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:

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

Unfortunately, the attack on the Black Caucus event was not the only racially motivated attack on Zoom witnessed this semester. In February, there were reports of three other

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¹ https://twitter.com/PSUblackcaucus/status/1355207050612109318/photo/1
² https://twitter.com/PSUblackcaucus/status/1355207050612109318/photo/1
events being ‘Zoom-bombed’, where individuals hijacked Zoom meetings and used racist language towards attendees, with some of these events being organized by or for members of the Black community at Penn State. On February 15th, a Black History Month event organized by the Gender and Equity Center was ‘Zoom-bombed’ by an individual minutes after the event started. The attacker re-enacted the murder of George Floyd and yelled racial expletives and hate speech towards the attendees. The same day, another racially motivated attack took place in a Zoom event organized by the Penn State Brandywine campus. Just a day later, individuals hijacked a panel discussion organized by the Bellisario College of Communications over Zoom and began shouting racist attacks at the attendees of the event.

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

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

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

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

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

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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
14 https://news.psu.edu/story/622178/2020/06/03/president/message-penn-state-president-eric-j-barron
16 https://news.psu.edu/story/622847/2020/06/10/president/message-penn-state-president-eric-j-barron
Recommended Course of Action:

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

- President Barron should reach out personally to the members of Black Caucus who were affected by this racist attack to see what next steps they believe are appropriate and what actions they want implemented.

- A university-wide mass email, not only a blog post or Penn State News article, detailing what happened and steps being taken to rectify the situation, as well as concrete information on what is being done to ensure that it never happens again. This email should be sent out immediately.

- Penn State should follow the requests made by the members of Black Caucus and “continue to use its full resources in holding these attackers accountable.”\(^{17}\)

- As requested by the members Black Caucus in their open letter to community, Penn State should also “invest in programming, educational opportunities, and research to combat anti-Blackness comprehensively.”\(^{18}\)

- Penn State should take steps to ensure that all students, faculty, and staff are educated on systemic oppression and racial justice.

- Penn State leadership should hold a live townhall and answer questions posed by the Penn State Black community and student leadership.

- GPSA echoes calls for actions highlighted in the open letters from the Black Caucus\(^ {19}\) and the Department of African American Studies\(^ {20}\) to the Penn State community and President Barron, respectively.

- Penn State should track all racial injustices and incidents reported across all campuses annually; this annual tracking system will be a reference to determine

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\(^{17}\) 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
if current actions taken by the university against such events have real impact in
the Penn State community.

Respectfully submitted,

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President ___________________________________________________       Affirm

---------------------------------------------- Veto

The Graduate and Professional Student Association