To the Smith College School for Social Work Community:

Creating social change is at the heart of the social work profession and central to excellence in clinical social work practice. Several events this summer prompted us to reexamine what it means to hold an anti-racism commitment as a clinical social work school in the 21st century. Our commitment, first made over 20 years ago, is a pledge to interrupt the ways that structural inequities impact opportunities and well-being, affect organizational processes and to mitigate their impact on student success.

Like many institutions, organizations, and communities, we have recently been challenged to put our commitment into action. Many of our students have called for new structures of accountability and student support as well as effective response when inequity emerges in the classroom and/or in field internships. In 2015, a broad coalition of faculty and students began meeting to reinvigorate the ways we live our commitment to more fully recognize how race and gender are made visible and valued within our curriculum and procedures. This collaborative effort has been productive, yet much work remains.

With momentum brought through student activism and deep engagement from our School community, we will continue to strengthen our School by taking the following steps:

1) Launch a deliberative process among resident faculty to increase a shared understanding of the importance of the School’s commitment to move toward greater anti-racism and anti-oppression practices with regards to admissions, curriculum and school policies and procedures.

2) Expand the School’s Marta Sotomayor consultation program beyond the summer term to provide support to students, faculty and advisors when/if questions emerge related to power, privilege or oppression in field learning.

3) Fully re-examine policies and procedures of the academic consultation/review process to ensure we provide support to students in a substantive, equitable and timely way.

4) Redesign the School’s curriculum process as it pertains to adjunct faculty so that the voice of each of these valued instructors is ensured in ongoing deliberations.

5) Work with student leaders so that all student perspectives are encouraged and heard.

Beyond this fall, building on our previous work, we will work to achieve four specific goals:

1) Increase content representing diverse race and gender perspectives in our curriculum, recognizing that the ability to navigate divergent viewpoints effectively is an essential skill for a social work professional.
2) Move toward 100 percent faculty and advisor involvement in the Critical Conversations facilitation model. Our ability to manage discussions where issues of identity, power and privilege emerge is essential to excellence in education and clinical practice.

3) Redesign how student evaluation data are taken into account when evaluating instruction and curriculum.

4) Continue to ensure that our student body, staff and faculty reflect the communities that we serve.

There will always be different perspectives within our community on how to address issues of inequity. We encourage civil discourse, with the shared purpose of improving the School for Social Work. Each community member—faculty, student, staff and advisor—not only has the right to raise important questions but should also be empowered to raise concerns in order to achieve greater accountability from one another.

Although our community members may have differing thoughts on how to make those improvements, our commitment to anti-racism and anti-oppression remains constant. A diverse student body is essential to delivering a high quality education and to better serve the communities where our graduates provide clinical social work services.

When the Smith College School for Social Work made its anti-racism commitment 21 years ago, students of color constituted 5 percent of the student body. Currently, 27 percent of our students self-identify as students of color, and our student body reflects a richness of identities and experiences. We are proud of each of our exceptional students and their ability to successfully meet our rigorous academic demands. The faculty has created and oversees a competitive and selective admissions process that brings emerging professionals of great promise into our programs. The success is evident. Our 56 percent admittance rate this past year places SSW among the most selective social work graduate programs in the country. We are equally proud of our consistently high graduation rate, which was 85 percent for this year’s graduating class.

Rebuilding trust within our community is important work that lies ahead for all of us as we continue to build a campus dedicated to inclusion, diversity and equity. I encourage all members of our community to get involved in the process of change. Come to meetings, provide your comments on our Feedback Loop, voice your ideas and concerns and take part in the dialogue. I look forward to the challenges ahead and will update you regularly about our progress.

Sincerely,

Marianne Yoshioka
Dean and Elizabeth Marting Treuhaft Professor
Smith College School for Social Work