

Open Letter Response to the SFSU Division of Equity & Community Inclusion email titled “Campus Climate Action Items, 2020-2021” sent May 6, 2021

Dear Division of Equity & Community Inclusion, Frederick Smith and Interim Vice President Hellweg and the Office of Student Affairs & Enrollment Management

We, the members of the CFA-SFSU Executive Board, write in response to the Campus Climate Action Items email sent May 6, 2021. In this statement, you claimed that the division of Equity & Community Inclusion at San Francisco State University has made influential strides “to address anti-Blackness, Islamophobia, antisemitism, AAPI hate, microaggressions, racism and sexism, as well as gender and sexual identity and other areas.” (It is unclear to us why gender and sexual *identity* are listed in parallel to the previous items, which are all forms of *discrimination*.) This rosy assessment serves to invalidate the experience of members of the campus community still suffering from these forms of harm. And without verifiable evidence of this purported progress, we cannot have confidence in the Campus Climate Action items described in your message to the campus.

Performative statements, such as your email, can be dangerous and harmful. Although SF State has been recognized for its demographic diversity, racial/ethnic diversity, this is not the same as having or striving for an anti-racist climate. The statements included in your email [co-opt the language of antiracism](#) to reinforce the fiction of racial harmony, all the while distorting the material realities of White Supremacy and anti-Blackness for Black and Brown students, faculty, and staff. Your email evokes the recent collection of essays found in *Anti-Racism, Inc.*, in which colorblind, multicultural, and diversity discourses reveal the appropriation of antiracist rhetoric as a strategy for advancing neoliberal agendas. We recognize your words as a representation of this unique phenomenon that requires careful interrogation and analysis. Moreover, we note that the stated action plan rests on an evaluation modality conducted internally, and by self-describing the successes, the university reinforces apathy and complacency rather than an authentic, transparent reckoning and acknowledgement of culpability regarding ongoing inequalities on our campus.

What, we ask, do the terms *diversity* and *inclusion* actually mean to you? How can a university that is subsidized by corporate interests, student debt, and exploited labor, embody or support *diversity* and *inclusion*? How are Black and Brown students, staff, and faculty safe in proximity to a campus police armed with military-grade weapons?

The illusion the May 6th email portrays is a type of racial harmony that assumes we have arrived at racial progress, that *diversity* and *inclusion* are mere boxes one can check, and that the work of inclusion is one of image management on behalf of the institution, its alumni, trustees, and corporate funders. We view your statement as a hollow proxy for meaningful action. Diversity is not auditable. You are the evaluators of your own Climate Action agenda. By self-describing only, the successes of your current Climate Action Items, you implicitly endorse complacency, rather than a truthful/authentic reckoning with ongoing inequalities on our campus.

To this end, we implore your office, and that of the President, to apply for participation in the University of Southern California’s Race & Equity Center’s [National Assessment of Collegiate Campus Climates](#) (NACCC), which is a quantitative survey administered annually at colleges and universities across the United States. Instead of the conflict of interest inherent to self-evaluation, an independent assessment would provide impartial data, helping all members of the campus community to gain confidence in our campus’s efforts to advance equity.

In addition, we are asking the university to take advantage of the Equity Institute Program, provided nationally by the USC’s Race & Equity Center:

Each Institute is designed for teams of 20 administrators and faculty members on a single college or university campus, intended to increase individual competencies and organizational effectiveness to enhance equity, diversity,

and inclusion. Each Institute has 8 modules collaboratively developed by expert scholars and practitioners across the country. These virtual modules are taught synchronously, with an Institute Faculty member and 20 participants simultaneously engaged on the same computer screen for 90 minutes at the same time, one day each week for 8 consecutive weeks.

~<https://www.uscequityinstitutes.org/>

We envision a transformative approach, rooted in authenticity and accountability, to achieve the structural changes demanded by marginalized students, staff, and faculty. Given the windfall of federal and state funding that we have recently received, we offer here numerous ways that that DECI can push for material changes to make good on the goal of being an ‘anti-racist university’. In short, if we know ‘how to be an anti-racist university’, let’s spend the money to make it a ‘university of Co-Liberation’ instead. We hope that this letter initiates such an accountability process, and we ask DECI for meaningful collaboration with the CFA and Black faculty on campus. Below we repeat [many of the same demands we offered last summer](#).

