an anti-racism institution, because it is possible to see the focus on anti-racism as divisive, as pitting groups against each other or as disrespecting the experience of other oppressed groups.

To begin with, the field of social work itself has had an historic commitment to opposing racism. At times, it has done that vigorously and wholeheartedly; at other times, that commitment has been more tentative and timid. Often it was the grassroots of social work that provided the impetus for increasing our engagement with race and racism. The founding of the National Association of Black Social Workers in the late 1960's was one such moment. The push from both Students of Color and White students here at Smith in the 1990's was another.

It was students here, pointing out what they perceived as the School's lack of commitment to opposing racism, who took actions that led to a series of faculty-student-administration dialogues. In these, there were moments of incredible frustration and anger, moments of breathtaking honesty and compassion, and moments of utter confusion and startling clarity. Central to the discussion was the question of whether our commitment to social justice should be expressed in anti-racism terms or, more broadly, as anti-oppression work. As you can imagine, there were compelling arguments on both sides of this question.

The most fundamental recognition we had in this process was that there was no answer that would be "wrong" and also that there was no answer that would be "right." It was a matter of choosing from between two equally compelling alternatives and acknowledging that whatever choice we made would generate problems of one sort or another. I want to underscore this: we knew that choosing either alternative would be right and that the question we ultimately faced was which inevitably resulting issues were we more willing to live with.

Ultimately, we chose to focus on becoming an anti-racism institution. We did that with a full recognition that this could be seen as stating that other forms of oppression were less significant. That wasn't and still isn't our intent. Plainly and simply, we made the decision that we did because we believed that racism has a unique legacy in this country with our history of slavery, lynching and Jim Crow laws, the internment of Japanese residents during World War II, race-based immigration laws, the targeting of people who are or appear to be of Middle Eastern descent, the denial of entry to Jewish refugees from the Holocaust, and the near genocide of Native people, and it seemed critical to us to afford that legacy a place of primacy in our overall work against oppression. In this country's current climate, in which police violence against people and communities of color—primarily Black ones—is a frequent occurrence and those communities' responses are judged more harshly than the systemic oppression they respond to, it is clear that racism is still very much with us. By focusing on the responses of individuals we inadvertently or purposefully avoid identifying racism as the problem, and that lack of acknowledgement, that silence, is itself a form of systemic violence.
Because race is such a difficult issue to talk about, one that generates uncomfortable emotions like anger, sadness, shame and guilt, we saw it is a topic that, left to itself, would be avoided, as it is in the larger society. It was our concern that, given the discomfort with talking about race and the potential competition for "air time" to address other sources of oppression, race and racism would receive little focused attention. The silence must be broken.

This slide shows the commitment we have made as an institution and as a community to combating racism. As indicated, the institution’s commitment to you, is: to promote knowledge, values and skills to identify, critically analyze and intervene against the injurious effects of racism; to foster respect for diverse worldviews; to encourage self-reflection and community conversations about race; and to encourage further studies in this area. In addition, in the curriculum, we continuously look at the intersections of racism and other oppressions and work to strengthen our efforts to address all oppression based on identity.

You, as students, are central to this community. A key commonality you share is that you're here to become competent clinical social workers. That involves honing the instrument of the work and that's your selves. The work you will do with your clients and in your agencies and communities will be greatly enhanced—in terms of your ability to enter into people's lives as competent clinical social workers—if you understand racism and the ways it affects clients' lives and yours, White students and Students of Color alike. And, I want to assure you other oppressions are visibly acknowledged here. For example, you have opportunities to join student groups organized around a range of identities. The curriculum, your Community Practice Projects and theses all offer multiple opportunities to explore racism and other forms of oppression.

