

Statement on “Let’s Talk About Race” at the University at Buffalo from the Faculty and Staff in the African and African American Studies program, Department of Transnational Studies

Our field was founded and continues to be defined by the social and professional responsibility to speak truth to power. That does not end when those in power change their message. We welcome the statements denouncing the systemic racism in our nation and on our campus. If issued six months or one year ago, they would have appeared forwarding looking. Now, however, they are simply reactive.

Let’s set the record straight. Here at UB, the “call to address the racism, violence, and injustice inflicted on Black Americans for centuries,” to quote the words of the statement from Despina Stratigakos, Vice Provost for Inclusive Excellence, does not arise out of “protests that have brought hundreds of thousands into the streets demanding justice.” That task has been going on at UB for at least as many decades as there has been an AAAS Department (five), at least as long as there have been Black students, Black faculty and Black staff at UB. Any such statement should begin by acknowledging the history of antiracism protest and action at this institution as well as the antiracism education that goes on each and every day in classes like the ones we teach. It should acknowledge the annual lecture series that we have sponsored for many years, the teachers that launched the department and our efforts to reach out to the larger community in Buffalo and across Western New York. In fact, it should disambiguate the all-encompassing “we” that discursively conflates those in our midst who are the primary victims of the “erect[ion of] boundaries that make some people feel welcome and others excluded” from those who exhibit the “attitudes” and engage in the “behaviors” that do so. It should clearly distinguish between those who need to become “agents of change” and those who have consistently taken on that role, as for instance the UB students whose anti-racism activism has been extensively covered in the Spectrum over the past two years.

We encourage administrators at UB to be respectful of that history. Your long overdue participation is appreciated. Unfortunately, to many at this juncture, you will appear to lack the necessary credibility to lead or control it. We do, however, welcome you to join and support those who have shouldered that burden for decades, Black students, staff, and faculty in the first place, including those in AAAS. It is in this respect that we are particularly disappointed that you have chosen not to invite our participation, to consult with us and other interested constituencies on campus, or coordinate with ongoing programming.

On the other hand, we urge you in the strongest terms to fulfill your institutional remit, in consultation with the campus community, of changing fundamentally the outdated and flawed policies governing this university that perpetuate the institutional racism you acknowledge. Those in the anti-racism movement have long since not only identified the problems but advocated solutions. The time has come to put those in effect. It is this sort of initiative that we expect from you.

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