

July 15, 2020

This message is in response to a letter and petition from a group of concerned students and alumni entitled, "Black Lives Matter at Manhattanville."

To the Manhattanville Community:

The brutal murders of Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery and, most recently, George Floyd, have sparked anger, frustration, and pain across the country and within our community. They've inspired action among millions and caused institutions across the nation to reassess their cultures. Here at Manhattanville, we stand behind our mission to provide "a diverse, inclusive, and nurturing environment" but we've heard clearly from you, our students and alumni, that there is a great deal of work to be done.

I wrote a letter that addressed the need for every institution in America to own up to the legacy of racism on which our country was built and called for a "[Conversation for Change](#)" for our community. It was intended to begin tough conversations at Manhattanville about racial injustice. These conversations are not easy and not theoretical. They are about processing feelings and emotions; they are about empathy; they are about action.

On June 19 of this year, I and many of my colleagues received a letter from a group of concerned students and alumni who want to see necessary change on our campus. Over the past three weeks I have met with my Cabinet to discuss ways we can address the points in the letter to begin to effectively bring about a shift in the campus culture and combat racial injustices going forward.

The **Presidential Task Force on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion** has also met to begin to make strides toward addressing the specific points in the student letter.

What follows is a series of specific action items to go beyond words of support for those who are protesting peacefully for change and to begin making a real difference right here at home.

The new initiatives below include:

- The creation of a new administrative position, Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer, to oversee progress toward a change in campus climate.
- Mandatory inclusivity and anti-bias training for staff and faculty.
- Curriculum changes.
- Additional efforts to recruit and retain Black students.
- The development of a Black Alumni association and mentoring.
- Forums for listening and engaging students in dialogue.
- Revisiting the College Mission Statement.
- Supporting Black student organizations.

1. Faculty: The most immediate need is for Manhattanville College to hire more Black faculty members. Some efforts to lend greater urgency to this are already under way: About a year ago, I instructed the Provost and the Deans that, henceforth, all faculty searches were required to submit evidence of proactive diversity outreach as part of the search for each position or risk a failed search. Since we have added that requirement to all faculty searches, we have in fact **not filled** two faculty positions because the search committees could not demonstrate that they had a diverse pool of candidates among their finalists. Going forward, the Human Resources department will ensure that each search committee is given lists and access to connections of black PhD candidates and faculty at predominantly black institutions nationwide. Once we emerge from the financial crisis created by the missing revenue and increased College debt as the result of the COVID-19 pandemic, my administration commits to providing additional incentives in the form of professional development funds for faculty from underrepresented backgrounds as a way to recruit and retain faculty of color to Manhattanville.
2. Administration: Starting this week, our Vice President for Student Affairs, Cindy L. Porter, EdD, has agreed to take on the additional responsibility of **Interim Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer**, to ensure that diversity and inclusion are not solely confined to the excellent work our Center for Inclusion has been doing. As a result, we now have an officially designated representative on my Cabinet who also has direct access to the Manhattanville Board of Trustees and who will work with faculty, staff and students to advance our diversity and inclusion efforts.
3. Mandatory Inclusivity Training: In addition to the inclusivity training that is included as part of the online orientation modules for incoming first-year students, the following has been put in place –
 - a. Beginning this fall, all newly hired staff and faculty will participate in an onboarding training session that will include a section on Understanding Implicit Bias.
 - b. This month, all Manhattanville faculty and staff received information regarding the virtual Summer Reflection Series on Addressing Racial Injustice in Higher Education offered by the College. The three-part series will focus on the steps we can take as individuals and as a community to address racism and its impact on black and brown communities and will include a required workshop for faculty and staff.
4. Curriculum and Faculty and Staff Development: As I write this, the Provost's Office is working with faculty on moving away from a predominantly Euro-Centric curriculum. The Provost invites students and alumni to be involved with developing the new curriculum. We will seek to identify modest funds, possibly through foundations, to support the work in this area. In addition, the Center for Teaching, Learning and Scholarship (CTLS) has partnered with the Center for Inclusion (CFI) and with a group of faculty and staff to read *How to Be an Antiracist* by Ibram X. Kendi, PhD, to reflect and to plan action for classrooms and curricula. The CTLS and the CFI will continue to partner

throughout the year to develop ongoing programming for faculty to address issues of equity and foster a climate of antiracism.

5. Admissions and Financial Aid: Despite the fact that three of our admissions counselors are people of color, we recognize that we have more work to do to attract Black students.
 - a. Both the Vice President of Admissions and Enrollment and the Interim Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer will work with Black alumni, Black faculty and staff and the Black members of our Alumni Board and our Board of Trustees, to engage Black high school seniors as well as potential graduate students of color who might consider coming to Manhattanville. The Vice President of Admissions and Enrollment will look at the areas of coverage of the Black admissions counselors to see if adjustments can be made to best support students of color. The College is also exploring teaming up with local, regional and national organizations that are dedicated to serving talented, underrepresented students.
 - b. While we are restricted by Federal law from offering scholarships solely on the basis of race, the College hopes to add scholarships for first-generation students, since experience has shown that Black and Brown students tend to be the most likely beneficiaries of such aid. To this end, we will look into Foundation support and additional support from our alumni as a way of demonstrating that the Manhattanville community as a whole is willing to take on some of the burden, going forward, that America has put on the shoulders of its Black citizens.
6. Alumnae and Alumni:
 - a. Black Alumni Organization – The department of Alumni Relations will partner with members of the Manhattanville alumni community in the hopes of establishing a Black Alumni Organization within the current Alumni Association that will foster meaningful communication, professional development, mentoring, and advocacy initiatives designed to strengthen and support the community of Black alumni and students of Manhattanville College.
 - b. Mentoring – In an effort to improve retention of our Black student community, we have been meeting with some of our Black alumni and alumnae to enlist their help with mentoring and placing our Black graduates.
7. Communications: The Office of Communications and Marketing and the Center for Inclusion have begun to invite student leaders to facilitate discussions on topics related to race and diversity on campus. These discussions will take place over the course of the coming months via **Instagram Live** on the main College Instagram account, @manhattanville_college. The first one will be held **Friday, July 17, at 2pm**. Students Chris Brown '22 and Emma Sheeran '20 of the Cooperative Multi-race National Transformative Youth or "CMNTY" initiative will facilitate a dialogue on making change through the BLM movement during the first Instagram takeover.
8. Mission Statement: In the context of preparing for our upcoming reaccreditation by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education, we will have a community-wide

