

Antiracism Statement – Bruce Mackh – July 2020

We find ourselves in an extraordinary moment, standing amidst a confluence of horrific disruptions under which no one should have to fear, live, or suffer. The spark that ignited the blaze was the public execution of George Floyd at the hands of a white Minneapolis police officer, following hard on the heels of atrocities committed against Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and too many others in our past. This spark also landed on a pile of tinder created by COVID-19, which has wreaked havoc on Black and Latino communities, both economically and medically. More than 80% of those hospitalized in Georgia for COVID-19 are Black.¹ In New York, Latinos are dying at rates 50% higher than whites and twice the rate of Asians.² Our low-income students, especially those who are Black and Latino, have struggled with the mandate to move instruction online because they lack sufficient access to high-speed internet or other necessary technologies. The racial inequities of life could not be more apparent.

These events have given me cause for introspection. To be honest, I must admit I didn't often consider that I was or am part of the problem. I advocated for students who received unfair treatment and protested with students targeted by prejudicial travel bans and immigration laws. I treasured the relationships I'd built with friends of color, especially those with whom I could have honest conversations about our differences in race, religion, gender, or nationality. However, I've come to the painful realization that I've been oblivious to my own privilege as a white male. Being a good person, having friends of color, and having never participated in any acts of violence or overt racism against others offer no defense for ignorance of others' lived realities nor my own blindness.

I've read dozens of recent statements issued by academic leaders proclaiming their stance against racism, many of which are quite similar. However, I'd like to take a different approach by sharing some truths I've learned as I've reflected on these matters.³

1. We must be brave enough to engage in difficult and uncomfortable conversations about anti-Black racism. If you are a person of color, please don't hesitate to speak the truth to me. I pledge that *I am here to get it right*, not to *be* right or insist on my own point of view. I greatly desire to learn how I can do better.
2. The work of anti-Black racism is the work of unlearning and re-learning the intersections of race, class, and race-based structural inequality by developing our comprehension of injustice through social and scholarly sources. We must adamantly reject notions that any person or group possesses "natural" superiority or thereby has the right to exert power over another. Power is not a birthright, nor should it be a function of wealth, class, gender, or any other aspect of identity.
3. We must recognize that we cannot lie to ourselves any longer. Being nice and polite, denying the fact and legacy of anti-Black racism and race-based structural inequalities built upon the concept of white supremacy by claiming we have friends of color who can vouch for our anti-racist character, insisting that we're basically good people is nothing but a screen behind which we hide from the responsibility to take action against injustice.
4. We must educate ourselves and attempt to come to terms with our role in the problem. The people who have been wronged should not bear the responsibility for teaching us how to be better human beings. I accept responsibility for my ignorance and hereby take on the role of a humble seeker of knowledge. I welcome any resources that might be useful in this effort, which I will happily share with others. However, I will not place the burden of my education on anyone else's shoulders.
5. As educators, scholars, and creative professionals, we are in a unique position to be change-makers in a broken and bruised world. All of us need to rise up and use this power to advance the cause of antiracism within and beyond our institutions.

I respectfully invite everyone to join me in making a commitment to do better. We cannot simply state our intentions to be more sensitive to diverse individuals' needs and promise to treat everyone with greater respect and dignity. Instead, we must become increasingly sensitive to how our positions of privilege unconsciously influence and even subvert our words and actions despite our best intentions. I humbly seek to improve in this area.

Genuine equity does not mean treating everyone the same. Our way forward is through a renewed commitment to access, diversity, equity, and inclusion with a particular emphasis on rectifying systemic injustices and fostering a climate that provides our most vulnerable students with the highest levels of support. Our BIPOC students should achieve equal success as their white peers, as should our students from low-income families or those who are the first in their families to attend college. We must identify, prioritize, and meet our most disadvantaged students' needs, giving them the support they need to achieve comparable results across all demographic groups.

In his famous 1965 debate with William F. Buckley at Cambridge University, James Baldwin said, "On this continent we are trying to forge a new identity, that we need each other." I agree, but our work is far from complete. We have never yet managed to live up to our pluralistic ideals, but we should not cease our efforts towards this noble end. I pray that recent events will provide the catalyst necessary to stir us to action, finally leading to a truly open-minded and accepting society where differences are sources of strength and joy rather than conflict, and no group or individual suffers from systemic injustice. I commit myself to strive towards this goal, beginning in my own heart and mind and extending my efforts to those with whom I work, not only in our department but across the college, university, community, state, and nation. I hope you will join me in this effort. Together, we are stronger. In our diversity, we can establish unity, becoming an exemplar of what is possible when people of good character band together in the service of a cause larger than themselves.

Epilogue

- I will observe, listen, and educate myself about antiracism.
- I will speak out against injustice.
- I will understand that I'm not perfect, and I will be grateful for the lessons I learn from my mistakes.
- I will contribute to something bigger than myself, even though I cannot change the world alone.
- I will continue to work for the cause of human rights by speaking out against racism and working for a more just and equitable society.
- I will help create and contribute to a culture of care.

¹ Weiner, R. (April 29, 2020). More than 80 percent of hospitalized covid-19 patients in Georgia are African American, study finds. The Washington Post. https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/more-than-80-percent-of-hospitalized-covid-patients-in-georgia-were-african-american-study-finds/2020/04/29/a71496ea-8993-11ea-8ac1-bfb250876b7a_story.html

² Jimenez, O. (May 9, 2020) Latino Communities in the US Devastated by COVI19. CNN. <https://www.cnn.com/2020/05/09/us/hispanic-population-coronavirus-impact/index.html>

³ Inspired by Austin Channing Brown's *I'm Still Here: Black Dignity in a World Made for Whiteness* (2018, New York: Convergent Books) and Brene' Brown's June 10, 2020 podcast *Unlocking Us: Brene' with Austin Channing Brown on I'm Still Here: Back Dignity in a World Made for Whiteness*. <https://brenebrown.com/podcast/brene-with-austin-channing-brown-on-im-still-here-black-dignity-in-a-world-made-for-whiteness/>