AAUP letterhead

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Dear UW Leadership,

The board of the University of Washington chapter of the American Association of University Professors has become aware of a situation concerning climate, student/faculty/administration relations, due process, and ongoing issues of anti-Black racism in the School of Medicine (SOM). The situation that has unfolded in the SOM highlights the dearth of resources for managing conflicts between students and professors (among colleagues, or with administration), especially when the underlying driver is racism.We write this letter to support the people at the heart of this struggle who are working to uphold the values of racial justice, shared faculty governance, and academic freedom.

More broadly, our goal is to highlight an urgent opportunity to establish and strengthen processes for restorative justice, designed specifically for managing conflicts of this nature.  Such processes in no way preempt or replace the formal provisions in matters of grievance and disciplinary actions established by the Faculty Code, nor do they in any way abridge established faculty rights.  Rather, restorative justice is a valuable tool for parties in conflict to hear each other, and perhaps achieve mutually acceptable resolutions that can contribute to better institutional cultures and a more robust community.

***Background***

On July 21, 2020, five members of the UW School of Medicine leadership signed a widely-distributed letter describing a controversy that erupted during the School of Medicine’s Ecology Health and Medicine (EHM) course in Seattle on March 20. This letter reported that three EHM course leaders had voluntarily resigned from teaching the course.

UWSOM leadership acknowledged “racism experienced by Black students across UW School of Medicine.” Their letter promised, “We are committed to dismantling institutional racism, mistreatment and other oppressive structures that hinder the ability for all members of our community to thrive,” and announced a new Learning Environment Steering Committee, “with representation from multiple organizations within UW Medicine,” without naming these or describing further detail. No further detail was available on the website regarding this new structure.

In response to the letter, UWSOM students published a [response](https://seedsofbamm.wordpress.com/0607-2020-update/) contesting key elements of the UWSOM leadership’s account and calling for further actions. These [BAMM](https://seedsofbamm.wordpress.com/) students called for dismantling systems of anti-Blackness at UWSOM.

As faculty in AAUP, we support student activism as a right, and the rights of Black students in particular, especially in these unprecedented historical times, to resist anti-Blackness at their university.

***Important matters of faculty shared governance, academic freedom, and racial justice***

We note that no faculty have been dismissed from their positions in SOM; this would have been inappropriate without due process. The students involved have recognized this, as reflected in a revised statement they have [posted](https://seedsofbamm.wordpress.com/0607-2020-update/). AAUP stands with faculty (and all workers) to ensure their due process within fair and just models when conflict arises.  Faculty, staff, and students are owed labor protections and protections from the harm caused by all forms of racism, and all are owed a meaningful, well-designed process for resolving conflicts in a way that serves all workers and preserves the integrity of our missions in teaching, mentoring, learning, and service.

Such a process would uphold long-established faculty rights critical to academic freedom, while also affirming  the rights of students to push back against injustices they experience and ensure that their voices and perspectives will not be dismissed. Students are also workers, and their struggles for justice are often sites of unpaid labor without protections.  As teachers, we faculty have a particular inherent obligation to teach and mentor our students, and to honor with humility the insights and wisdom that they -- the scholars, teachers and mentors of the future -- bring to the collective enterprise that is the University.  In faculty evaluations, we formally recognize the value of service; students have no such formal mandate or recognition for service, and we are indebted to those who contribute this work, on top of a demanding academic load.  This social justice work is labor, and should  be acknowledged and taken seriously as such.

***Ongoing concern about the lack of action to address racism in the School of Medicine***

It may appear to a casual or new observer that these concerns are about this single classroom incident, but these concerns have a long and troubling history in the SOM. Anti-Black racism can be traced back through all of [U.S. medical history](https://www.worldcat.org/title/until-the-well-runs-dry-medicine-and-the-exploitation-of-black-bodies/oclc/1078475228), including to the origins of our own university (see abbreviated bibliography below).

In recent years, anti-racism advocacy in the School of Medicine has been persistent and clear, including a student-led call-to-action in May 2016, and a [petition](https://www.change.org/p/students-for-an-anti-racist-uwsom-demands-for-an-anti-racist-university-of-washington-school-of-medicine) from the Students for an Anti-Racist UWSOM, which “[a]sks for an Anti-Racist University of Washington School of Medicine,” signed by 269 supporters. We acknowledge the activism work of former UWSOM student [Ohenewaa Nkrumah in 2017](https://seattlepeoplesparty.com/2018/02/23/must-occupy-uw-school-medicine/), who attempted to draw attention to [deep problems](https://southseattleemerald.com/2017/12/13/the-silence-here-is-deafening-and-it-kills/) in the school.  Racist police-involved [incidents](https://www.thecollegefix.com/students-faculty-call-university-washington-police-racist-demand-disarmed/) in the UWSOM’s Department of Global Health in 2016 also still linger unresolved, and serve as a background to the current events.