conversation about revising the Manhattanville Mission Statement to more explicitly address diversity and inclusion as one of our core values.

9. Presidential Task Force for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion: The Presidential Task Force for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion will facilitate a forum to discuss critical concerns of our Black community as raised by the Black Lives Matter movement. This online forum will be centered around our students and serve not only as a listening session but also to elicit tangible and pragmatic ideas for improving Manhattanville's campus culture. Dr. Porter, in her new role as Interim Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer, will work closely with the members of this Task Force and ask them to serve as an advisory body.
10. Black Student Organizations: Speaking for the Manhattanville College Board of Trustees and for myself and my Cabinet, I look forward to working with Black student organizations and constituencies on campus to elicit their direct input on what further improvements we can make to our diversity and inclusion culture. During my time in office, we have doubled the budget of our Black Student Union. I promise that we will look at the processes pertaining to student organizations and activities to see where they can be streamlined to foster more collaboration, partnerships and engagement. I will ask Dr. Porter to work with the Center for Student Involvement and Leadership (CSIL) staff and the Black Student Union to review the needs of the organization this year and see where adjustments can be made.
11. Preventing bias and responding to Perceived Instances of Bias on Campus: We recognize that students have not felt supported by the College in interactions with law enforcement. Going forward, we are committed to working together to ensure that the student experience matches the collective values of me and my administration and the College community; that the actions of officers and staff on campus demonstrate that our students have a safe home here within our community.

Campus Safety:

- a. Anti-bias training has been conducted with Campus Safety officers for each of the past two years and we are currently working with our security contractor, SSC, to provide additional training on the SSC bias response protocol.
- b. Campus Safety will proactively address any complaints about officer behavior that are brought to our attention with either the College or SSC, as appropriate.
- c. Campus Safety is now tracking our interactions with Harrison Police with the help of our Student Affairs Office. This fall, Campus Safety will publish current protocols and practices related to Harrison Police Department involvement on campus.
- d. We will reach out to the Harrison Police Department in the hopes of engaging in ongoing dialogue and inviting them to an upcoming community meeting.

Manhattanville Bias Education Response Team: The Manhattanville [Bias Education Response Team](#) (BERT) was formed in November of 2019 to serve as a resource for community members who have reported incidents of bias that are not covered by the Manhattanville Student Handbook or the Faculty/Staff Handbook. BERT collects data on

reported incidents of bias that will be shared with the community annually. To report an incident, you can fill out a form [here](#).

12. Manhattanville Board of Trustees:

I have engaged the Manhattanville Board of Trustees on the urgency of this matter, and they have great interest in being part of the solution and in engaging with the campus community in general and our Black and Brown students in particular to learn more about the issue and to see how they can be of help. To that end, the Board has created a special sub-group that will advise the President and Dr. Porter as needed and is standing by to meet with students, alumni and other community groups as necessary. The names of these Board members are:

Dwight Hilson (Chair)

Mary Cooper

Michael Dunn

Michael Watson

I would like to thank the Manhattanville Board of Trustees for expressing their earnest interest in seeing Manhattanville College progress in this area.

These are the first of many steps that the College will take to address systemic racism. This is a once-in-a-generation opportunity for Manhattanville College to move forward in an effort to align our current campus climate with the best of our traditions while addressing areas where we have not made enough progress since 1969. This will not be an easy or comfortable road for any of us. But it is the only road worthy of the courageous stance taken by Mother Dammann more than 70 years ago. As a community, we must support our Black and Latinx students, faculty, staff, and alumni.

I want to thank the students and alumni who took the time to write to me and the faculty and administration to bring these issues to light. As mentioned in my initial response, we can – and we will - push the agenda for change, and I am personally committed to doing that, as is my administration. And we need you – the students and alumni – to continue to bring your experience to the table and to work with us to make substantive change.

I invite members of the CMNTY Initiative, BSU, and other student organizations to meet with me and my Cabinet to begin a personal conversation. All those who would like to be involved in these conversations and initiatives, please contact Loren McDermott, Special Assistant to the President, at Loren.McDermott@mville.edu.

I would also like to remind all of you that I have virtual office hours from 3-4pm every Thursday and welcome you to use this time to continue these discussions on a personal basis.

I look forward to continuing these discussions and this movement for change.

Sincerely,

Michael E. Geisler, Ph.D.
President

