

An open letter to the University of Utah Master of Public Administration (MPA) Program:

We are writing to you as former and current MPA students of color and current public administration professionals. In the past few weeks, we have seen various public institutions stand with our black communities to denounce law enforcement's actions and the deeply racist history of our nation. We acknowledge that the MPA program sent out an [initial email](#) on Wednesday, June 3rd acknowledging the murder of George Floyd and included a general call to action. However, the lack of long term accountability from the program itself is disappointing. The purpose of our letter is to call the program into an acknowledgement of a shared responsibility and to contextualize this within our experiences in the program.

While the specific email itself is not our main point of contention, we must address the glaring omissions of that communication. The email titled, *These Interesting Times Keep Getting More Interesting*, feels inappropriate at best, callous at worst. This is a time of deep mourning and pain for people of color and black members of our community. We ask the program to address the murder of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Bernardo Palacios and other fellow human beings adequately. We also ask the MPA program to refrain from making judgments on the appropriateness of specific methods of protest. It is not the place of any institution or ally to judge the merits of the tactics of a movement that is not ours to lead.

The program's principles, espoused in its mission, declared objectives and learning outcomes set forth by the Network of Schools of Public Policy Affairs and Administration (NASPAA) describe the responsibility of public administrators to address the history of systemic racism, colonization, and violence in our public institutions. As students of color who have spent years in this program, we have seen time and time again; this goal has not been met.

While it should not be necessary to share our experiences and to engage in unpaid labor for the benefit of our white peers and professors, we feel it is essential to do so at this time when the lack of this conversation has led to the deaths of so many. In just the past two years, we saw that with one notable exception in Dr. Jesus Valero's Non-profit Management course, our courses had one reading per syllabus on the topics of race, inequality, oppression, and privilege and sometimes none at all. When these topics were covered they were done from a framework of affirmative action, monetary gain, while inequality, systemic racism, oppression, privilege, and internalized bias were rarely mentioned. If they were mentioned, it was discussed shortly, incorrectly, and in a very surface-level way. In our enrollment, we have never had black peers or professors in our classrooms. Many of the people in the program today want to support and work with marginalized communities and are actively thwarted by our professors lack of knowledge on these topics. Our peers graduate with little understanding of the daily oppressions and

inequalities faced by BIPOC in the United States and the impact of their roles as public administrators in these communities.

As we collaborated to write this statement, it was apparent that traumatic experiences happened to each one of us. In our first class in the program, the videos of the murders of two separate people of color by law enforcement were shown as part of a guest speaker's lecture without a trigger warning or a thorough contextualizing of the systemic violence of these acts. In the few courses taught by professors of color, white students would show a lack of respect and microaggressions that were not seen with white professors, including questioning the professor's credentials, speaking over the professor and asking the professor about affirmative action in their path to being hired. The responsibility to speak up about these inequalities and comments made out of ignorance required emotional labor that often led to racial battle fatigue. Our professors' inability to facilitate such conversations would lead to the tokenization of our experiences and that of all people of color.

In 2015, The University of Utah Office for Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion set forth [13 initiatives](#) that originated from student demands in response to nationwide protests after the murder of Freddie Gray. We believe the MPA program can implement these initiatives to address the inequities of our systems, the responsibility cannot be passed to just one diversity hire, one diversity class, or one diversity office. We call on the MPA program to consider the following recommendations to better prepare graduates to address the systemic racism that is very much present in public administration.

- **Immediately address the lack of black students and faculty in the program.** The program needs to ask, how we are discussing the inherent anti-blackness that all non-black individuals have been taught to hold? What resources are we offering to our black communities? How are we reaching out to future and past black students and providing our support? How is the program ensuring that the history of slavery, segregation and current violence against black communities is weaved into every course and learning outcome?
- **Radical curriculum change to encompass an anti-racist framework.** As the program is currently implemented, the onus of anti-racist curricula is placed on students of color. The program needs to take immediate steps to require the comprehensive facilitating of this framework by current faculty. This should include training on privilege, racism, colonization, the impact of racism, and implicit bias on all facets of public administration. The department should also vet all outside speakers to ensure they don't hold racist values or harm students further. We urge the program to require and offer at least one course that all students must complete that encompasses the history of racism in public administration.

- **Diverse Faculty Hiring Initiative.** The lack of diversity in MPA faculty, administrators, and advisors is glaring. We ask that the MPA engage in a hiring initiative to recruit more faculty, administrators, and advisors of color and from black, LBTQ+, indigenous, and other marginalized backgrounds. This should include faculty, administrators, and advisors that have specific experience in academic research and praxis of anti-racism, critical race theory, and colonization within a public administration framework.
- **Clear and accessible policies to address violence and microaggressions towards students of color.** Institute a reporting method for students of color to report incidences, staff response, and to receive mentorship for faculty of color. Institute clear accountability measures for when others engage in these behaviors while in the program.
- **Mentoring and support for students of color.** We ask the MPA program to provide paid leadership and mentorship opportunities for students of color. The MPA program should institutionalize a public affairs student association focused on supporting students of color. It should have funding and support at the same level as the Public Affairs and Global Enterprise Student Association (PAGE).
- **A long-term strategic plan with accountability measures.** The MPA should create clear and tangible goals to report on the progress of anti-racist measures. Once instituted, the program should report on progress to students, alumni and community members at least once a year.

Sincerely,

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