

RACIAL JUSTICE INITIATIVE

5 YEAR IMPACT REPORT

TRUTH, JUSTICE AND COMMUNITY



As we mark five years of the Racial Justice Initiative at the University of St. Thomas, we pause to reflect – not only on how far we’ve come, but on the deeper impact of this work.

What began as a bold vision has grown into a movement – **connecting classrooms and communities, stirring dialogue, and advancing justice across the Twin Cities and beyond.**

Rooted in the belief that **truth-telling is the first step toward justice**, RJI has illuminated histories too often buried, empowered voices too long ignored, and invited all people of conscience into the work of repair. In five years, we’ve:

- **Dialogue to action:** Built moderated forums and education that turns honest conversation about history and workplace culture into practical tools teams can use right away.
- **Community partnership engine:** Codesigned programs with schools, nonprofits and local organizations that strengthen community leadership and deliver clear improvements in team climate and outcomes.
- **Cross-sector solutions:** Brought together educators, business leaders, and public officials to translate historical insight into everyday practices that improve how people learn, work and serve.
- **National reach and influence:** Dr. Yohuru Williams and RJI have informed curricula, professional learning, and community initiatives across multiple states, with media, campus and civic partnerships extending their impact far beyond any single institution.

This report is a testament to what we’ve built together. It is also a call: **to stay in the work, deepen the commitment, and move forward – together.**

Thank you for walking this path with us,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Yohuru R. Williams". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name being the most prominent.

Dr. Yohuru Williams
Distinguished University Chair and Professor of History and
Founding Director of the Racial Justice Initiative

BY THE NUMBERS

IN FIVE YEARS, WE’VE SEEN OUR WORK EMBRACED IN MULTIPLE WAYS:

10

MasterClass sessions

8

AfterClass sessions

350

Average in-person and
on-demand MasterClass
attendees

3,000+

Total MasterClass
attendees over three years

ENGAGEMENTS WITH STUDENTS: **COUNTLESS**

GIFTS TO SUPPORT RJI: **\$3.2M**

STATES IN WHICH DR. WILLIAMS HAS PRESENTED: **20**

APPEARANCES ON PBS ALMANAC: **20+**

APPEARANCES ON HISTORY CHANNEL: **30+**

NUMBER OF WHEATIES BOXES ON WHICH DR. WILLIAMS APPEARS: **1**

IMPACT AND REACH: **IMMEASURABLE**

RACIAL JUSTICE INITIATIVE

AT ST. THOMAS

From the first days of fall to the last applause of October, the University of St. Thomas pulsed with the presence of the Racial Justice Initiative (RJI). At its core was Dr. Yohuru Williams – a voice that blends scholarship with storytelling, turning history into a living force on campus.

He opened the academic year with packed orientation halls, where first-year undergraduates and incoming law students felt their anticipation transform into purpose. His energy didn't stop there – it spilled into student events, mentoring circles, and a celebrated feature in Athletics' Black History Month program, where his message reverberated beyond the stands.

Spring brought a collaboration with the Department of Theology that reshaped the campus into a space of reflection and unity, as a weeklong tribute honored George Floyd's life and legacy. In the arts, partnerships with the Melrose Toro Center for Ethical and Principled Leadership invited audiences to witness the intersection of creativity and conscience, leaving hearts stirred and conversations ignited.

The year's crescendo came with Finding Forward in October. Rev. Tony Lowden – longtime pastor to former President Jimmy Carter – spoke with warmth, conviction and vision, painting a picture of peace and civility that lingered long after the final words. The standing ovation was more than applause; it was a recognition of a year in which RJI wove courage, creativity and community into the very fabric of university life.

WITH K-12 SCHOOLS

K-12 schools often turn to RJI and Dr. Williams for guidance with social studies curricula, navigating evolving academic standards, and inspiring educators.

We are proud to partner with various school districts and teaching organizations this year. Special thanks to the Osseo School District and Elk River Education Association for their leadership.

A highlight included Dr. Williams speaking at the Civics for All Comics Group and New York City Public Schools' Department of Social Studies and Civics, exploring how comics can be used to teach history and civic engagement.



