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### **Gardner-Webb Faculty and Staff Plan Spring Events to Promote Diversity and Inclusion**

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ACADEMICS

# Gardner-Webb Faculty and Staff Plan Spring Events to Promote Diversity and Inclusion

BY OFFICE OF UNIVERSITY COMMUNICATIONS ON NOVEMBER 18, 2020



▲ Dr. Kemeshia Randle Swanson poses with some of the books she will be using in her African American literature course. Photo by Lindy Lynch / GWU Student Photo Team

## Programs Include Recognition of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Black History Month and a Course on African American Literature

As Gardner-Webb University students and the campus community continue to process national events related to racial injustice and inequality, GWU faculty and staff will offer more avenues next semester for communication and understanding. Assistant Professor of English Dr. Kemeshia Randle Swanson will be teaching an African American literature course in the spring entitled “Still I Rise.” JeNai Davis, director of [Diversity and Intercultural Initiatives](#), is planning several opportunities for students, faculty and staff to ask questions and discuss complex issues in a safe space.



▲ JeNai Davis

Since starting her job at Gardner-Webb in July, Davis has hosted many programs to engage the campus community in conversations around diversity and inclusion. “The Gardner-Webb community has come together numerous times in just my few short months here,” Davis affirmed. “My most memorable moment, however, has been the [#TogetherAsOne March](#) organized by football athletes. The turnout that day was overwhelming, and the conversations that happened afterwards were all vital to campus.”

Additional programs coordinated by Davis for the spring semester will bring guests from the community to offer their perspectives on healing the divisions in society. “Our first event for the spring will be in honor of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and Dr. Lamont Littlejohn, a GWU alumnus, will be the guest speaker,” Davis noted. “Black

History Month plans are already in the works, and students will have many different options to choose from to engage and learn more.”

Swanson’s English 434 class is open to any student registered at GWU. Her scholarly expertise is American literature 1865 to present, African American Literature, Black feminisms, popular literature and culture. She designed the course with students’ needs in mind. “The murder of George Floyd in May of this year, coupled with the unrest caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, resulted in GWU students making a special request for a place to process and critically discuss their frustrations,” she offered. “This course is an attempt to begin answering the students’ plea. It is a place for students of all races, genders, ages, socioeconomic standings, and abilities to learn the value of varied viewpoints and to practice empathy.”



▲ Some of the authors and public personalities who will be featured in English 434: Harriet Jacobs, Frederick Douglass, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., J. Cole, Serena Williams and Maya Angelo.

The course will use traditional literature and other modern texts to examine the lived experiences and cultural practices of African Americans from the pre-Civil War era to the present. “We will study memoirs, short stories, speeches, poetry, music lyrics, and even fashion (amongst other genres and expressions) to explore the long-standing tradition of African Americans displaying tact and tenacity, using their literature and lives to fight injustices and overcome adversities,” Swanson described.

Students will read works by well-known African American authors, such as Frederick Douglass, Zora Neale Hurston, Martin Luther King Jr., Maya Angelou and others. Additionally, they will look at people in popular culture who do not consider themselves African American scholars but purposely disseminate knowledge—J. Cole, Serena Williams, Michelle Obama, etc.

“I strongly believe that part of the reason America has not healed from its past is because we have shied away from having the difficult conversations,” Swanson observed. “Instead, we have placed bandages on our wounds and wished them away. This is not an effective problem-resolution strategy, however. As a professor in the humanities, my goal, always, is to teach students to be self-reflective; to think and write critically and objectively; appreciate differences; become informed; and practice empathy and mutual respect.”

[Learn more about “Still I Rise” in this Q&A with Dr. Swanson.](#) >



▲ Dr. Kemeshia Swanson teaches a class at Gardner-Webb. In the spring semester, she is offering an African American literature course entitled “Still I Rise.” Photo by Lindy Lynch / GWU Student Photo Team

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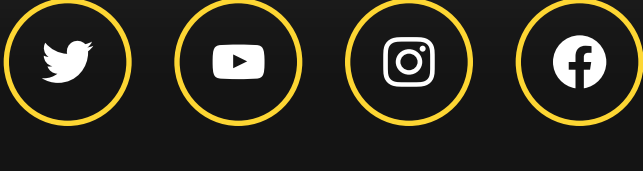
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