

June 3, 2020

STATEMENT FROM THE CONSORTIUM OF CHAIRS AND  
DIRECTORS OF BLACK STUDIES IN THE SOUTHEASTERN CONFERENCE

In our capacity as members of the consortium of Chairs, Directors, and Heads of Black Studies Programs in the Southeastern Conference (SEC), we collectively condemn the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery in 2020. In doing so, we denounce the taking of many other Black lives in recent years, those lives lost in acts that can only be described as unjustifiable, blatant expressions of systemic racism and white supremacist violence. They did not have to die. Unfortunately, such atrocities have become part of a heinous tradition of debasement and slaughter of Black people and others, dating back over four hundred years.

Our hearts go out to the families and communities of these victims, and, like all other citizens whose lives and realities are directly in the path of such ongoing experiences, we cannot help but be impacted emotionally and react passionately to this historical moment of crisis in which we find ourselves.

What we are witnessing in the wake of Floyd's murder is the resurgence of conditions ripe for a global revolutionary movement in unprecedented circumstances of a global pandemic. Paradoxically, while our current situation allows time for deep reflection, the palpable horror of this moment is silencing. Nonetheless, it is with urgency that we are motivated to support this movement for change and imagine how best to turn our grief into productive action. As our history demonstrates and demands, we are once again generating new knowledge and pathways to activism. Our call is to help guide our on-campus communities of faculty, staff, and students, providing them with the critical understanding and support they need, and to advocate on their behalf with our administration for the resources to swiftly and effectively meet these demands.

Black Studies was born out of student, faculty, and academic activism in the 1960s. As a discipline, it has always been committed to a direct engagement with socio-political realities of Black people and their lived experiences. That commitment – to uncovering the life and culture of Black people, to attending to the history of violence and injustice – echoes throughout the various programs within the SEC. This caucus of faculty who lead Black, African American, and African Studies programs and departments in SEC universities was created in 2016, and it has proven to be a space of administrative, intellectual, and academic exchange that benefits those assuming leadership responsibilities in these programs. The positions we occupy are especially important given our locations within predominantly white institutions in the Deep South, as well as the nature of our units in terms of their historical and Civil Rights commitments. Our roles as directors and chairs serve as bridges between university administration, faculty, and student advisors. As such, the monumental tasks before us now are even more vital and arduous. Notably, we once again we face the simultaneous challenges of

balancing situations that both threaten our physical and professional lives, with unreasonable expectations that we balance restraint and intellectual objectivity as we analyze and grapple with this watershed moment.

Our black and brown campus communities have been targeted multiple times by acts of aggression and white supremacy, meaning – these spaces are no different from any other public spaces. Our commitment to challenging and changing this reality is grounded in our powerful potential and work as thinkers and shapers of minds. The presence of Black Studies programs, in existence for more than five decades, is therefore essential, and increasingly so, for it offers the only space for the type of open engagement and learning dedicated exclusively to local, national, and global black experiences. We affirm that the sharing and dissemination of this kind of knowledge is necessarily activist and transformative. However, that is precisely what our programs are intended to do – namely, attack the very systems of oppression in which the national protests are engaged: bigotry, personal prejudice, and institutionalized racism. And at the core lies the deeply engrained historical perspective continuing to plague this nation – that is, the troubling belief that Black people are less deserving of any and everything.

The recent pleas, cries, and requests to be saved from the “sincere ignorance and conscientious stupidity” to which Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. referred, as well as the disruption and lack of peace that Anna Julia Cooper magnified in her intersectional, interconnected essay on America’s race problem, provide evidence beyond a reasonable doubt that Black, Africana, and African Studies continue to be the most viable academic solutions to this crisis and the ongoing national and global crises continuing to undermine our entire educational system. The pipeline starts here, and our systems must invest rather than continue to divest the kind of real support that matters, because as Black Lives Matters, #blackstudiesmatter.

This movement is comprised of a notably large number of young adults, teenagers, and even children. Many of them are our students, and we are obligated to address this moment and its impact on their lives in a direct and open way. They are rightfully angry, they are confident and self-assured in their convictions, and yes, they are morally and ethically right. Our task as chairs, heads, and directors is to support their cause, for it is also ours. This cause is a visual and direct reflection of everything that defines us as leaders of Black Studies programs, as seekers and providers of knowledge, and most importantly, as advocates of justice.