Resolution # 70-12

The Graduate and Professional Student Association (GPSA)
The Pennsylvania State University

of the 70th Assembly
October 14th, 2020

Be it decided by the Assembly of Elected Delegates,

Racial Justice: Black Lives Matter
(Decided: [ Y / N / A ])

Nature of the Situation

Members of the Black community have continuously had their lives put at risk because of deep-rooted racism in the United States. This past year has been particularly brutal. On March 13th, 2020, Breonna Taylor was murdered in her bedroom as police officers broke into her apartment and fired dozens of rounds. On May 25th, 2020 George Floyd was murdered by asphyxiation by the Minneapolis Police Department for allegedly passing a counterfeit $20 bill. Several months later in Kenosha, Wisconsin, Jacob Blake was grabbed by a police officer from behind and shot seven times in the back, leaving him with internal injuries and paralyzed from the waist down. After a night of unrest and protest, the Wisconsin National Guard was called in. Rather than hold the police accountable for their actions, Wisconsin opted to weaponize a domestic military force against its own people. All too often, officers related to murders and attempted murders like these have not been held accountable, thus skirting the consequences of their actions. The Black Lives Matter movement was started in 2013, but support for the movement has grown exponentially in 2020, in part due to the above events. The Penn State GPSA has previously condemned the discrimination and harassment faced by the Black community due to COVID-19 (Resolution #70-01). We now must act swiftly and decisively to condemn these injustices and support the community and the Black Lives Matter racial justice movement.

On March 20, 2019, the State College police responded to a mental health visit call. Moments later, Osaze Osagie was shot and killed by the State College police. Osaze, who was Black, and a person with autism and schizophrenia, was betrayed by the police and his community. Penn State
and the greater State College community came together to create an endowed scholarship that
honors Osaze - the Osaze Olufemi Osagie Memorial Scholarship for Educational Equity. Though
this endeavor is laudable, the response from Penn State fails to protect black students and
community members from the systemic breakdowns that led to Osaze’s death.

The 3/20 Coalition, named after the date of the shooting Osaze Osagie, is a local community
organization which has organized a number of protests and teach-ins to put pressure on local
officials to reopen the case and to release the identity of the officers involved in the case. The
organization has ten demands which they read at the protests they organize. These demands include
the implementation of a community advisory board to address instances of discrimination, bias
and racism in State College government and police, the release of the names of all officers involved
in all shootings and the firing of the officer who killed Osagie, and transparency and the release of
policing data regarding policing with special attention to race and ethnicity. Many Penn State
students and faculty have attended these protests in support of the organizations’ local and national
aims for racial justice.

We recognize that there have been instances of racial injustice on campus at the hands of people
in power, especially against Black graduate and professional students. Some of these grievances
include but are not limited to racial remarks made by Penn State faculty, a current culture of racial
bias at the university, lack of representation of people of color, and the feeling that the Penn State
administration is not listening to impacted communities.

We acknowledge that the university has taken steps towards racial reconciliation, such as the
creation of a task force to protect its marginalized students, but there is still work to do. The
recruitment and retention of graduate students of color and the retention and promotion of faculty
of color to better reflect our student body's diversity is a necessity. The Penn State community will
need better funding for quality inclusion training for students, faculty, staff, administrators, and
Board of Trustee members to do this feasibly. In addition to the faculty, the university should
ensure that the Board of Trustees and members of the various task forces reflect the diversity of
our campus community.

The relationship between law enforcement officials and community members lies at the heart of
the issue of systemic racism. Penn State University spends large amounts of money to support the
University Park police force. According to the University Police & Public Safety report on
revenues and expenditures, in Fall 2020, the total expenses for University Park Police Operations
amounted to $7,495,355, with $5,596,591 covering personnel expenses and $1,898,764 covering
operating expenses. Operating expenses cover daily costs such as patrol vehicles, safety
equipment, uniforms, travel, professional development, and police specific technology and
software. Further budget breakdown is available in the State College Borough 2020 Annual
Report.