THE POWER OF PARTNERSHIPS

WITH BUSINESS AND CORPORATIONS

In the months and years following the murder of George Floyd, local and national CEOs have turned to Dr. Williams for more than perspective – they’ve sought a guide who can connect the lessons of history to the urgency of the present. Around polished conference tables and in virtual boardrooms, he translates pivotal moments from our past into actionable insight for navigating today’s challenges and tomorrow’s opportunities. His counsel has become a compass for leaders who understand that informed decisions are grounded in both truth and vision.

WITH NONPROFIT COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

The Racial Justice Initiative (RJI) stands shoulder-to-shoulder with community leaders whose work drives justice and healing. Partnerships with the Minnesota Council of Churches, YWCA, Interfaith Action, the Minnesota Justice Resource Center, and others have built coalitions that last. These aren’t one-off collaborations – they’re enduring alliances where mission meets momentum. Together, we spark change that no single organization could ignite alone, reminding the

community that strength multiplies when we stand united.

WITH GOVERNMENT

From county chambers to state offices, RJI works alongside the public servants on the front lines of representing Minnesotans. Together, we’ve strengthened Hennepin County’s commitment to disparity education and partnered with the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development to deepen their diversity learning programs.



These relationships move beyond policy talk – they’re about equipping decision-makers with the historical context and practical tools to create systems that serve all Minnesotans more fairly.

THROUGH THE ARTS

Art can pierce where facts alone cannot, and RJI embraces its power to shift perspectives. Collaborating with groups both on and beyond the St. Thomas campus, we’ve brought audiences into stories that linger long after the curtain falls.

GUTHRIE THEATER

A Raisin in the Sun: Our debut partnership with the Guthrie filled the house for Lorraine Hansberry’s timeless work, followed by an on-stage conversation with Dr. Williams, director Austene Van, and Minnesota African American Heritage Museum and Gallery co-founder Tina Burnside. It was an evening where theater and dialogue merged into a shared call for reflection.

Blues for Alabama Sky: We returned to the Guthrie for Pearl Cleage’s moving portrayal of 1930s Harlem – a tapestry of economic hardship, reproductive rights, and resilient community. Directors Tina Price and Maija Garcia joined Dr. Williams before the performance to explore how the play’s themes speak with startling relevance today.

Skeleton Crew: In 2024, our programming focused on the intersection of work and racial justice, partnering with the Melrose Toro Center for Principled Leadership. Our summer AfterClass gathering featured Skeleton Crew, set in Detroit during the Great Recession, immersing audiences in the struggles, solidarity and dignity of auto workers on the brink.

CHANGEMAKERS IN ACTION

We are pleased to unite with many different groups on unique events and programming. This has encouraged attendees to live out the St. Thomas mission through the lens of racial justice – to think critically, act wisely, and advance the common good.

GENERAL MILLS MLK JR. DAY BREAKFAST - JANUARY 2024

Dr. Williams was recognized as a community changemaker by General Mills and the United Negro College Fund on MLK Day at the 34th Annual Martin Luther King Jr. Holiday Breakfast in Minneapolis.

Williams was the moderator of the conversation “Leading Onward: Elevating New Voices for Justice & Equality” with this year’s keynote speaker, activist Marley Dias, founder of the #1000BlackGirlBooks movement (shown at right).

VOTING RIGHTS SYMPOSIUM - FEBRUARY 2024

In the critical 2024 election year, the Racial Justice Initiative joined with FairVoteMN, local colleges and universities, and community partners to host the first



annual Voting Rights Symposium at the University of St. Thomas. Nearly 500 people attended in-person and virtually as

Governor Walz and other elected officials emphasized the need to uphold our democracy and find common ground with those surrounding us.

BOSTON COLLEGE - APRIL 2024

Dr. Williams joined a panel at Boston College’s Forum on Racial Justice in America to share “Distinctly Catholic Tools for Building Racial Justice.”