We had asked for engagement within a forum as a ‘real time’ town hall where your office and the President will openly acknowledge the [CFA Statement of Anti-Racism and Social Justice Demands](#) and offer a safe platform for discussion. While the January Faculty Retreat ‘How to Be an Anti-Racist University’ was ostensibly successful, there was not one Black Faculty from Africana Studies assigned a spot to present a plenary. Not one. The CFA’s Council on Racial & Social Justice was also ignored and left without a single opportunity to engage. When you say that you have worked with all communities on our campus you erase the work and silence the voices of those most impacted by racial harm. Was this cold shoulder retaliation for the CFA Executive Board calling out the President’s all-white cabinet as #SFSUsoWhite?

We’d like to direct our next points to Dr. Hellweg specifically. At a recent ZOOM gathering produced and presented by the *Soul of San Francisco State*, the director of the Black Unity Center, which was under Dr. Hellweg’s two years of interim leadership, submitted a video to the group of faculty, alumni, and student educators, and staff brought together from the Graduate Education program. In this video they speak inaccurately to the origins of the Black Unity Center, stating that “six students’ began the Black Unity Center. This is false. The Black Unity Center, prior to the Upper Administration’s usurpation in 2019, was created by former Africana Studies Chair and faculty member Dr. Serie McDougal at the behest of his students. His commitment to them was paramount to the center’s success. He was commended by the SFSU Academic Senate for this achievement. It was created by Dr. McDougal because nothing had existed prior to his action. This false narrative showcases your office’s negative impact on the work of Black Faculty. The erasure of heritages of Black faculty and students and the university’s corporatization of Black achievements for pockets and not progress (see [Bold Thinking Campaign](#)) contradict the claims of your email. We requested, last year, that the Black Unity Center’s governance be returned to Africana Studies, from whence it originated. That demand has been ignored.

On July 17, 2020, President Mahoney presented a list of bullet points regarding BLM at SFSU. The most confusing was this:

- **Advancing curricula that support Black student success** by increasing the number of faculty whose work lies in the **Pan-African diaspora or who have a demonstrated record of success in research, teaching and/or service with Black populations.** We will also offer pedagogical workshops for faculty, solidify pathways for double majors or minors in identity-based degrees and increase community service-learning opportunities with our Black community partners

We’d like to know what this connotes. If this was to be a statement pertaining to Africana Studies faculty why was this not simply stated? Your office and all of your self assessment and programs would fall under this but it is us, the faculty, that creates the curriculum. Is this bullet point

showcasing the President and Dr. Hellweg's office as being supportive of curricula for Black Studies? New courses are being approved and created by faculty that center on Africana Studies with absolutely no support or acknowledgment from the Administration. Where is your office's support of AB 1460 the Ethnic Studies Bill? Perhaps a forum with the entirety of Black Faculty could be conducted. Please, for the sake of our members, and even those who aren't, clarify the paradoxes that you present, which are deleterious and traumatic for Black faculty & students.

We would also like to address the DEI's celebration of the inclusion of SF State in the WSJ list of diverse institutions. **You write, "SF State is a unique and remarkable place. You may remember that last year we were recognized on the Wall Street Journal's Best Colleges list - ranking in the top five in the "Environment" category. This recognition was for the diversity of the University, based on race, ethnicity, income and national origin of our students and employees."**

It is unclear what is being celebrated here. The term "diversity" comes across as a politics of feeling good, and implies that we've solved issues of inequality and thus encourages complacency. As Sara Ahmed reminds us, this presents diversity "as a quality the university already has, by virtue of the kinds of staff and students that already exist within the organization... diversity and equality work hence becomes about changing *perceptions of whiteness* rather than *changing the whiteness of organizations.*"

And as Jeffrey Chang clarifies, "...Corporations and colleges would appoint chief diversity officers and increase their holding of assets directed at 'diverse demographics,' while pushing ads — sometimes also doctored — that featured happy, diverse consumers,"



Further, this WSJ report reflects the *student body*, not our administrative staff, which is overwhelmingly White. The faculty are disproportionately White as well. This stands in stark contrast to the racial diversity of our staff and student body. The narrow and skewed view of "diversity" fails to acknowledge the unfair power dynamics maintained by a majority White administration with a majority of non-White student body.