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1 https://news.psu.edu/story/592351/2019/10/09/administration/community-penn-state-help-raise-50000-osaze-
osagie-memorial
2 https://www.facebook.com/320-Coalition-2244750575843126
demands_1483433/?fbclid=IwAR0ZOX185_R878QtimYnEE7ElZBy3Jb53_P-gZSp-KGao7astLIXIA5SU
5 http://www.statecollegepa.us/DocumentCenter/View/22221/2020-Adopted-Budget-no-appendices
While it is important that these public services are funded, it is imperative that these funds are contributing to a police department that is accessible and available to help all students. Reviewing the results of the 2019 University Police and Public Safety Survey reveals the tension that exists between our minority community members and the University Police. In this survey, 80% non-minority respondents agreed with the statement “University Police officers are respectful to people like me,” whereas only 65% respondents belonging to minority communities agreed. Similarly, 8% of respondents belonging to minority communities reported feeling targeted by University Police due to their racial or ethnic identity, compared to 0% of non-minority respondents. In addition, 26% of minority students reported that they would not feel comfortable contacting the University Police if they were in need of assistance. Similar issues in the relationship between community members and the State College Police Department (SCPD) were revealed in the 2020 International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) assessment of the SCPD. When community members were asked about their perceptions of the procedural justice carried out by the SCPD, approximately 25% of the respondents stated that they had experienced some level of discrimination by the SCPD.

We acknowledge that both the University Police and SCPD have taken steps in addressing these critical issues that lie in law enforcement in University Park and State College. However, much remains to be done in terms of transparency and action. The State College Borough 2020 Annual Report lists several continuing education programs for police officers. This mandatory training includes instruction on the use of force and firearms, crisis intervention, and cultural awareness and sensitivity training, among others. It is not clear what the cultural awareness and sensitivity training consists of or what material is covered in this training. Greater transparency is needed in order to ensure that officers are receiving comprehensive instruction in order to address potential implicit bias and discriminatory attitudes towards minority groups. President Eric Barron also recently announced the reconvening of a task force to improve the relationship between law enforcement officials and members of minority communities, with the task force comprising of university and local community leaders. While we acknowledge that the reconvened task force is still in its infancy, it is crucial that those involved in law enforcement reform constantly update the community on the progress that is being made with regards to these changes, so as to provide assurance to the community that these initiatives will translate into concrete changes within the police force. This transparency and accountability is critical to all members of the student body and State College community feeling safe and secure.

This transparency is also required in the several other initiatives announced by President Eric Barron in June 2020 to address racism, bias, and community safety. While information regarding the goals and people involved in these initiatives can be found on the Action Together website, updates on the progress of these initiatives have not been posted on the website, making it challenging to find information on what, if any, progress is being made. One such initiative was

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6 https://www.police.psu.edu/university-police-community-survey-reports
7 https://news.psu.edu/story/633870/2020/09/30/administration/task-force-policing-and-communities-color-reconvened-more
9 http://www.statecollegepa.us/DocumentCenter/View/22221/2020-Adopted-Budget-no-appendices
10 https://news.psu.edu/story/633870/2020/09/30/administration/task-force-policing-and-communities-color-reconvened-more
11 https://actiontogether.psu.edu/ongoing-initiatives
the assembly of a diversity task force to review and revise the Student Code of Conduct relating to racism, bias, and community safety across campus. A progress report was provided by the task force during the Penn State Board of Trustees meeting on September 18th, 2020, and provided the following recommendations:\(^{12}\):

- modify the purpose and introduction of the code so there would be more optimistic and inclusive language;
- introduce a mandatory module regarding racism and bias for students to complete before registering for classes;
- modify the language under a substantial university interest in the area of jurisdiction;
- take legal action when an incident occurs; recommend changes but still incorporate existing principle of the university;
- and add two new sections to the Code of Conduct, the first being commitment to diversity and inclusion, and the second being education on the student conduct. The progress report provided to the Board of Trustees has not been well communicated to the student body\(^ {13}\). No other updates have been shared publicly.

