



How We Can Make Black Lives at Penn State Matter, An Open Letter to President Eric J. Barron from the Department of African American Studies, University Park

Dear President Barron:

The Department of African American Studies at Penn State University joins those around the country and across the globe who are protesting anti-Black police violence, sparked by the police-murder of George Floyd. As we mourn the deaths of Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade and so many others at the hands of police, we remember that police right here in State College killed Osaze Osagie in March of 2019 (See here: <https://www.centredaily.com/news/local/community/state-college/article234892452.html>). As in most police-involved shootings, Mr. Osagie's homicide was ruled justifiable and no one was held accountable. However, such incidents and the graphic footage of police violence against unarmed protestors make very clear that policing in the US continues to serve the interests of the powerful by enforcing the racist, sexist, homophobic, transphobic and exploitative social and political order. We point to the case of Osaze Osagie to remind the University community that police violence and other racial harms are national AND local.

The continuing crisis of police violence against Black people is occurring precisely as Black and Brown people are being disproportionately impacted by the global health pandemic. The huge disparities between Black and White people in contracting and dying from Covid-19 in the U.S. reinforces the fact that systemic anti-Black racism and white supremacy are a national disease as old as African people's presence on these shores. Wherever one lives, whatever one's class, gender identification, ethnic identity or religion, white supremacy in all of its myriad forms contributes to health, wealth, educational, income and incarceration disparities between Black and White people, and these disparities are reinforced by pervasive and persistent anti-Black state and non-state violence.

As members of an academic community formed in the crucible of 1960s social movements, we know that this is a historic, but not unprecedented, time in our collective history. We remain committed to challenging systemic racial inequality and injustice, as well as anti-Black violence. And we support the right of all people to protest the conditions of theirs and others' oppression, particularly when such protests affirm the dignity and value of Black life. Here in State College, we teach in a majority-white university, our children attend predominantly white schools, we shop in majority-white stores, and we encounter an overwhelmingly white State College police force so we understand just how enmeshed are the conditions on campus and off. We recognize the traumas Black people in this community face as we navigate almost all white spaces daily. We are also painfully aware that faculty of color and particularly Black faculty are often tasked with addressing inequities and systemic racism around us, typically at the expense of our own teaching, scholarship, and career advancement.

Our university recently concluded a historic hire of 13 faculty at all ranks in African American Culture and Life. But, as of yet, the University has done little to support the retention of this major investment. We hope that the current crises make clear to administrators that now is the time to make the climate hospitable for them, their families, and the students who so need the teaching and research they bring to this institution. This recent cluster hire and the rapid response to Covid-19 prove that Penn State can act, and act swiftly, when it has the will to do so. Surely, if we can learn and work during the pandemic of the century, we can learn and work without racism. We, therefore, call on President Eric J. Barron to meet this moment with effective and decisive action rather than “plans”, “committees”, and other fact-finding bodies that effectively delay action. If national protests show anything, it is that people have had enough of moderate reforms and promises, and demand remedies such as those listed below that will lead to structural and lasting change.

To be clear, we appreciate that your June 10th letter acknowledges that Penn State has much urgent work to do “within” our own Penn State community. However, we do not accept the initiatives you listed as legitimate or sufficient responses to historical and contemporary inequities at Penn State and in State College. Like so many other universities, we have been here before. During moments of crisis, universities often turn to familiar administrative responses: task forces, high level committees, faculty senate deliberations that frequently produce important reports, but yield little, if any, structural change -- perhaps by design. Moreover, we note that your letter calls for collaboration with the Faculty Senate, a body with a majority white membership with very little scholarly, professional or experiential expertise analyzing and combating anti-Black racism. Certainly, with a few exceptions, this can be said for Penn State’s upper administration, as well. Therefore, we call on you, President Barron, to recognize the expertise of the African American Studies department where we teach courses and produce research that analyzes the historical, structural, and pervasive inequities against which Black people struggle here and around the globe. As a community of scholars who have been teaching the history of race and racism in the United States since the discipline’s founding, we call on you to center our department and our disciplines’ collective expertise and knowledge in ongoing discussions about how to deal with the national and campus crisis of systemic racism.

