

BU Center for Antiracist Research lays off staff members

Move comes amid shift to “fellowship model,” university says

By [Nick Stoico](#) Globe Correspondent, Updated September 15, 2023, 11:09 p.m.



Ibram X. Kendi, center, moderated a discussion last Sept. 24 at the Somerville Theater with from left, Congresswomen Ayanna Pressley, Ilhan Omar, Cori Bush, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Rashida Tlaib. CARLIN STIEHL FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Boston University’s [Center for Antiracist Research](#) has laid off an undisclosed number of staff members, just over three years after its promising launch to reshape the national discourse on racial and ethnic disparities.

The layoffs come as the center, led by renowned author and antiracist scholar Ibram X. Kendi, shifts to a “fellowship model,” according to a university spokesman.

The center, which opened at BU in the summer of 2020 amid nationwide protests over the killing of George Floyd and other Black men and women by police, will continue to be led by Kendi, its founder and director, BU spokesman Colin Riley said in a brief statement.

Riley did not answer questions about how many people were losing their jobs, but current and former employees said the layoffs affected a majority of the staff. People familiar with the layoffs put the number between 20 and 30.

A page on the center’s website dedicated to listing “team” members appears to have been disabled, but an archived version of the page from July 31 shows a staff of about 45 people, including Kendi and other department leaders.

“We can confirm that there were layoffs,” Riley said in an email Thursday. “The University and Center is committed to working with and supporting affected employees as they look for their next opportunities.”

Attempts to reach Kendi for comment on the layoffs and the center's transition to a new operating model were unsuccessful. Multiple messages sent to Kendi's chief of staff were not answered, and an email sent to his BU address bounced back.

Current and former employees in the center who spoke with the Globe were critical of Kendi's management and questioned how a department that has received millions of dollars in donations and grants since its launch could now be in a position where it is cutting staff.

The center is split into four offices that focus on narrative, advocacy, research, and policy. Spencer Piston, faculty lead of the center's policy office and an associate professor in BU's political science department, said the layoffs have affected people in each office.

"There are a number of ways it got to this point, it started very early on when the university decided to create a center that rested in the hands of one human being, an individual given millions of dollars and so much authority," Piston said in an interview.

Saida Grundy, a BU associate professor of sociology and African American & Black Diaspora Studies, was named assistant director of narrative for the center in November 2020, but said she left less than a year later. She said the center lacked structure and she was forced to work hours beyond what was reasonable for the pay she received.

"It became very clear after I started that this was exploitative and other faculty experienced the same and worse," she said.

The center is also the home of The Emancipator, a racial justice media platform started in 2021 as a collaboration between the center and The Boston Globe's opinion staff inspired by the 201-year-old antislavery newspaper. Operations moved to BU in March.

Riley said The Emancipator will continue and was not affected by the layoffs.

The Center for Antiracist Research was [announced](#) in June 2020 after BU recruited Kendi from American University, where he founded the Antiracist Research and Policy Center three years earlier.

The hiring of Kendi and the opening of the center was a coup for the university, coming as his work, in particular his 2019 book “How To Be An Antiracist,” were receiving newfound attention amid a global reckoning on issues of racial inequity and police brutality following the murder of George Floyd.

University officials said at the time that they had been working to bring Kendi to Boston for more than a year.

At the time of the launch, then-president of BU Robert A. Brown told the university publication BU Today that Kendi’s leadership “would create a critical emphasis on research and policy to help eliminate racism in our country.”

The announcement was followed by a flood of donations to BU to support the center and Kendi’s work, including a \$1.5 million, three-year gift from the biotech company Vertex and a [\\$10 million donation](#) from Twitter founder Jack Dorsey later that summer. A few months later, The Rockefeller Foundation donated \$1.5 million over two years to help fund the center’s [COVID-19 Racial Data Tracker](#).

Grundy said the funds that flowed into the center could have been put toward academic scholarships.

“Those donations could have been going to benefit Black students,” she said.

Tonya Alanez of the Globe Staff contributed to this report.

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