Adding to the lack of transparency in terms of the progress being made on the Action Together initiatives, is the unclear structure of how the multiple commissions, task forces, and committees involved will collaborate and be overseen. In addition to the diversity task force conducting the full review of the Student Code of Conduct, President Barron announced seven other initiatives, including: a Presidential Commission on Racism, Bias and Community Safety to examine the deployment of university resources to address social issues related to racism and bias; a task force on Policing and Communities of Color to examine where progress has, or has not been made since this task force completed its work in 2017; an initiative to ensure that education and employment equality has the attention of the Board of Trustees; working to initiate mandatory bias training for all employees; working to require racism and bias course work; improving policies that will increase the hiring and retention of faculty who are members of underrepresented groups; and prioritizing the well-being of all students and employees\(^ {14}\). It is unclear if independent groups working on these initiatives with overlapping goals have any formal oversight to facilitate collaboration and ensure that accountability and responsibility are not lost in the multitude of commissions, task forces, and committees.

Transparency is also needed to ensure appropriate representation of graduate students and minorities in all of the commissions, task forces, committees, and groups involved in the Action Together initiatives. Members lists are available for the diversity task force reviewing the Student Code of Conduct and the Presidential Commission on Racism, Bias and Community Safety. However, it is unclear who is involved in carrying out the other initiatives announced by President Barron. The diversity task force consists of 26 members with student, faculty, and staff representation, including three graduate and professional students (two of whom are people of color). The Presidential Commission consists of 19 members with undergraduate student, faculty, staff, and alumni representation; however, no graduate or professional students are included as members. For efforts to address racism, bias and community safety to be successful in advancing meaningful change, it is essential to have representation from all levels in the University, and particularly representation from people of color.

GPSA’s call for Penn State to explicitly address issues of racial justice, police violence, and the need for explicit anti-racist instruction in educational settings aligns with broader student activist

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\(^{12}\) [https://www.collegian.psu.edu/news/campus/article_8877f270-fa15-11ea-afee-d31328f59a9c.html](https://www.collegian.psu.edu/news/campus/article_8877f270-fa15-11ea-afee-d31328f59a9c.html)

\(^{13}\) [https://news.psu.edu/story/632279/2020/09/17/administration/task-force-shares-progress-recommendations-following-review](https://news.psu.edu/story/632279/2020/09/17/administration/task-force-shares-progress-recommendations-following-review)

\(^{14}\) [https://actiontogether.psu.edu/ongoing-initiatives](https://actiontogether.psu.edu/ongoing-initiatives)
movements across the country. Students at the University of Southern California, for example, have called upon their administration to divest from the Department of Public Safety and sever relationships with the Los Angeles Police Department; increase focus on hiring Black, Indigenous, and other faculty/staff of color; increase the Black student population and student representation on the Board of Trustees (with a focus on introducing diverse perspectives); develop mandatory diversity, equity, inclusion, and racial justice trainings for staff, faculty, and students; and make explicit commitments as to how the university will respond to future incidents of anti-Black racism on- and off-campus. Similarly, graduate students who went on strike at the University of Michigan included within their list of demands a call for the university to defund the university police by 50% and to cut all ties with the Ann Arbor Police Department and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). Earlier this month, multiple student government organizations at Ohio State made similar calls for the university to cease on-campus police operations and to review off-campus contracts with local police.

Additionally, student organizations at all three of the campuses listed above have also called for higher education leaders to consider the role of education itself in the perpetuation of anti-Black violence and the maintenance of white supremacist structures. These student activists have called for upper administration and faculty alike to interrogate the centering of whiteness in curricula and pedagogy, and to make a commitment to integrating culturally reflective and sustaining modes of instruction across the curriculum. This call is particularly urgent given President Trump’s recent Executive Order on Combating Race and Sex Stereotyping, which, among other things, seeks to prohibit power-conscious diversity, equity, inclusion, and racial justice initiatives by federal offices, government contractors, and recipients of federal grants. The order also calls on educational institutions to exclusively promote a “pro-American” curriculum that excludes scholarship by faculty using Critical Race Theory and other explicitly anti-racist frameworks. The federal administration has threatened to defund educational systems that develop curricula based on this scholarship (and is already in the process of investigating the California Public School System), which will have a disparate impact on Black, Indigenous, and other scholars of color who are the primary authors of such work. We are already seeing the harm of this policy - the University of Iowa decided in early October to temporarily halt all diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives on their campus and to ‘reassess’ graduate student and faculty research projects focused on topics of race, gender, sexuality, and class over fears that the federal administration will revoke federal funding and grant opportunities. Other institutions have taken a different approach. Responding to graduate student calls for action, leadership at the University of Michigan published a “Statement on Executive Order on Combating Race and Sex Stereotyping” that, in part, expressed a commitment to academic freedom and the importance of supporting graduate student and faculty research, teaching, and service toward racial equity and justice.

