

June 19, 2020

Dear members of Black Faculty and Staff, Faculty of Color Group, Latino Faculty and Staff, and the Puerto Rican Alliance, et al.,

On Monday of this week, I received a letter from members of the Black Faculty and Staff, Faculty of Color Group, and Latino Faculty and Staff. On Wednesday, as I was reflecting on how I might reply, I received a second letter from a coalition led by the Puerto Rican Alliance, which enriched my thinking about the issues. I want to take the opportunity both letters provide to respond jointly to them, not because they express the same concerns—they do not—but because, despite their differences, much of what I want to say applies to both.

I could not agree more with the spirit of these letters. They are inspired by the hope that real change is both necessary and possible through working in partnership. They ask a crucial question: *What would a Black life-affirming campus look like?* It's an important inquiry—worthy of our time and attention, and worthy of action.

I appreciate the analysis of anti-blackness as a specific form of racism that is often ignored under the umbrella of “diversity and inclusion.” I agree that anti-blackness expresses itself in assumptions about the worth and competence of Black students, staff, and faculty, and that it can lead to hostility and social isolation. I am committed to tackling both racism and anti-blackness at Brooklyn College.

This critical moment in history—with social and political uprisings against racism worldwide—provides us with a rare opportunity to deliberate together and to change Brooklyn College for the better. It is a moment whose importance we agree upon, and whose significance we must honor. I want to work with you to help perfect this institution. That aspiration binds us, and calls for us to work together, whatever our disagreements and differences, for the sake of our joint purpose. And to do so now.

I'm heartened by the profound commitment to the College expressed in both letters. I respect the desire to turn long-held concerns into actionable policies and outcomes. I look forward to engaging with you, as we share a love for this institution and the role it has played in the lives of those who have attended it throughout its history.

I agree that it is not enough simply to express sentiments when action is called for. More so, when there are actions, though limited in number, that fall entirely within my jurisdiction and authority, that I can implement immediately. With that in mind:

1. I will appoint a Diversity Mentorship Coordinator for faculty to focus on the professional development for and retention of faculty of color. I have asked Chief Diversity Officer Anthony Brown to work with you to develop a list of responsibilities for the position and a process to select the coordinator, with the position commencing in the fall semester.

2. I will appoint a Staff Ombudsperson to focus on the professional development for and retention of staff of color. I have asked Director of Human Resources Renita Simmons to work with you to develop a list of responsibilities for the position and a process to select the ombudsperson, with the position commencing in the fall semester.

These two requests were made of me when I met with Black Faculty and Staff in person just before the COVID-19 pandemic hit, and I am pleased to operationalize them now. Among other important tasks, the people who occupy these positions will be responsible for identifying ways to recognize the work that Black faculty and staff routinely perform to confront anti-blackness and to advocate for Black students. I will also task the Diversity Mentorship Coordinator with helping to qualify and quantify the unrecognized labor of faculty of color, and to help us revise policies on promotion and tenure to reflect this hidden workload.

There are many other issues to address, as your letters indicate. They are too important not to hear from you directly on them. The question is how to proceed to do so. The normal ways of operating to move forward such an agenda—convening an in-person meeting of representatives of the relevant groups—are not available right now. We could convene such a dialog on Zoom, but web meetings are suboptimal for many reasons. On the other hand, these issues are too important to put off until we enjoy normal conditions again, so we will have to proceed in the circumstances in which we find ourselves. I'd be interested to hear how you think it might be best to proceed to engage with one another on the issues you have raised, as well as others that are likely to emerge in the course of our dialog.

Today is of course Juneteenth, a day to observe and reflect on the abolition of slavery, which, for the first time in history, has now become a state holiday. It's a reminder of why the focus on racial equality is so vital. It's also a reminder of how dramatically society can change, and how people of good faith coming together to make those changes—pushed ever forward by those who demand justice—can have real impact.

Again, thank you for your letters that identify this critical moment in history and ask for concrete action in response to it. I await your thoughts about how best to move forward.

Yours sincerely,

Michelle J. Anderson
President, Brooklyn College