

The Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity

The Ohio State University
Columbus, OH
kirwaninstitute.org
Est. 2003



Andrew Grant Thomas
Deputy Director

The Kirwan Institute was founded at the Ohio State University in 2003. With the hope of establishing the university as a leader in a new interdisciplinary field, Kirwan's founders decided the institute would:

- Foster critical and creative thinking on concepts about race and ethnicity;
- Examine hierarchies and systems of control, domination and oppression;
- Explore the interrelatedness of race and ethnicity to other foci such as gender and class;
- Examine the cultural, economic, political and social experiences of racial and ethnic minority groups in the Americas (note that the Institute's work is now global in scope)
- Interrogate the material conditions of life and achievement among groups that systematically are subjected to systems of domination and oppression.

The institute works hard to accomplish such goals in part through its use of conceptual frameworks like structural racialization. Deputy Director Andrew Grant-Thomas describes structural racialization as "the idea that individuals and individual beliefs and behaviors are only one factor that may contribute to racialized phenomena. People sometimes also consider institutional racism but, beyond that, we believe that one important source of racialized meanings, outcomes and



inequalities are the dynamics that happen between institutions or across substantive domains like education, health, and employment."

Structural racialization is particularly important when considering issues of social justice. Kirwan maintains that social justice work often is reactive and can cause problems in one area while alleviating problems in another. Grant-Thomas explains, "The way we tend to approach social problems is try



to break things out into their separate constituent bits and try to solve each bit, but that doesn't work. It doesn't work because much of the difficulty and complexity of the problems we face come from how these different bits interact in irreducible ways to create the outcomes we see."

Issues of social justice never rest and new areas of research always are emerging at the Kirwan Institute. Grant-Thomas currently is working on a project to generate visions of what the United States will look like if current social justice and racial equity work is successful. It is titled "Visions 2042," which is the year the U.S. Census predicts that there no longer will be a racial majority – and many believe will be a time of great significance.

He says, "Suppose people doing this important work are successful, and things are significantly better in terms of race. What does that look like? Suppose we knew that some of the seeds of transformation were in place right now – in the year 2010. What might some of those be? And how do we get from here to there?"

The questions are difficult to answer, but Grant-Thomas stands by their importance. "It's about taking very seriously the challenge of making real substantial racial progress and figuring out the kinds of strategies and tactics that are required to do so, as opposed to focusing only on immediate and incremental goals," he says. ■

Photos courtesy of the Kirwan Institute.