

Race Relations at Aragon

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In an effort to research the nature of race relations at Aragon, the Outlook conducted a student survey and interviewed students and staff members. The survey, which was sent to all Aragon students, received 250 responses and produced the data seen on the graphs. Students Michelle Lopez, Kendall Makuta, Jianna Maso and Beth Yeung participated in a panel discussion, sharing experiences of racial discrimination at Aragon. Milton Reynolds is a Bay Area educator and consultant hired by school districts to help foster a better understanding of critical thinking around race. Reynolds has worked with Facing History and Aragon and has had more than 30 years of counseling experience. Lindsay Bussey is an English teacher taking steps to create a social justice class at Aragon.

Why is racial identity important?

Since the 19th century, the U.S. has attracted immigrants from around the world. In 2019, nearly 40% of the American population was of nonwhite or Hispanic descent. However, children of color can struggle to fit in as they juggle with the idea of being an American still tied to their family heritage. Racial discrimination, too, can prevent one from recognizing or associating themselves with their racial identity.

"We've been socialized in [a] colorblind framework," said Milton Reynolds. "[It] posits all identities as equal but centers whiteness without naming it."

Reynolds defines race as more than just skin color or appearance. It's used to label someone as "fit" or "unfit." Race can falsely categorize people based on their historical context, thus failing to recognize people's distinct cultures and experiences.

"Asians are looked at monolithically," Reynolds said. "That's silly because if you don't understand the history, you don't know that Chinese have a fundamentally different trajectory in this country than do Japanese and Koreans, do Filipinos, Vietnamese, Hmong."

With such misinterpretation, certain communities are put at a disadvantage. Resources and opportunities are allocated disproportionately. Even more worryingly, negative stereotypes can discourage or distract individuals, preventing them from performing to the best of their capabilities.

"[Racism] really impacts our mental health," said sophomore Kendall Makuta. "We constantly think about the way others perceive us and [how] we have to live up to these stereotypes."

Some Aragon students have personally struggled dealing with prejudices around their ethnicity but have learned to grow from it.

"Growing up, I reject[ed] my culture," Makuta said. "I wanted to be like everybody else. A lot of kids would look at what I was eating and judge me. Gradually I started realizing that ... you shouldn't care what other people think because it's part of your culture, ... and you should learn to embrace it."

It's important for students to appreciate each other's unique background to foster an inclusive environment for all. Only then will schools achieve a community that encourages everyone to strive for their best.

"We should connect and learn from each other," said sophomore Michelle Lopez. "Why not learn about different foods [and] different places around the world? [They are] interesting and unique. ... We should [learn to] accept each other."

In a broader context, cultural appreciation allows people to look past differences and cooperate as a united front.

"The reality is that we're going to move forward as a diverse country," Reynolds said. "The kind of problems we [will] need to solve ... require really complex thinking and the ability to honor multiple perspectives and understandings of the world."



The issue of normalized racism

Despite inclusivity being one of the Aragon community's goals, 39.2% of surveyed students have noticed normalized racism in casual conversations with their classmates or peers. This includes things such as racial and ethnic slurs, stereotypes and racist or discriminatory language.

"I hear [racial slurs] too many times," said sophomore Kendall Makuta. "There will be kids walking around playing music, but if there is a slur in the song, everybody says it. It's not that hard to skip a slur in a song, but people say it regardless. I also think that it's more common in person at school in a group of friends because maybe some people might not even hear it."

In addition to hearing racial slurs on campus, 68.4% of students surveyed hear or see people online using a racial or ethnic slur at least once a week. Anonymized social media allows users to post whatever they want with minimal consequences.

"I think a lot of cyberbullying happens [with] slurs because I feel like people have more security when they're just behind their phone," said sophomore Beth Yeung. "They feel like it's more okay to say it because it's just a Snapchat story; it's gone in 24 hours." But after 24 hours ... you don't know how many people that's really affected or hurt."