Just this year, fellow public institution, Ohio State University, [pledged to hire 100 faculty members from underrepresented backgrounds](#), and 50 scholars whose work addresses social equity and racial disparities. We no longer face a dire budget situation - we urge the DEI to strongly advocate for tenure-track cluster hires, to be drawn from the ranks of our exploited lecturer faculty.



From the *Bold Thinking Campaign* 2013-2019 which raised \$157 Million Dollars.
Exploiting to ignoring, "Show us the Money"

You write, "The division of Equity & Community Inclusion works diligently with all members of the University community to ensure that we best realize the potential of our diverse community" and continue by saying that Faculty Affairs & Professional Development has created "initiatives to increase retention of faculty of color."

We as representatives for the CFA, the Union for the faculty have been made aware of one initiative the Equity & Leadership Development Program within the College of Liberal and Creatives Arts, for which Frederick Smith is a part, has no Black Faculty leadership and is closed to Non-Tenured Faculty. Wouldn't such an initiative benefit from the Black & Brown voices, whether tenured or not, to be sought out to contribute to these initiatives which you say are created to benefit them?

Despite promises by President Mahoney to meet and collaborate with the CFA's Executive Board and the Council on Racial and Social Justice, the CFA was never asked to collaborate on any of these action items. You also fail to mention any specific material support for Black faculty and the curriculum they produce. We repeat our demand for [resources that protect Black/African students, departments, and centers](#), and for [greater mental health support](#) in light of our long-understaffed [counseling services across the CSU](#) and at SFSU in particular.

Also, your claims of having inclusive searches are also unauditible. The CFA was excluded. The CFA was not included on the large search committee for the Vice President of Student Affairs and Enrollment Management, nor are there any initiatives to always include members of the CFA Executive Board on all administrative searches. This type of initiative would be reaching out to ALL of the campus community, and most importantly faculty representatives that are not cherry picked by the administration.

Regarding campus safety, you write that through "the creation of a University Public Safety Advisory Committee, ongoing discussions with Associated Students, and a University Police Department (UPD) whose Chief is an experienced student services professional reporting to the Vice President for Student Affairs & Enrollment Management, our structure provides a significant advantage as we build a 21st century, student-centered model for campus safety."

The Associated Students passed [a resolution in July of 2020](#) supporting *abolition* of the University Police Department. The CFA's Cops off Campus group [made the same demands in October of 2020](#), and enumerated a robust list of actionable steps toward decreasing the University police force. When plans for the Public Safety Advisory Committee were announced last fall, we asked you, Interim VP Hellweg, to invite the CFA, Students for Quality Education (SQE), Black student organizations, external

community representatives, and mental and public health experts. We asked that you treat this work as a community-led project rather than another bureaucratic committee. These requests were completely ignored. Further, the phrase ‘21st-century policing’ like its twin euphemism ‘community policing’ refers to policies that promote *more* police presence and which have been [shown to further harm](#) communities of color.

We do not need another task force to know that police presence on campus terrorizes and traumatizes Black students, faculty and staff. We do not need a police chief with student services experience, because we know [the history of campus policing is rooted in suppressing student demands for racial justice](#). We demand information on the percent of the police budget that was reallocated to campus programming, [as you promised to do nearly a year ago](#), and spend that money on life-affirming alternatives for community safety.

In the same July 2020 statement noted above, the Associated Students write “San Francisco State University has consistently noted the vision of Equity and Inclusion, but disregards the actions needed to ensure those truths be followed. We must remind ourselves what enabled the opportunity for equity and inclusion to exist on our campus in the first place: activism, protests, grassroots organizing, and calls for accountability.”

San Francisco State’s mythic status was created by the protest of Black and Third World students in 1968-9. The Bold Thinking Campaign saw the Office of Marketing plaster pictures of BIPOC students on buses, banners on and around campus, downtown San Francisco, and on BART. Also, in 2020, the SFSU website’s main page blasting pictures upon pictures of Black Students. This represents a sad bit of self-congratulatory tokenizing to use the shrinking number of Black students as visual capital for outside consumption when Black leadership is ignored and under-resourced on our campus.