In response, Dean Ramsey created a UWSOM Anti-Racism Action Committee (ARAC); however, this committee may have become inactive, as the most recent (very brief) meeting minutes are from November, 2019. In June, 2020, UWSOM leaders posted a “[Pledge Against Racism](https://www.uwmedicine.org/pledge-against-racism)” in response to recent killings of Black people at the hands of police; statements of this nature were being issued by many organizations in June, and there is a whole critique of these (see two in the bibliography below).

This year, we understand that nine of the 140 Seattle-based e-2019 students are Black. These nine represent the largest incoming class of Seattle-based Black students in the school’s history. The collective goal of all UW faculty is for all of them to become proud and successful graduates of our School of Medicine in three years -- a goal worthy of all our commitment.

***Importance of establishing restorative justice processes for managing conflicts of this nature***

All claims of racism and anti-blackness must be taken seriously, and a space created for restorative justice that affirms its harm and invests in its redress.  Restorative justice would be a potentially transformative precursor to formal (disciplinary or adjudication) processes that might avert the need for such processes. (Relatedly, a Faculty Senate team has been trying to redesign the discipline and grievance sections of the UW Faculty Code to make it more humane and effective, see details here [https://www.washington.edu/faculty/senate/faculty-disciplinary-task-force/.)](https://www.washington.edu/faculty/senate/faculty-disciplinary-task-force/). At the center of restorative justice is an acknowledgment that  offensive behaviors cause harm to people, relationships, and the community.  People who view themselves as victims of harm feel vulnerable and want to close that wound. Each person wounded has to be able to talk about the meaning to them of their wounding. If the parties are willing, the best way to do this is to help them meet to discuss those harms and processes for resolution. Sometimes those meetings lead to transformational changes in the lives of all involved. There are three big ideas here: (1) repair: offenses cause harm and justice requires repairing that harm; (2) encounter: the best way to determine how to do that is to have the parties decide together; and (3) transformation: this can cause fundamental changes in people, relationships and communities. [Source: <http://restorativejustice.org/>].  There is expertise on restorative justice in our own School of Law.

Since the UWSOM has struggled with racism (especially anti-Black racism) from its inception, and since students have been calling attention to this problem for many years, we support UWSOM committing resources and implementing permanent institutional changes that support restorative justice processes that meaningfully process classroom incidents, conflicts in clinical settings, concerns about leadership, and other situations. The lack of pre-existing mechanisms clearly has hurt both faculty and students attempting to solve problems this spring.

***This work is not easy***

We acknowledge and affirm everyone who is doing the hard work of dismantling racism in ourselves, in our classrooms, in our institutions, especially those in the SOM at this difficult juncture. We especially acknowledge the hard work of Black and Indigenous students, faculty, staff, alumnae, and administrators who are continually called and unfairly held accountable to do this work to challenge, educate and change the majority white institutions in which the rest of us have greater privileges.  Non-Black faculty and administrators need to harness themselves to the non-optional work of building institutional policies and practices aimed at ending racism and anti-Blackness through restorative justice. Developing these processes in SOM will serve the entire University.

***/proposed to be signed by UW AAUP Chapter board/***

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[Shawn O Utsey](https://www.worldcat.org/search?q=au%3AUtsey%2C+Shawn+O.%2C&qt=hot_author); [Iman Shabazz](https://www.worldcat.org/search?q=au%3AShabazz%2C+Iman%2C&qt=hot_author) ([Burn Baby Burn Production).](https://www.worldcat.org/search?q=au%3ABurn+Baby+Burn+Production%2C&qt=hot_author)***Until the well runs dry: medicine and the exploitation of black bodies*.** [Virginia Commonwealth University. Department of African American Studies,](https://www.worldcat.org/search?q=au%3AVirginia+Commonwealth+University.+Department+of+African+American+Studies%2C&qt=hot_author) United States : Privately Published, 2011.         eVideo access here: <https://www.worldcat.org/title/until-the-well-runs-dry-medicine-and-the-exploitation-of-black-bodies/oclc/1078475228/editions?referer=di&editionsView=true>

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Useful conceptual model from the [RYSE Center](https://rysecenter.org/) in Oakland, CA