15 https://dailytrojan.com/2020/08/12/call-to-action-confronting-racial-injustice-on-campus/
Recommended Course of Action:
The Penn State GPSA formally recommends the university take the following actions. These recommended actions will be communicated to the Vice President for Student Affairs, the Provost, and the President of Penn State by the Executive Board either in meetings or in a formal email.

1. Through collaboration with the Student Restorative Justice Initiative, we recommend that the police budget, that was recently released on September 2, 2020\(^{23}\), be updated to include more details about operating expenses. The current document has a footnote stating that “Operating Cost are the daily cost that are necessary to conduct policing such as patrol vehicles, safety equipment, uniforms, travel, professional development, and police specific technology and software.” We would like to see a breakdown of how the money is distributed among these categories, with specific identification of the amount of money spent on weapons/arms, as operating costs saw a major increase between 2018-2019 and have remained high. We also would like to see a declaration of the amount and nature of funds/resources used for COVID regulation enforcement.

2. We recommend that the commissions and task forces that were recently developed\(^{24}\), including the Presidential Commission on Racism, Bias and Community Safety, the Task force on Policing and Communities of Color, and the task force charged with the review of the Student Code of Conduct, post regular updates on a combined website. Although the Action Together website provides information on the formation of the initiatives, updates on the initiatives are not posted to this website. We recommend that each group post a status update minimally bi-weekly, where members of the Penn State community can see the status of these initiatives. The Code of Conduct review task force has provided an update to the Board of Trustees, but this update could be more accessible if it is on this combined website, rather than in Penn State News\(^{25}\).

3. We further recommend that the task force and committee chairs be compensated, either in perhaps teaching release or release of service responsibilities by department administration for faculty. For staff and students, we recommend that the administration find additional creative ways to compensate these students for their time.

4. We recommend that each task force and commission include graduate and professional student representation with at least one graduate student with a diverse background. For example, the Black Graduate Student Association (BGSA) serves as a representative body for Black graduate students at Penn State and would be an excellent starting point for representatives for the task forces.

5. We recommend that the Board of Trustees rethink their recently released “goal of at least 50% underrepresented groups on the board by 2025.”\(^{26}\) Accomplishing this goal could be achieved without meaningful change not only in the membership of the Board of Trustees but also in the culture. We recommend that the Board of Trustees pursue more meaningful strategies to not only diversify the Board, but to also improve the culture that the Board promotes as the senior leaders at Penn State.

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\(^{24}\) [https://actiontogether.psu.edu/ongoing-initiatives](https://actiontogether.psu.edu/ongoing-initiatives)  
6. We recommend that Penn State pursue advocacy efforts to counter the recent Executive Order on Combating Race and Sex Stereotyping. This Executive Order will actively detract from the efforts of Penn State, with federally funded initiatives, to pursue anti-racist initiatives. We stand with scholars working in these areas and call on the administration to take an explicit stance in support and solidarity with faculty, students, and staff whose work may run afoul of the “pro-American curriculum” movement.

7. We recommend that Penn State provides funding for quality inclusion training for students, faculty, staff, administrators, and Board of Trustee members.

8. We recommend ensuring that faculty, Board of Trustees members and task forces reflect the diversity of our society and increase efforts to recruit and retain a diverse campus community.

Respectfully submitted,

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President ___________________________________________________ Affirm Veto

The Graduate and Professional Student Association