It's just not possible to address all the forms of oppression with as much depth and care as they deserve. Oppression is something a great many of us experience in very personal ways. Virtually all of us have some aspect of our identity that places us in a privileged position in society, while other parts of our identities may have been targeted in some ways. For example, as a White, heterosexual man, I come to this institution with levels of unearned privilege that have brought me benefits in this world. On the other hand, as a Jew whose working-class parents fled Nazi Germany, I grew up knowing there were those who would like to exterminate me and my family. So, like virtually all of you, there are aspects of who I am that benefit from being part of the dominant culture and there are other elements of my identity that at times leave me feeling vulnerable and marginalized. Ultimately, though, we often have some level of privilege and we can choose to use what privilege we do have to challenge the assumptions and structures of privilege, what anti-racism activist Peggy McIntosh calls "unearned advantages" and "conferred dominance".

But, as I call on you to make a personal commitment to the School's anti-racism work, I want also to acknowledge implications of the commitment we ask you to make.

It's important to recognize, for example, that choosing one oppression and making it our focus does deemphasize others and, at the same time, to engage deeply in recognizing one source of oppression is a way we can learn to truly feel and challenge other oppressions. We can "both" focus on racism for its own sake "and" on the lessons racism can provide in dealing with sexism,
heterosexism, anti-semitism, ableism, classism, and all the other "isms" that are such destructive forces in our lives, whether we are targeted or not.

We've committed to becoming an anti-racism institution out of an acknowledgment that the best we can do is to continually work toward that goal. As with becoming anything, it is a constant work in progress. And we call on you to join us in the difficult and exhilarating and worthy work of becoming what we aspire to be. It's important, though, I believe, to acknowledge that, here at Smith, we aren't an oasis of racial peace and harmony. We bring our country's and our own histories to this time and place. And, as James Baldwin wrote in *The Fire Next Time*: "History does not refer merely to the past. On the contrary, the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally present in all that we do."

We each approach this commitment at different stages of our own racial identity development and consciousness. For some of us, this is an old battle that we have engaged in for years, while for others, the systems of privilege within which many of us live have permitted us to ignore injustice and oppression based on identity. This commitment requires an acknowledgement that it is a manifestation of White privilege to not be conscious of racism and that those of us who are White must be willing to recognize, examine and address that privilege.

It is also important to remember that we are in a community that has come together with anti-racism work as part of its purpose. Whatever missteps we make, however we show our ignorance or feel our rage or sadness, we are among people who are trying to get it. In contrast with the virulence of the racism outside the gates of Smith College, we hope that the racial conversation here can be conducted with respect, as among friends and colleagues, comrades and allies. Entering into a profession that values self-awareness and growth, having to grow and/or learn should not be a source of embarrassment or shame. The important thing is that you make the effort and begin the process.

I want to note a particular challenge in living this commitment at Smith. The totality of the institution—our sharing dorms and dining facilities, along with classroom and extra-curricular learning—makes this a pretty intense place. Since we have little choice but to interact with each other, and since the reality is that building an anti-racism community is challenging, we need to remember that while we will do it imperfectly, it's truly important that we are making the effort anyway. And, if our relationships get strained, and if we turn on each other or, sometimes, ourselves, that is when those who truly profit and benefit from racism are the real winners.

While understanding often comes through a reflection on our own experiences, it is important to recognize that if you haven't experienced racism personally, you will need to listen to those who have, to get a more realistic, though still incomplete, understanding of its impact. And, for people who have experienced racism, I recognize that not all such experiences are identical nor do they have identical meanings to you across different targeted groups. My hope is that we will all use our passion, empathy, and intellect to see the connections and differences between our own oppression, from whatever source, and racism as experienced by those whom racism targets.
For White students, it will be important to take responsibility for your own learning about racism and not expect Students of Color to teach you or cheer on your efforts. I urge you to respect your classmates' efforts despite whatever mistakes and awkward statements they make rather than using it as an opportunity to demonstrate an advanced racial consciousness. For that can be just another form of oppressive behavior. Not talking about race is worse than talking about it badly and nothing stops the conversation more quickly than being shamed for not being perfect. It is often useful to recognize a person's intentions and not just focus on how that intention gets expressed. Intentions are important but they are not enough. So while we honor intent, we hope that it is made manifest in your behavior and your willingness to be open to feedback, even if you experience it as criticism. Given that it is hard not to be reactive to something that you perceive as negative, our hope is that you will be open to considering the feedback you receive as an opportunity to learn.

