

**Subject:** MPA program policies, practices & responsibilities with regards to race, equity & inclusion

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**From:** Anna Thomas

**To:** Tabitha Marie Benney, David Paul Carter, Richard T. Green, SHARON MASTRACCI, John Steven Ott, paultmorris@outlook.com, CHRISTOPHER A SIMON, Phillip McMinn Singer, LINA SVEDIN, JESUS VALERO, Erin Moore, Lara Lee Bauer

June 5, 2020

Dear colleagues, professors and mentors –

We are writing to you as concerned alumni of the MPA program at the University of Utah. We are writing, as white allies, at the request of our peers who identify as Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC).

The lack of substantive response, reflection and action by our MPA leadership in the context of persistent civil rebellion against police brutality against black people, as well as other evidence of entrenched systemic racism that harms and kills BIPOC community members, is disappointing and hurtful.

We understand that a brief message was posted by the current program director, titled "[Program Director's Statement Regarding the Death of George Floyd](#)." Thank you for taking the time to acknowledge the importance of the moment, and for making reading, donation and voter registration recommendations.

What is missing from this message is any acknowledgment of the work that must be done *by the program itself* in the area of race, equity and inclusion.

Many of our peers of color have struggled as part of the MPA program. We have heard from these friends, colleagues and fellow students that they have, at times, felt: tokenized or expected to speak "for all people of color" during class conversations; marginalized by the absence of discussions of race and equity in courses; and frustrated with faculty and classmates' unwillingness to engage in uncomfortable conversations about persistent social and professional inequities.

Representation, responsiveness, and equity are all critical components of responsible public administration. Public administrators – whether they serve in non-profit organizations or governmental agencies, or engage with government as part of the private sector – bear a very unique and important responsibility to engage in the mitigation and eradication of inequity.

It is not enough to recommend that public administration students vote, give money and educate themselves as individuals. As one of the primary entities training the next and current generations of public servants in Utah, the University of Utah MPA Program must look inward to its own practices and processes. For example, the statement that was posted did not explicitly address the needs, concerns or feelings of students of color; rather, it implicitly was addressed to white, middle class students who are also U.S. citizens (those who have money to donate, those who are able to legally

vote, and those who need to learn about “White Fragility.”) We believe that just a couple conversations, with just a couple of MPA students or alumni of color, would have resulted in a very different, and likely more inclusive, message at this painful time.

We strongly encourage MPA Program leadership – including all MPA program professors – to listen to students and alumni of color at this time and going forward. Public administrators of color report feeling unseen, alone and unsupported in the MPA program. Public administrators who are white, are not exposed – through traditional program offerings – to the programmatic approach to critical race theory that is warranted by our social realities.

Decisions about housing and lending policies, legislation that enables and excuses use of force, placement of disruptive infrastructure, budgetary allocations that preference one area of public work over another, unequal implementation of community programs...all perpetuate systemic racism, and *all* are within the purview of public administrators.

The MPA Program at the University of Utah trains and educates public administrators. What is the program doing, comprehensively, to prepare public administrators to be part of solutions we need to support and advance communities of color? To this point, the answer has been: very little. In the words of Dr. Brian Williams:

In the safe spaces of university settings where future public administrators are taught and trained, trepidation continues to rule the day. Our nervousness as instructors seem to prevent candid discussions and resulting action to understand and ultimately address the problem of white supremacy and racism in American society (Gooden, 2014). This is coupled with our disinterest or oversight in valuing and supporting research and scholarship on this and related topics. Our field’s trepidation may be a result of a lack of understanding, a lack of institutional incentives, a disinterest in addressing the problem, a harboring of racist beliefs, or a combination of the above. ***As a result, our field is complicit either as intentional or functional actors in support of administrative racism*** ([Williams, n.d.](#)).

We would like to see more reflection, organizational change and action from our MPA program. We would like our friends, colleagues and peers of color to be at the forefront of this work, and we are ready to be their allies in this work.

Thank you for your attention.  
We look forward to your response.

Jamie Linville, MPA ‘18  
Public Sector Marketing Director, Lenovo

June Hiatt, MPA ‘20  
Organizer, Utah Renters Together

B. Peter Monson, MPA ‘18  
Grant Coordinator & KCPW Board of Directors

Steve Gehrke, MPA ‘12

Director of Administrative Services/Quality and Process Improvement,  
Utah Department of Corrections

Sarah J. Balland, MPA '18  
Policy Analyst, Office of Legislative Research and General Counsel

Tracey Farnsworth, MPA '17  
Administrative Manager, University of Utah

Megan Hillier-Geisler, MPA '18  
PhD Student, Lilly Family School of Philanthropy (IUPUI)

Stacey Adams, MPA '11  
Public Involvement Manager, Somers-Jaramillo + Associates  
President-Elect, Utah Chapter American Society for Public Administration

Whitney Reed Poulsen, MPA '18  
Lead Internal Business Operations Consultant, AT&T

Anna (Brower) Thomas, MPA '14  
Senior Policy Analyst, Voices for Utah Children

Baylee White, MPA '18  
Real Property Agent, Salt Lake City Corporation

Mr. Jan Bents, MPA '18  
Senior Associate Director of Admissions, Kelley School of Business