



Carmen Estela Kennedy Saleh

Rise Up, Raise Questions

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Carmen Estela Kennedy Saleh wants students to know that they have the ultimate say when it comes to shaping their education, and that their journey should include more than a warm seat in a lecture hall. “Adopt the spirit of a life-long learner,” says Saleh. “You’ll get the best out of your education when you leave your desk now and again. Be an active part of the campus community and attend artistic and scholarly events; find the connective tissue between these and your studies.”

As an author and African American Studies lecturer, Saleh, '21 MFA Creative Writing, '26 EdD, is enjoying a life of academic immersion as she studies and teaches these days. She believes the time she spent on the Silicon Valley corporate scene was foundational to her educational path. That experience gave her a front-row seat to the ways racism rests in corporate ecosystems, from the microaggressions that spark team fissures to systemic practices that can create legal

issues. Having witnessed some of Silicon Valley's racial injustices, she believes that being sensitized to recognize injustice and stand against it will hasten positive social change. "Most of my students will soon be starting a career, and I hope that when they encounter what I've encountered they won't be blindsided," Saleh says. "I hope they'll remember that they have agency and can make the changes that need to be made."

She recalls 2020, when the Black Lives Matter movement saw a national wave of support on social media, especially following the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police. There were businesses, including some Fortune 500 companies, that showed support for BLM on social media with a black square. Saleh points out that some of the support ended shortly after it started. "It was performative in some ways, and later found to block algorithms that could have affected substantive change," says Saleh. Moments like this reminded her of the need for companies to be active listeners who pause and listen to those at the forefront of social justice movements, particularly if the goal is to be an earnest ally. These moments also motivated Saleh to inspire her students to think critically. She points out, "You need foundational exposure to racial literacy to be able to pose questions in the workforce. You have to be able to recognize it before you can question it."

Saleh teaches a course called The Humanities and African American Culture. She is aware it may be the only ethnic studies class her students take. As someone who worked in Silicon Valley and anticipates many students doing the same, she focuses on sharing job relevant information. "No matter where you end up, a boardroom, med-lab or data center, the knowledge you picked up along the way should help you confidently raise questions," Saleh says. In her course, this means giving students the tools to understand how power silences its opposition in order to function in society.

While she hopes to give students a platform to grow from, Saleh explains that creating change takes more than just the sit-down education. "You're only learning so much if you're in a vacuum. The minute you're free from that and are encouraged to step into the community, the learning process begins," says Saleh. As part of her

curriculum, students receive credit for attending one of the many campus or community events on her syllabus. She has woven this into her pedagogy with the hope that students get involved outside of the classroom. These events have featured luminaries from activist icon Angela Davis, sponsored by the Cesar Chavez Community Action Center, to authors, poets and educators with local ties such as Sheila Smith McKoy and Vernon Keeve III. During the fall 2024 semester, Saleh saw this as a crucial time to remind students of the voice their vote represents. To that end, she invited activist Carmen Brammer to unpack the history of the vote and data that illustrates its importance. Saleh curates these events, hoping to inspire a broad set of perspectives with which students can engage.

Saleh hopes her class can be a catalyst for students to create positive change. "We're using praxis I call micro-macro-make a difference," she says. "You look at yourself and then you look at the big picture, and now what? You know better, so now you can do better—not just for yourself, but for all of us as a society."

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