For Students of Color this may mean bearing witness to your White classmates' learning and for owning your own reactions to that process as well as to the racial content of your experience here at Smith. And, I want to say to you that we have heard over the years that we are asking something quite difficult of you. You may hear fellow students grapple with ideas that reflect your daily experiences and yet are new to them. Statements may be made in the process of learning that you may see as naive or even ignorant. You may be inappropriately looked to for affirmation of the good intentions of others in the community. In some ways, this may not differ that much from your experiences outside of Smith. While we are in the process of becoming something different from the world outside, we are still part of that world. So, while we are creating space in our Smith community for you and your White colleagues to explore, examine and address racism, we hope that when you feel you have to challenge us, you will do so directly and with compassion as part of your actions in upholding the School's commitment.

For faculty—as part of this learning community—it means that we need to find ways to promote and support learning about racism. We need to model the kind of racial awareness we are asking students to develop. And, it's important that, as entering students, you know that the School has made a substantial commitment to supporting faculty efforts in that direction. Our resident faculty have had an ongoing monthly anti-racism dialogue and training since the commitment was formalized over twenty years ago. Our adjunct faculty have had numerous training sessions on anti-racism work at their annual meetings, the School sponsors an ongoing group for faculty each summer dedicated to anti-racism pedagogy, and we conduct an on-line anti-racism course for adjunct faculty. Finally, the School's Anti-Racism Task Force meets at lunch each Tuesday during the summer and we invite you to join faculty, staff and students in using that forum to explore racial issues on campus and work together to address them.

A number of years ago, my wife—about to begin her career as a therapist—asked someone who was celebrating her 50th wedding anniversary if she had any secret to making a relationship work for that long a period of time. The profoundly simple answer was: "Just keep talking."

I don't know of any way to build a community and maintain relationships other than to follow that advice. When an ignorant or thoughtless remark wounds you, just keep talking. When you're unsure of how to say something important but difficult, just keep talking. But, at the same time,
remember the challenges of living so closely and intimately together in this pressure-packed community.

The conversation needs to continue but at a time and place when the parties are willing to talk. President Obama following the tragic shootings in Tucson said: "We may not be able to stop all the evil in the world, but I know that how we treat one another is entirely up to us." And, let me add that how we treat ourselves in this learning process is also part of this commitment.

As I draw to a close, I want to offer a perspective on what we can reasonably expect to accomplish here. It is important to recognize that racism is embedded in virtually all of our societal structures and affects, in a pervasive way, so many aspects of our lives that it is practically impossible to fully comprehend. I make this statement to suggest that the journey we ask you to join in today is a lifetime's journey. Whatever we are able to accomplish here, in our 27 months together, is only a start to the work that must be accomplished.

We are all up against pretty much the same forces. Once people choose to hate based on identity, they don't really care if you're Black, Asian or Hispanic, Jewish, Muslim or Catholic, gay, lesbian, or Transgender, or an immigrant, documented or not. So, in the time we spend here competing for more attention to be given to one identity, people who wish us all harm are organizing and mobilizing.

It is up to us to choose whether to stand and work together to build a country in which: we all have a right to be who we are and not fear that our identity is an invitation to violence directed against us; that an injury to one is an injury to all; and that the things we have in common are much more important than what divides us. If we choose to find a way to stand together, there is little we can't do.

In that spirit, we can see the School's anti-racism commitment as a commitment to the truly important work of building justice and recognize that struggling against racism is a way to oppose all oppression. As Frederick Douglass said: "If there is no struggle, there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom, and yet depreciate agitation, are men who want crops without plowing up the ground. They want rain without thunder and lightning. Men may not get all they pay for in this world; but they must certainly pay for all they get."

If we wish to harvest the crop of anti-racism, we will have to plow up some ground and tolerate some thunder and lightning. And, it is a struggle worth waging and paying for to achieve the progress we want to see.