

Resolution # 70-24

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



of the 70th Assembly
March 3rd, 2021

Be it decided by the Assembly of Elected Delegates,

Racist Attacks Towards the Black Community at Penn State
(Decided: [Y / N / A])

Nature of the Situation:

1
2 On Wednesday, January 27th, 2021, the Penn State Black Caucus held a virtual Spring
3 Involvement Fair. This Zoom event was attacked by 51 individuals who “directed
4 numerous racist and homophobic slurs at three Black Caucus Executive board members”,
5 filled the chat with “anti-Semitic and white supremacist language and symbols”, and also
6 “screamed into their microphones, played loud music, or exposed themselves in a sexual
7 manner”¹. Black Caucus members removed the intruders from the Zoom room and
8 reported the attack to Penn State Administration. On Friday, January 29th, The Black
9 Caucus posted an open letter to the Penn State community on their social media pages
10 detailing the incident, calling on the university to take action, and raising the question “[I]f
11 we are not safe in our classrooms, on our campus, in our homes, in an online meeting,
12 then where are we supposed to go?”²
13
14 Unfortunately, the attack on the Black Caucus event was not the only racially motivated
15 attack on Zoom witnessed this semester. In February, there were reports of three other

¹ <https://twitter.com/PSUblackcaucus/status/1355207050612109318/photo/1>

² <https://twitter.com/PSUblackcaucus/status/1355207050612109318/photo/1>

1 events being 'Zoom-bombed', where individuals hijacked Zoom meetings and used racist
2 language towards attendees, with some of these events being organized by or for
3 members of the Black community at Penn State. On February 15th, a Black History Month
4 event organized by the Gender and Equity Center was 'Zoom-bombed' by an individual
5 minutes after the event started. The attacker re-enacted the murder of George Floyd and
6 yelled racial expletives and hate speech towards the attendees³. The same day, another
7 racially motivated attack took place in a Zoom event organized by the Penn State
8 Brandywine campus⁴. Just a day later, individuals hijacked a panel discussion organized
9 by the Bellisario College of Communications over Zoom and began shouting racist attacks
10 at the attendees of the event⁵.

11
12 These recent string of attacks against members of the Black community show that they
13 are not random acts and are part of a much larger problematic issue at Penn State. Time
14 and again there have been reports of Penn State students committing racist acts both
15 within and outside Penn State's campuses. Black students at Penn State have repeatedly
16 shared incidents of racism they have been subjected to over the years. Yet, in almost
17 every incident, the University has taken little to no action against perpetrators. We believe
18 this has set a dangerous precedent that fails to hold these perpetrators accountable and
19 creates a hostile environment for Black students at Penn State. In late 2019, graffiti of a
20 racial slur was found in Simmons Hall at the University Park campus, one of the
21 designated dorms for Schreyer Honors College students. While the Dean of Schreyer
22 Honors College issued a statement condemning the incident, it still remains unclear
23 whether there was an investigation to find those responsible for the act and hold them
24 accountable⁶. On May 31, 2020, a video of a young man yelling racial slurs at a group of
25 peaceful Black Lives Matter protestors in Aston, Pennsylvania, surfaced on social media.
26 When it was revealed that the man was an undergraduate student at Penn State named
27 Sean Setnick, calls for action to be taken against him went largely unheeded. While the
28 University responded to the incident with a short statement via Twitter denouncing "this
29 hateful speech and bigotry in all of its forms"⁷, it said it could not take any disciplinary
30 action against the student due to his First Amendment rights^{8,9}. Despite significant
31 outrage from the Black community at Penn State about the University's inaction, we know
32 little of other recourses that were taken to hold Setnick accountable for his actions. In the
33 wake of the rallies surrounding racial injustice last year, at a number of community events,
34 Black students at Penn State described incidents of racism they experienced at Penn
35 State, further emphasizing the hostile environment for Black students that exists in the
36 University^{5,10}.

³ <https://onwardstate.com/2021/02/15/zoom-bomber-crashes-penn-state-black-history-month-event/>

⁴ <https://www.brandywine.psu.edu/story/14966/2021/02/15/two-zoom-bombings-under-investigation-university-police>

⁵ <https://onwardstate.com/2021/02/16/zoom-bombers-allegedly-disrupt-bellisario-college-panel-with-hate-speech/>

⁶ https://www.collegian.psu.edu/news/campus/article_dc4c9d90-08be-11ea-bd0d-77818c059213.html

⁷ <https://onwardstate.com/2020/06/01/alleged-penn-state-student-recorded-using-hate-speech-racist-slurs/>

⁸ https://twitter.com/penn_state/status/1267980418256711680

⁹ https://www.collegian.psu.edu/news/campus/article_3a329bd2-a87c-11ea-979c-775c34930b10.html

¹⁰ <https://radio.wpsu.org/post/second-roundtable-penn-state-students-and-faculty-share-stories-racism-and-ideas-change>

1
2 President Barron took several days to respond to the recent racist Zoom attack on the
3 Black Student Caucus, waiting until Saturday, January 30th, 2021 to address the incident
4 in an open letter. In his open letter, Barron stated, "Please know that university leadership
5 continues to stand in solidarity with you and all individuals who are victims of hate and
6 prejudice as we publicly denounce these disgusting attacks and diligently pursue ways to
7 find and hold accountable the perpetrators."¹¹ These words echo previous responses
8 from President Barron. In the May 30, 2020 response to the killing of George Floyd¹²,
9 Barron did not consult with the University's African American Studies department¹³. This
10 response, as well as a response released on June 3, 2020¹⁴ to address racial attacks
11 across the country and in the State College area, also denounced hate speech. In the
12 June 3rd response, Barron states, "We acknowledge the pain, anger and frustration that
13 such events have on our friends and colleagues. And, as much as we want it to stop, we
14 cannot exact a legal punishment without both violating the law or giving up the rights that
15 protect our democracy." There has been a lack of communication about the string of racist
16 attacks that occurred in February, apart from information about an underway investigation
17 and a statement from President Barron¹⁵. A message from President Barron on June 10,
18 2020 highlighted seven actions to show the university's commitment to making changes
19 at Penn State, however none of the action items presents an avenue to hold student
20 perpetrators directly accountable for their actions¹⁶.

