

PAFA students, alumni call for dismissing CEO

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Body

More than 850 alumni and students of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, along with members of the greater arts community, have signed a petition calling for restructuring the leadership of the nation's oldest museum and school of fine arts, starting with "the immediate termination" of CEO and president David Brigham.

The petition went up Thursday on the website changeatpafa.com. It denounces a June 12 memo to faculty and staff from Lisa R. Biagas, vice president of human resources, "reminding" them not to state their PAFA affiliation in petitions and protests supporting Black Lives Matter, as first reported by Billy Penn on June 19.

"As we all continue to participate in our democracy," Biagas' memo read, "I want to remind you that we do so as private, individual citizens, and that we do not represent ourselves by our PAFA affiliation or titles in these forums."

The petition calling for Brigham's ouster also highlights "the stark contrast" between Biagas' memo and the lofty ideals expressed in a June 1 letter from PAFA's senior staff proclaiming the institution to be "united in our grief and outrage over the killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and countless other Black Americans whose lives continue to be cut short by brutal acts of racial violence."

Brigham said Friday that he stands by the June 1 letter. "PAFA declared itself in solidarity with Black Lives Matter ... and we've never really backed off from that," he said. The policy against associating staff and faculty members' activism with the institution "actually protects free speech. Because it says that you can sign any petition, you can be involved in any protest, you can be involved in any legitimate political movement. You can take any form of free speech, but you should do so in your own name as a citizen."

He said that includes support for both mainstream views - "And I would say that as of today, Black Lives Matter is a mainstream view" - as well as "very unpopular views" that most of the PAFA community might disagree with.

While the petition calls for Brigham's ouster, it also calls for review and possible termination of two deans, a complete overhaul of the board of trustees and the women's committee with additions of people of color, and reviews of public statements by board members on matters of racial justice and equity.

In addition, it calls for a revamped curriculum that reflects a more diverse and inclusive sense of art and its past. And it seeks a strong commitment to diversity in hiring at the school, in the administration, and at the museum.

The voices behind the petition

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The petition started coming together on the weekend after the Billy Penn story, said one organizer, Yikui (Coy) Gu, an artist and professor who received his M.F.A. from PAFA in 2008. "I was just really disgusted by just how incredibly tone-deaf PAFA's administration just continues to be," Gu said Friday, citing Inquirer stories about the school's handling of sexual assault allegations.

"The Billy Penn article came out Friday. By Sunday, we already had a Zoom meeting all organized and set up," he said. Nearly 50 people participated, including some members of PAFA's staff, alumni, and students from PAFA's various programs.

Gu, who lives in Philadelphia and teaches art at a college in Maryland, has resigned in protest as president of the Alumni Council, an unpaid position that included a nonvoting seat on the board of trustees. "I felt really conflicted because part of me feels I can effect change from the inside. However, that place is just such a dumpster fire that I just cannot have my name associated with them right now in a public way," he said.

"As one of the handful of people of color there that they love to trot out for like any kind of visibility when there's a marketing opportunity ... there's a degree of guilt if I kind of stay on and continue to be used as a tool for them," said Gu, who is Chinese American. "I'm not a Black man. I don't have the same fears, and I don't bear the same degree of racism that African Americans do, but I want to be a good ally."

Eustace Mamba, a Black recent graduate of PAFA who is entering its M.F.A. program, said in an email Friday what he sees as the disconnect between the institution's championing of the work of Black artists and his experience as a distinct minority at the school.

"The PAFA museum also has one of the most important collections of African American artwork in the world," Mamba wrote. "It makes me proud as a Black artist to walk through the same halls as Njideka Akunyili Crosby, Barkley Hendricks, Henry Ossawa Tanner, and many more. But I also often wonder if they experienced the same feelings of inequality and loneliness here at PAFA? I wonder if they were passed over for opportunities, simply because they looked different?"

For Mamba, who helped write an open letter from undergraduates that accompanies the petition on the changeatpafa.com website, the news of the Biagas memo was a "really big surprise" and a disappointment.

After being pleased by the school's "initial response to the Black Lives Matter protests," he said in an interview Friday, "I was really surprised that they were taking a stance almost ... devaluing our lives."

When people sign petitions that identify them with PAFA, "I think it really speaks to how proud people are of the school. They want to stick their PAFA affiliation on anything they do," Mamba said, adding that he's hopeful the protests within the PAFA community will result in a school he's even prouder to attend.

Brigham told The Inquirer on Friday that a demand to defund the police that some PAFA faculty had endorsed in a citywide petition called Philly Arts for Black Lives was a sticking point for him. That petition had called for, among other things, "the defunding and redistribution of police funding toward human services."

"It was the specific language around defunding the police that we felt was something we didn't want to take a position on," Brigham said. elgray@inquirer.com

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