

Letter to University Leadership from Concerned Faculty at Penn State

Last week, Penn State reminded us why it needs a space that is dedicated to the production of ideas and practices aimed at ending the structural racism that plagues its own campus and the nation as a whole. The brash disregard for BIPOC voices and anti-racist protestors was a reminder of why Black faculty are leaving the institution at four times the rate of any other group and why so many students, faculty, staff, and alumni have concluded that they don't matter to Penn State.

The university has gone back on its commitment to creating a Center for Racial Justice. This recent backsliding adds to a long list of broken promises on issues of racial justice by Penn State, going back decades. Look no further than the two-part [More Rivers to Cross \(Part I and Part II\)](#) report that documents the pervasiveness of the problem; or [the Village protests](#) of 2001, a documentary of the failure of Penn State leadership to address racially-motivated death threats to a Black student. More recently, consider their embarrassing, dehumanizing response to protests by those demanding an opportunity to learn without threat to their physical or psychological well-being. Each time, Penn State promised to do better and to invest in its infrastructure. Each time, as has happened again with the events of last week, the university's actions prove that there is no institutional commitment. One president giveth and another taketh away, as President Neeli Bendapudi has now done in the case of the Center for Racial Justice, an initiative announced by her predecessor, Eric Barron, in the heat of the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020-2021. At the time, then President Barron declared, "We must acknowledge the pain, anger and frustration that such events inflict on our community. We must recognize that Black Lives Matter and that racism, bias and religious intolerance yield an inexcusable cost to life and liberty." Fast forward from this statement, made on June 10, 2020, to last week's decision to halt the Center's creation. It is merely the latest in a string of decisions illustrating an all too consistent pattern: concessions on racial justice, solemnly made in moments of crisis, are soon forgotten when the crises pass.

In the case of the ill-fated Center for Racial Justice, a search committee for a founding director had been formed and duly charged, a search firm had been hired, and committee members had been exhorted to dig deep into their Rolodexes in search of potential applicants for the job. Then, after months of toil, President Bendapudi suddenly pulled the plug. Why?

While university officials claim this decision was made in consultation with key stakeholders, the committees, staff, students, and faculty who labored to make the center happen were not consulted. Key community leadership, including the authors of [More Rivers to Cross](#), members of the Presidential Commission, and the [Presidential Truth and Reconciliation Commission](#) – groups whose memberships the Commonwealth Campuses, alumni, and businesses – were not consulted. This is

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symptomatic of a decades-long history at Penn State, where the university has failed to invest in work that addresses structural inequality and the realities of structural racism on our campuses, in our community, and in the state. At a time of rising racial inequality and intensifying racial injustice, Penn State leadership has decided to turn its back on research to address and potentially positively impact the realities of racial injustice.

Disturbingly, this decision came in the wake of the “Stand Back and Stand By” event, where the notorious alt-right, Proud Boys-founding white supremacist Gavin McInnes came to campus to perform in a “comedy show.” No less disturbing was the militarized response of state and local police, including riot squads in full armor and units on shodded horses, all of them deployed against Penn State student protesters, some of whom were also maced by Proud Boys. What is possibly most disturbing about this event, however, was the university leadership’s [first](#) and [second](#) public responses. They seem to steal a page from Trump’s “good-people-on-both-sides” speech in the wake of the Charlottesville crisis. The university blamed the protestors whose actions, it said, “furthered the visibility” of speakers espousing “abhorrent views and rhetoric.” It may have been lost on the writers/signers of this statement that the university’s faux-Solomonic, both-sides-are-to-blame assertion validates the point made by those protesting the “Stand Back and Stand By” event: they don’t matter. When, just days later, the decision to quash the Center for Racial Justice was announced, those protesting the university’s complacency in the face of racism saw yet another indication of how much they matter to the powers that be on campus.

The university has also failed to explain the president’s decision to nix the Center for Racial Justice with consistency. Initially, the university said the center was unaffordable. Following pushback and bad publicity, messaging has changed. More recent communications reveal a tentative plan to spend more on existing racial justice programs than the center would have cost. While any plan that leads to systemic antiracism reform is welcome, these messages appear inconsistent and raise further concerns. Either the university did not have the resources for the center, or they had the money all along and were going to invest it elsewhere. The current administration is employing questionable scarcity tactics with budget numbers that appear to have shifted. President Bendapudi often shares that we have nothing to worry about because she is a *banker*, but last week’s response to the protestors and the decision to defund the racial justice center reminds us that the university needs a *president*. We need a credible path to enacting racial justice at Penn State.

Less than a year ago, President Bendapudi was named our university president. When she took this mantle, she became the first woman and woman of color to hold this office at Penn State. Moreover, she brought with her a personal history of diversifying leadership teams and of promoting diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging. As president of the University of Louisville she vowed, amid the Black Lives Matter protests, to make it the nation’s premier antiracist institution of higher learning. While we recognize that our new president is still fully settling into her role, and has many arduous tasks before her, we assert that the issues addressed in this document are pressing and urgent. These concerns matter too. President Bendapudi began her time with us with a *listening tour*. We hope she is listening now, including to her own previous statements

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311. Ben Goldman, Associate Librarian, University Libraries
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313. Adri van Duin, Distinguished Professor, Mechanical Engineering, University Park
314. Joy Krumenacker, Assistant Professor of Psychology, New Kensington

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354. Michael Sturm, Assistant Teaching Professor, Human Development & Family Studies, Brandywine

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375. Molly Countermine, Associate Teaching Professor, Human Development and Family Studies, UP

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390. Sarah Chilenski, Research Associate Professor, Edna Bennett Pierce Prevention Research Center
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