21
22 The administration's refusal to take meaningful steps towards the elimination of
23 hatefulness in the Penn State community leaves open the possibility for further escalation.
24 Every virulent racist incident that is allowed to go unpunished paves the way for the next
25 incident. As student leaders, we care deeply about making this school as safe a place as
26 possible for the student body. This should be a place for students to grow. No member of
27 our community should be made to feel unsafe or unwanted. We ask that the Penn State
28 administration work with us to ensure we build a community where each person is
29 welcomed and celebrated.

30
31 Both the University Park Undergraduate Association (UPUA) and the Graduate &
32 Professional Student Association at Penn State have penned several resolutions related
33 to working towards racial justice and anti-racism, illustrating our ongoing calls for action:

- 34 - GPSA Resolutions
- 35 - Resolution # 70-12: Racial Justice Black Lives Matter
 - 36 - Resolution # 70-01: Condemnation of Discrimination and
 - 37 Harassment against the Black and Latinx Communities &
 - 38 Recommendations for Community Safety

¹¹<https://news.psu.edu/story/645947/2021/01/30/administration/message-president-barron-recent-hate-filled-zoom-incidents>

¹²<https://news.psu.edu/story/621754/2020/05/30/administration/response-tragic-death-george-floyd>

¹³<https://www.mcall.com/news/pennsylvania/mc-nws-pa-black-studies-call-for-change-20200705-a3yemktyqjbe7nnjjir4or3wmq-story.html>

¹⁴<https://news.psu.edu/story/622178/2020/06/03/president/message-penn-state-president-eric-j-barron>

¹⁵ <https://www.statecollege.com/penn-state-police-investigating-another-racist-zoom-bombing/>

¹⁶ <https://news.psu.edu/story/622847/2020/06/10/president/message-penn-state-president-eric-j-barron>

- 1 - Resolution # 69-20: Condemnation of COVID-19 Related
- 2 Discrimination and Harassment against the Asian Community
- 3 - Resolution # 69-07: Statement on Inclusion
- 4 - Resolution # 67-04: Support of Undocumented Penn State Students
- 5 - UPUA Resolutions
- 6 - R. 37-15: In Support of the Formal Recognition of Native American
- 7 Heritage Month and Programming and the Support of the Indigenous
- 8 Peoples Student Association
- 9 - R. 32-15: Support of “Know Your Rights While Protesting” Webinar
- 10 - R. 30-15: In Support of the Demands Made by Penn State’s
- 11 Department of African American Studies
- 12 - R. 25-15: Formal Recognition of Hispanic/Latinx Heritage Month
- 13 - R. 07-15: Creation of UPUA Racial Justice Roundtable
- 14 - R. 06-15: Creation of the UPUA Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-
- 15 19) Disproportionate Effects on Protected Classes and Solutions
- 16 Roundtable

17

18 **Recommended Course of Action:**

19

20 The Penn State GPSA formally recommends the University take the following actions:

- 21 - President Barron should reach out personally to the members of Black Caucus
- 22 who were affected by this racist attack to see what next steps they believe are
- 23 appropriate and what actions they want implemented.
- 24 - A university-wide mass email, not only a blog post or Penn State News article,
- 25 detailing what happened and steps being taken to rectify the situation, as well as
- 26 concrete information on what is being done to ensure that it never happens
- 27 again. This email should be sent out immediately.
- 28 - Penn State should follow the requests made by the members of Black Caucus
- 29 and “continue to use its full resources in holding these attackers accountable”¹⁷
- 30 - As requested by the members Black Caucus in their open letter to community,
- 31 Penn State should also “invest in programming, educational opportunities, and
- 32 research to combat anti-Blackness comprehensively”.¹⁸
- 33 - Penn State should take steps to ensure that all students, faculty, and staff are
- 34 educated on systemic oppression and racial justice.
- 35 - Penn State leadership should hold a live townhall and answer questions posed
- 36 by the Penn State Black community and student leadership.
- 37 - GPSA echoes calls for actions highlighted in the open letters from the Black
- 38 Caucus¹⁹ and the Department of African American Studies²⁰ to the Penn State
- 39 community and President Barron, respectively.
- 40 - Penn State should track all racial injustices and incidents reported across all
- 41 campuses annually; this annual tracking system will be a reference to determine

17 <https://twitter.com/PSUblackcaucus/status/1355207050612109318?s=20>

18 <https://twitter.com/PSUblackcaucus/status/1355207050612109318?s=20>

19 <https://twitter.com/PSUblackcaucus/status/1355207050612109318?s=20>

20 <https://documentcloud.adobe.com/link/track?uri=urn:aaid:scds:US:5fa8b8ac-ccaa-4c97-ba72-5b715d0dbe84>

1 if current actions taken by the university against such events have real impact in
2 the Penn State community.
3

Respectfully submitted,
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President _____ Affirm
Veto

The Graduate and Professional Student Association