We stand with our students and offer this letter as a repeated and urgent call for accountability and transformative structural change. We look forward to the first Black Faculty Forum with President Mahoney, and the newly hired, Dr. Jamilah Moore, the soon to be seated Vice President of Student Affairs & Enrollment Management.

We appreciate the service provided by Dr. Beth Hellweg, and wish her continued success in her next and future endeavors.

The EXECUTIVE BOARD of the SFSU CHAPTER OF THE CALIFORNIA FACULTY ASSOCIATION

Original email from DEI

Dear Campus Community,

SF State is a unique and remarkable place. You may remember that last year we were recognized on the Wall Street Journal’s Best Colleges list – [ranking in the top five in the “Environment” category](#). This recognition was for **the diversity of the University**, based on race, ethnicity, income and national origin of our students and employees.

As President Mahoney noted at the time, the benefits of learning and working in a diverse environment are many. The division of Equity & Community Inclusion works diligently with all members of the University community to ensure that we best realize the potential of our diverse community by encouraging communication, offering educational programming and promoting understanding to foster a positive campus climate.

Even in the last year, as many of us have moved to remote learning and work, Equity & Community Inclusion partnered with many departments across campus to advance the shared goals of our diverse campus community, engaging in important work to address anti-Blackness, Islamophobia, antisemitism, AAPI hate, microaggressions, racism and sexism, as well as gender and sexual identity and other areas.

Some highlights of the past academic year include:

- The establishment of a [Bias Incident Education Team](#), which offers educational opportunities in response to potentially divisive campus interactions;
- The creation of a new Interfaith Programs Unit;
- The development of the SF State Educational & Interfaith Programs Fund to support student programming;
- The establishment of affinity-based advisory groups to provide guidance on campus climate issues impacting AAPI, Black, Jewish, Latinx, Muslim, and many other communities on campus;
- Over 200 educational programs and training opportunities for students, staff, faculty, and administrators presented by Equity & Community Inclusion;
- Guidance and skill-building workshops to dozens of campus departments and teams to help address campus climate issues;
- Collaboration among campus departments to identify a short-and-long-term prayer space for Muslim students and employees; and
- Support for the campus-wide Black Lives Matter at SF State initiative.

Further details can be found in a [recent presentation made at the Academic Senate](#).

Efforts by campus partners like the [Center for Equity & Excellence in Teaching & Learning \(CEETL\)](#) and [Faculty Affairs & Professional Development](#) also resulted in progress in critical areas such as inclusive hiring practices and pedagogies, employee skills development and training, and initiatives to increase retention of faculty of color.

In the face of a challenging national environment, the SF State family pulled together this year to develop and work on a [Black Lives Matter Action Plan](#) that identified the specific needs of our campus with recognition that the work needs to be sustained and consistent to create an equitable environment that supports Black student success. More recently, the University pulled together again to demonstrate support for Asian American & Pacific Islander (AAPI) students and colleagues.

We continue to meet with student organization leaders and affinity groups to address campus climate issues, as well as issues of national and local importance. With the creation of a [University Public Safety Advisory Committee](#), ongoing discussions with Associated Students, and a University Police Department (UPD) whose Chief is an experienced student services professional reporting to the Vice President for Student Affairs & Enrollment management, our structure provides a significant advantage as we build a 21st century, student-centered model for campus safety. Our UPD officers and staff recognize the level of authority and trust that have been placed in them by the campus community. We also recognize that questions, hurts, conversations, and traumas related to campus and municipal policing will be part of campus climate conversations at SF State and campuses across the country.

As President Mahoney said last year, [“diversity is easy, but inclusion is hard.”](#) She added, our campus’ diversity humanizes geopolitical issues and our differences, breeding understanding and compassion. This year, across many areas of the University, work to strengthen inclusivity continued, and even accelerated, despite our remote modality. As we plan our return to the

physical campus in Fall, we renew our commitment to inclusion and making sure people feel they belong, they matter, and they are validated.

We express our deep gratitude to all who have met with us this year, to all who have come together at critical moments to support individual communities, and to all who have worked under difficult circumstances to help us better realize our role as an engine of educational equity and social justices.

Sincerely,

Frederick Smith, Ed.D. (he/him/his)
(she/her/hers)

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