

## RE: Call to Action Addressing Systemic Racism in the FIU Psychology Department

July 15, 2020

Dear Dr. Pettit,

In the wake of the most recent murders of Black Americans and while balancing our own personal experiences combating racism, we, the Black psychology doctoral students, are calling for enhanced support from the Department of Psychology. With this Call to Action, we hope to provide deeper insight into how systemic racism affects daily routines and learning experiences for Black students within our Department. Black students are both invisible – unheard and under-supported – and hypervisible – used for diversity optics and as representatives for our race – and both of these interfere with our education and wellness. Black students often receive messages to just power through, but the national landscape is inspiring us to share more transparently now how this feels and what it looks like, with hopes of elevating attention and inspiring change.

- FIU is one of the nation's largest Hispanic-Serving Institutions, and 70% of students identify as non-Black Hispanic/Latinx. Frequently, conversations regarding individuals from minoritized ethnic-racial groups are addressed to "People of Color". However, this group label perpetuates the marginalization of Black students and fails to identify us as a group of individuals with separate, unique experiences and concerns at a time when our distinct voices need to be heard.
- The racial climate of classes can range from subtly uncomfortable to overtly hostile:
  - Professors often seem uneasy and uninformed teaching about race and inequality, and few Black scholars are represented in course material.
  - Some faculty or students explicitly reify stereotypes; others encourage "colorblind" approaches that minimize or ignore the unique challenges, triumphs, and disparities among Black populations in science.
  - Most courses assign a grade for class participation, assuming everyone has an equal voice on topics inherently rooted in our intersectional identities (e.g. race, gender, socio-political status, SES). Stigma, stereotypes (e.g., angry Black person), and power dynamics (e.g., fear of retribution in grading), result in Black students regularly feeling powerless, exhausted, or marginalized in these conversations in which we are unable to freely express our opinions.
- Black students often feel "tokenized" in various settings and situations (e.g., class, professional development events, service) when non-Black faculty and students ask us to represent, speak on behalf of, or serve as experts for our race.

- Microaggressions (and sometimes overt racism) are common by both faculty and students, but often evident only to us (or otherwise publicly ignored), and we face the difficult decision to speak up and risk being labeled “defensive” or “aggressive” or suffer in silence.
- Black students are asked to invest significant time and energy toward recruiting more Black students, but the absence of the Department’s prioritization of retaining its existing Black students leads us to conclude that these efforts are intended to enhance the Department’s optics of diversity rather than a genuine commitment to inclusivity.
- Invisibility was especially illustrated recently, in the wake of Black racial injustice, when emails, resources, and a colorblind processing space prioritized a White, antiracist focus – resulting in the exclusion of Black students and faculty and neglect for their unique challenges and elevated stress and trauma.
- These common experiences of marginalization lead Black students to seek and create spaces to support each other and counter experienced racism (e.g., Black Graduate Women’s Association) and to organize and lead diversity initiatives (e.g., Diversity Committee). Altogether, though vital to our survival in academia and wellness at FIU, these support and service activities divert time away from our program milestones, research, and scholarship, and risk and/or result in conflict with some mentors who perceive such activities as either peripheral or insignificant.

We hope these examples help to illustrate the daily experiences and impact – on both productivity and wellness – of invisibility and hypervisibility for Black psychology doctoral students at FIU. We recognize they may represent Black student experiences across other departments and beyond FIU; and reflect the larger systemic racism embedded in academia (e.g., DiAngelo, 2012; DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2018; Barker, 2016). We appreciate support for diversity initiatives during the last couple of years that represent steps towards a more equitable environment for all faculty and students. In that spirit, we’d like to outline additional, actionable recommendations that would provide further support for Black inclusivity at FIU:

1. *Racial bias and allyship training* expected for all faculty and staff to address overt and covert racism in the department (integrated and ongoing). We suggest topics including anti-Blackness, White fragility and saviorism, cultural humility, history of racism in psychology, systemic racism, racial trauma, microaggressions, inequities in research practices and funding, intersectionality in racial identity, mentoring racial-ethnic minority students, race as a sociopolitical construct, and racial justice.
2. *A recurring student survey* distributed each semester on observed or experienced racism or racial microaggressions to measure perceptions and identify changes in racial climate. We suggest the survey be absent of any identifying information and used systematically to inform actionable steps to address racism and be public to all students.

The Rady Faculty of Health Sciences Racial Climate Survey 2020 [here](#) is a good example.

3. *When a highly publicized and traumatic racial injustice event occurs*, we recommend faculty have a system in place such that they know what steps are expected towards understanding the impact of and providing support for Black students and students of color in the department.
4. *Public statement of commitment and action* toward a department climate that values Black inclusivity and anti-racism. The Clinical Science Diversity Committee developed resources for the program and department website; however, this content was buried during site redesign. Posting an action plan on the psychology website and disseminating by e-mail to faculty and students will promote transparency and demonstrate commitment. There are some very nice examples of this, including the University of Virginia's website [here](#) and University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign's website [here](#).
5. *Increased accountability* by assessing diversity, equity, and inclusion contributions from faculty. We recommend the department communicate an expectation that all faculty, staff, and students are responsible for cultivating an anti-racist and inclusive environment. Inspired by UVA's statement above, we suggest faculty annual self-evaluations include a question about their contributions to diversity, equity, and inclusion. We suggest student course evaluations include a question rating the degree to which their instructors created an inclusive classroom environment.

While not an exhaustive list, these suggestions represent actionable steps we believe would go a long way toward initiating lasting change. We hope to spark conversation, collaboration, and **a mechanism to safely and ongoingly communicate ideas** that empower Black students. With that in mind, we welcome you to share this Call to Action with department leadership, faculty, and staff. We recognize the Psychology Department's increasing awareness, willingness, and wanting to support Black students. We, the signatories of this letter, are calling for actionable steps, accountability, and allyship for the education and wellbeing of **current and future Black students**.

Respectfully,

The Black Psychology Doctoral Students