MLK JR. DAY STATE OF MINNESOTA PROGRAM - JANUARY 2025

Dr. Williams was proud to serve as the emcee of the Minnesota MLK Jr. Day program at the Ordway Theatre in January 2025. This public program, broadcast statewide, celebrates the legacy of Martin Luther King Jr. with the governor and recognizes outstanding leaders in our midst.



COMMUNITY SEEING CHANGES

IN MEDIA

Whether in front of the camera, behind a microphone, or in print, Dr. Williams brings history's long arc into sharp focus for today's audiences. As a regular voice on PBS *Almanac* and MPR *Morning Edition*, he has been sought out during pivotal moments – including the morning after the 2024 presidential election – to untangle the historical threads woven into our current political landscape.

In May 2025, his storytelling took center stage in the *Star Tribune's* **Ghost of a Chance** podcast and community event. Joining reporter Eric Roper's journey into the past of a 110-year-old Minneapolis home, Dr. Williams helped bring to life the extraordinary tale of the Robinson family, turning archival research into a deeply human narrative.

Audiences nationwide have also seen him on the History Channel, including a featured role in Kevin Costner and Doris Kearns Goodwin's acclaimed series *The West*, where his insights deepened the exploration of America's frontier story. His historical expertise reached global streaming audiences as well with an appearance in Netflix's documentary series on Wyatt Earp, adding sharp context to one of the Old West's most enduring figures. These high-profile projects showcase the University of St. Thomas on a national – and international – stage.

His influence reaches the literary world as well: *More Than a Dream: The Radical March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom*, co-authored with Michael G. Long, earned a place on the 2023 National Book Award Longlist in Young People's Literature – a testament to his ability to inspire and inform across generations.

WITH TWIN CITIES PUBLIC TELEVISION, PARADOX, A POLICING RESEARCH AND DOCUMENTARY PROJECT

In partnership with Professor Michael Lansing, Dr. Yohuru Williams set out to trace the long and complicated history of policing in the Twin Cities – not as a purely academic exercise, but as a catalyst for urgent community dialogue about the future of public safety. What began as a public history research initiative evolved into *Paradox*, a compelling documentary produced by Twin Cities Public Television. To be released this September, the film threads together archival discoveries, historical analysis, and lived experiences, inviting viewers to grapple with the tensions between past and present. It's a project designed to illuminate, to provoke thought, and ultimately, to open the kind of conversations that can reshape what safety means for everyone.

OUR VISION FORWARD

We envision a future where the University of St. Thomas serves as a **national model for community-engaged racial justice work** – a place where scholarship meets action, and where the stories and struggles of those from the past shape the path forward.

Our goals include:

- **Expanding community partnerships** to address racial disparities in education, housing, health and criminal justice.
- **Creating spaces for healing and dialogue**, where history is honored and futures are imagined together.
- **Investing in youth leadership**, equipping the next generation with the tools to lead with courage and compassion.
- **Sustaining impact through innovation**, research and long-term commitments to equity.

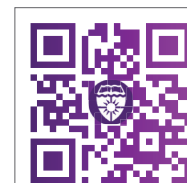
JOIN US IN THE WORK OF TRUTH, JUSTICE AND REPAIR

We invite you – our partners in purpose – to walk with us on this path toward racial justice. Whether you are an educator, advocate, student, executive, or community member, **your voice, your presence and your investment matter.**

Together, we can build a future shaped by historical truth and rooted in shared dignity.

Here's how you can be part of this transformative work:

- **Attend an upcoming MasterClass or AfterClass** to engage in critical conversations on history, equity and justice.
- **Bring the Racial Justice Initiative into your circles** – your classroom, congregation, boardroom or neighborhood. Let us co-create the journey toward understanding and action.
- **Invest in our mission** by making a financial gift: link.stthomas.edu/rji-give.



our work – and fuels a more just and hopeful future.

THANK YOU FOR BELIEVING IN THIS MISSION – AND FOR CONTINUING THE WORK ALONGSIDE US.

The Racial Justice Initiative is 100% funded through the generosity of donors like you. Every contribution sustains



WE ARE GRATEFUL!