Normalized racism on campus has been a continuous problem. Anti-hate speech campaigns at Aragon have tried to fight against the issue, but it continues to persist even during virtual learning. Sophomore Lloyd Walter believes that one way to combat this is increasing the amount of respect towards others on campus.

"I just say to be more respectful," Walter said. "Try to go into a situation where you can be as non-judgmental as possible, so you can get to know that person. [Think] 'oh, I like you,' or 'oh, you're a bad person, so I don't like you,' instead of thinking of race like 'oh you're Black, so you're that' or 'oh, you're white so you're that,' or 'you're Poly[nesian], so you're that.'"



How race shapes self-perception

Racial discrimination can often be a negative influence on a student's mental health and may accumulate to internalized racism, which warps one's perception of self. The National Center for Biotechnology Information describes how racial discrimination can be conceptualized as a "social stressor that sets into motion a process of physiological responses."

Research reveals exposure to discrimination early in life may lead to negative consequences on a person's mental health. Another NCBI study found that 76% of study participants had a worsened mental health state due to the effects of discrimination and racism. Furthermore, according to the nonprofit organization Mental Health America, "Native and Indigenous American adults have the highest reported rate of mental illnesses of any single race identifying group."

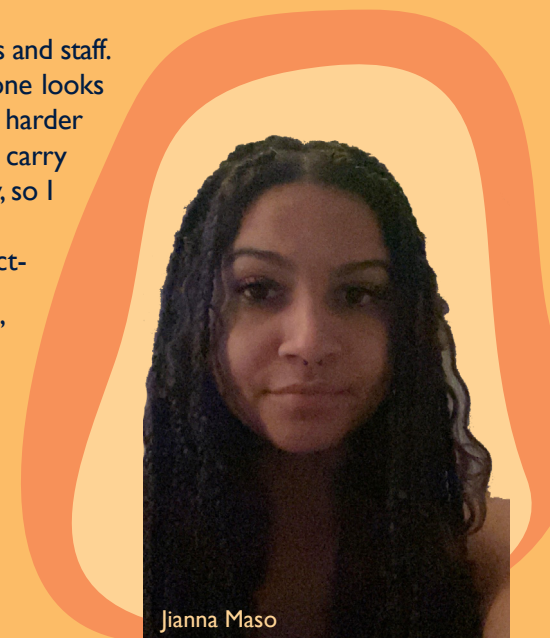
In the famous psychological study "Doll Test" used in the Supreme Court case Brown v. Board of Education, researchers had Black children pick which dolls they preferred to play with – a majority picked the white dolls. Then they asked the children which dolls looked like them; some of the children began crying after identifying that the Black doll looked like themselves. The researchers determined the children's perception to be due to the environment and discrimination they faced growing up.

Sophomore Beth Yeung's own experience with racial stereotyping had an impact on her in school. "A lot of the stereotypes I've experienced are [that because] you [are] Asian, you're good at math. ... Especially with my friend group, I've noticed it creates a lot of stress on us where it can impact not only our mental well-being," Yeung said. "Everybody expects us to be good at math [and] get good grades. ... We just constantly think about the way others perceive us and their stereotypes of us and think that we have to live up to these stereotypes."

Racial stereotyping affects the daily lives of both students and staff. "I know the hardship of being in academia where no one looks like you," said English teacher Lindsay Bussey. "You have to try harder so you can be the rule, not the exception. It is a weight that I carry that I can't be too ghetto or too loud. I always need to be early, so I don't fall into the stereotype of being Black and being late."

Sophomore Jianna Maso also found that her race impacted her own self-image at a young age.

"When I was younger, I always straightened my hair," Maso said. "People would come up to me [to ask to] touch [my] hair [because] it looked cool, but I felt like some kind of animal [when] they were trying to touch me. ... I didn't like my hair, [so] I always straightened it. Once I got to middle school, I started getting called whitewashed a lot; I wasn't a stereotypical Black girl. Once I got to high school, I started embracing it more and not shaming my hair every day, just being who I want to be."