We therefore call on you, President Barron, to do the following:

1) Sever Ties with Local Police Forces and Disarm Campus Police: We request that Penn State, as have other universities, dissolve contracts with outside police forces whose policies and practices reflect the pervasive anti-black bias evident in policing around the country. We support the demilitarization of all police including on-campus police by asking that they be disarmed on campus. This will ensure that all members of our community can work and learn in an environment where we do not fear for our lives;

2) Establish a New Task Force on Policing and Communities of Color: We ask you to form a new commission to address local policing that includes local faculty experts on race and policing, community members most impacted by biased policing practices, and nationally recognized experts who are proposing ways to reduce public harm, increase transparency, institute community review, and strengthen criminal and civil accountability for police brutality. We adamantly oppose the revival of the 2016 Task Force on Policing and Communities of Color given its composition and its recommendations, which would not substantially change the structural relationship of police to Black and other marginalized communities. For decades, numerous studies have shown that the 2016 report's proposed recommendations, even if implemented, would not work. Instead, changes to current policing practices should be formulated and **implemented** using evidence-based solutions from groups like the Center for Policing Equity and Yale Law School's Justice Collaboratory, among others. In addition, increased funding is needed for public services that address the root causes of domestic violence, substance abuse, houselessness, and mental health crises;

3) Center Courses in African American Studies and Other Appropriate Units for a New GE Requirement on Anti-Black Racism and Challenges To It: Penn State is not unique in being a place where structural racism operates, but it does have a unique opportunity to make meaningful change. We represent an academic field that is well-positioned to educate our students and community about the history of structural racism, racial violence, and the meaning of transformative justice. We call on the university to center our course offerings including Black Freedom Struggles (AFAM 100), Racism and Sexism (AFAM 103), Afro-Latin America (AFAM 105), and African American History (AFAM 152), as well as the course offerings of other units including African Studies, Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, Latino/a Studies, and Asian American Studies that address these issues. Courses that focus on structural racism and challenges to it should be required of all students as part of our General Education requirements;

4) Establish a Well-Funded Resource Center for Underrepresented Faculty: Underrepresented racial and ethnic minority faculty members are difficult to recruit and retain at Penn State. In other words, Penn State and State College are not welcoming environments for nonwhite, historically marginalized faculty. This is unfair and inequitable. We call on you to establish a well-funded resource center for underrepresented faculty and other marginalized populations that facilitates equitable access to opportunities, leadership and advancement at each career-stage. We also call on you to institute stronger policies that better protect faculty from the racial and ethnic microaggressions and behaviors from colleagues and administrators that inhibit their success at Penn State;

5) Increase Student Aid for Black Students: Black students are more likely than any other demographic group to graduate in debt and among all students who graduate in debt, theirs is the highest. Penn State, thus, participates in aggravating the existing (and

growing) Black-white wealth disparity. We ask that Penn State increase the resources it devotes to recruiting Black and underrepresented students including allocating scholarships for Black undergraduates and predoctoral, doctoral and postdoctoral fellowships for Black graduate students so that we can successfully recruit them and they can graduate debt-free;

6) Increase Mental Health Resources for Black Students: Racial and ethnic minorities are harmed by racial and ethnic microaggressions and other activities that define their Penn State experience. As a result, they are disproportionately represented among those seeking increased mental health resources. Yet, their academic success depends on their ability to maintain emotional and psychological health. The creation of equity and greater diversity means that we must develop resources that support their success, despite these unfair conditions. We call for a renewed focus on the recruitment and retention of mental health professionals who better represent the diversity of our student body and can better serve their needs.

The time for change is long overdue, as global *and* local protests over the last 3 weeks have demonstrated. We stand with our students in demanding that this university do better. We call on Penn State to become a local and national leader in combating systemic anti-Black racism on its campuses and eradicating police violence and all forms of state and nonstate violence wherever it is found. We look forward to your response.

Respectfully,
The African American Studies Department, afam@psu.edu
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