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University has let down Pitt's black community, chancellor says

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By **DONOVAN HARRELL**

Chancellor Patrick Gallagher and Provost Ann Cudd are doing some soul-searching as recent protests throughout the country have forced institutions to evaluate the extent of systemic oppression against African-Americans.

"Like many of you, this is possibly one of the biggest moments that I've lived through in the sense that such a fundamental injustice, something that's touching people so dramatically and that's sort of permeated our society — at least our country — from its very founding is coming up in this powerful way, catalyzing not just national outrage and protest and demand for change but now globally," Gallagher said of the various Black Lives Matter and social justice protests underway.

The death of George Floyd, who died last month after a Minneapolis police officer knelt on his neck for nearly nine minutes, was the spark for a new wave of protests against police brutality and systemic injustices against African-Americans.

Gallagher said at the June 11 Senate Council meeting that this recent wave of protests is shining a light on injustice and is changing the way institutions address systemic oppression. Cudd also said these protests are very well-merited and highly effective.

"And I'll be candid, I don't know if I fully appreciated the enormity of it when we were watching another case of unbelievable police brutality, but I think it's clear to all of us now that this is big," Gallagher said.

Gallagher added that after several meetings with various members of Pitt's black community, it's clear that Pitt has to improve its culture dramatically.

"One of the most painful things is the degree to which we let them down as well that their experience didn't live up to the ideals that we uphold as a University," Gallagher said. "And whether it was in explicit ways or implicit ways, it simply wasn't acceptable. And I think

that's something that while it was painful, it was also brutally honest."

He and Cudd said the protests and these conversations have reaffirmed their resolve for making Pitt a more inclusive place for black faculty, staff and students.

"You don't make change by only focusing on the parts of the story you already know or that you want to believe in," Gallagher said. "You do it by putting up a mirror in front of yourself and, in our case, our own organization to see how we can do better."

Cudd said that she would "double down" on her commitment to diversity, inclusion, equity and justice, particularly around African-American communities. Some of her priorities are to hire and promote more black faculty and increase financial aid for black students.

Further, Gallagher said that additional plans are underway to try and improve institutional accountability for making these changes. He said it was crucial to pause Pitt's five-year strategic planning process to re-evaluate how the University can better support equity and justice.

"In some schools, staff are being added to support black student organizations that we have neglected to provide them appropriate staffing, and that includes the Excel program in engineering," Gallagher said.

Additionally, Gallagher said he's adding more black students to the Public Safety Advisory Committee, chaired by Pitt Law Professor David Harris.

They will work with the Pitt Police department to re-examine how the department works and interacts with members of Pitt's black community. Pitt Police officers also will receive additional diversity training that focuses on the needs of the community, Gallagher said.

He said that there aren't any plans to adjust the funding for the department amid nationwide movements to "defund" police departments.

Another change Pitt is considering is renaming Scaife Hall. Recently black students in the School of Medicine have expressed concerns that the name is tied to the eugenics movement. The building is named for Alan Scaife, whose daughter Cordelia Scaife May has been linked to anti-immigration policies.

"Our starting point, interestingly enough, is going to be to learn more about this ourselves and to take a retreat and to look specifically at the issues of systemic racism, and then turn to what we as an institution have to do to dismantle those systems, to essentially demolish a system of systemic racism that we might have here at the University," Gallagher said.

He said he has also approached United Way to see if they'd work with Pitt's student organizations to create an impact fund to address systemic issues.

Cudd and Gallagher have said they will be looking for ways to make sure Pitt is using more of its resources to help Pittsburgh's black communities, including the Hill District and Homewood, where Pitt has opened Community Engagement Centers.

"The Hill District is just a few miles from the Cathedral of Learning," Gallagher said. "We have not shared the wealth of education and opportunity that we can provide. We haven't been that beacon of inquiry and learning and education for our nearest neighbors that we should be."

Gallagher said it's especially painful that these difficult conversations are happening during a time of social distancing because of the COVID-19 pandemic. This makes it difficult to emotionally support black faculty, staff and students who may be retraumatized by George Floyd's death, he said.

Some black students told Gallagher Pitt's response to this situation feels different when compared to the response to the Tree of Life Synagogue shooting.

"There was kind of this palpable coming together," Gallagher said. "We were standing in the Cathedral lawn. We were wearing 'Pitt is Stronger Than Hate' t-shirts — that solidarity, it just felt supported."

But one way Pitt is helping support its black community is by "making spaces" for their voices to be heard, Cudd said. And she and Gallagher said they would make sure that they spend plenty of time listening to their concerns.

Gallagher said authenticity is also key to making lasting changes to the University

"We're not looking for performative empathy here, performative solidarity," Gallagher said. "These are colleagues, these are friends, these are people we work with. And one of the failings, and I think in some cases, is white discomfort with talking about race. In the middle of the trauma, we either failed to recognize it or we just didn't reach out."

Gallagher vowed that Pitt can and will take concrete action on equity, justice, diversity and inclusion.

"We're moving past the time of statements and words," Gallagher said. "This is really a time of what are we going to do about it?"

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