Making Aragon more inclusive

While 74% of 250 Aragon students surveyed indicated that Aragon was somewhat or extremely racially inclusive, in light of the recent racially charged shootings and widespread xenophobia, the school can do more for its students of color.

"When you don't see any black people in the classroom, there's a subconscious feeling that they aren't qualified to be in that position," Bussey said. "If you don't see your own image, you don't see that that's possible for you. ... It does a disservice to our students to not teachers of color."

Being in a classroom without teacher role models of the same race can be isolating to students of color. "The challenge for most educators is they don't really understand that, from a historical lens, schools are a primary institution of race making," Reynolds said. "Every day, [educators] ask students to engage in certain content, evaluate them, rank them and then allocate them different opportunities based on these sets of practices that we've inherited. But in many cases, we don't actually even understand how deeply problematic some of them are."

Students approach issues in different ways due to lived experiences and socioeconomic factors stemming from diverse racial backgrounds. Thus, learning about students' experiences from a historical context is crucial to understanding educational material.

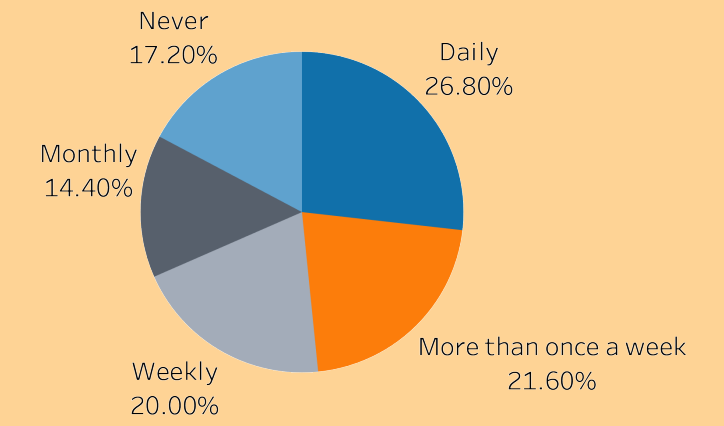
"This starts by becoming familiar with alternative narratives and marginalized narratives," Reynolds said. "That's narratives coming from people of color, from disabled communities — reading the history of scholarship that comes from communities that are typically seen as subordinate or less than perfect."

This year, all freshmen are taking introduction to ethnic studies, a class where they learn to study the histories of race, ethnicity, sexuality and culture to cultivate respect and compassion for all. The class not only helps teachers develop new curriculum holistically but also builds multicultural understanding for students.

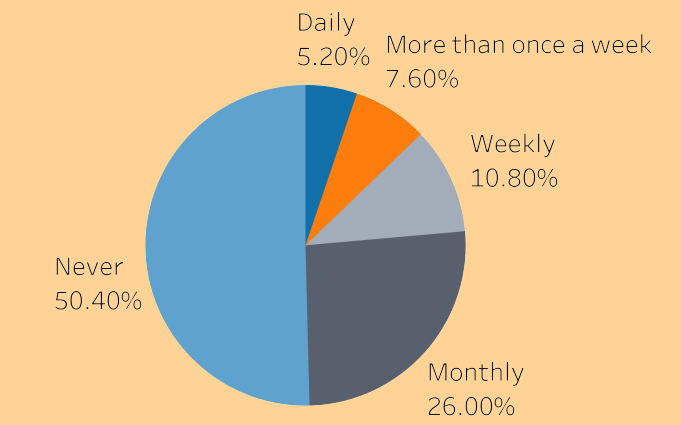
"It's our pedagogy, the way that we teach and what we choose to teach about, that gives us access to creating a safer learning space for more students," Reynolds said. "Part of that is actually getting teachers to engage with new curriculum and new content."



How often do you hear or see people online using a racial or ethnic slur?



How often do you hear a friend or classmate use a racial slur?



How racially inclusive do you think Aragon is?

