

# Open Letter to Dr. Friedman from the BSA

Dear Dr. Friedman:

On June 2, 2020, you issued a letter detailing how recent episodes of civil unrest – a response to the modern-day lynchings of black and brown peoples at the hands of police – captured your attention. As a student at Piedmont Community College (PVCC), a Proud Black woman, and the newly elected president of the Black Student Alliance (BSA), I am glad you acknowledge the injustices plaguing people of color and welcome your efforts in promoting equality.

Our club is dedicated to dismantling the isms of the world. We elevate, amplify, encourage, and protect the narratives and voices of people of color. We welcome anyone who shares these goals and are committed to combatting the systemic, oppressive structures that saturate society. Our work also celebrates the diverse perspectives that come with intersectionality, which is why we partner with other campus clubs and community organizations to champion a world of true equality.

Dr. Friedman, you closed your letter with a call to action for each and every one of us in the PVCC Community to stand against a system that has historically promoted racism and bigotry; the BSA has accepted your challenge.

We want you to know the best defense against oppression of any kind is to humanize the survivors and empathize with their stories and experiences. Therefore, we would like to focus your attention on the areas of education surrounding race and racism, fostering an environment of honest and open communication, and investing in staff enrichment and diversity. These recommendations were compiled by students based on our shared experiences during our tenure at PVCC. We believe if the administration were to concentrate efforts on these key topics, PVCC would be on a path

towards a more welcoming, diverse campus, and a better tomorrow.

Racism is an incredibly difficult and sometimes uncomfortable topic of discussion. But if you ask any student of color how racism is approached in their classes, many will express a lack of experience completely or an experience that registers as unsatisfactory. Sadly, discussions with educators and staff will likely reveal results that are steeped in the same discomfort. It is with this in mind that the BSA recommends the college host or encourage faculty and staff to attend a training and/or seminar about racism in education covering topics such as how to discuss it, how to diffuse tensions in classroom settings, and how to educate others about racism in a manner that does not cause students to feel invalidated.

It would be remiss of us not to address the ways in which racism can affect the curriculum as it exists in course materials. The medical field, for instance, has long held the myth that Blacks and Whites perceive pain differently – a statement that is ludicrous to us because there is no scientific evidence to support this belief, yet a nursing textbook published by Pearson in 2017 attempted to categorize pain perception based on ethnicity – an idea that perpetuates the notion of alterity on a basic human level. This is but one example of how racism can be hidden in curriculums and have dangerous consequences.

In response, we recommend the college establish a committee to examine our current curriculum and textbooks for outdated, biased, and/or ambiguous information that can be easily misconstrued and misrepresented. A panel consisting of a variety of professors as well as members of the staff would be best. We ask that this committee recommend replacement textbooks and/or curriculum guide points for professors. These endeavors would arm the faculty, students, and staff with

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the proper approaches to race within their disciplines of study. There is the added benefit of knowing those employed at PVCC would be equipped with the absolute best tools to handle the large issues of our society today – a benefit that would not only make them invaluable to us but potentially make PVCC the model for the rest of the Virginia Community College System (VCCS).

PVCC is a beacon within the community. Knowing just how influential our tight-knit college is, the college should host a deliberative dialogue on race and racism. Last year's deliberative dialogue on gun control sparked many passionate and important conversations on and off-campus while allowing us a glimpse into the personal (humanized) experiences of those around us. Due to the rising civil unrest in the country, now is the perfect time for such a discussion. We feel PVCC is the ideal venue – we have the space, several members of staff dedicated to a more equitable world, and most importantly, we have the ability to draw in representatives of every demographic within our community. For us, it just makes perfect sense and we're hopeful that you can see the vision as well.

Your letter referenced the value statement of the college – “We seek to promote an understanding and appreciation of differences by creating an inclusive environment embracing individuals with diverse backgrounds, experiences, and aspirations.” One of the things that makes PVCC such a wonderfully unique and special place is just how diverse the student body is. One can quickly find their “tribe” on grounds with ease. We wish that same diversity was reflected in the staff. While PVCC has a tremendously talented staff, the diversity of it does not quite ring true with our value statement. If PVCC is truly seeking to foster an “inclusive environment” that welcomes

“individuals with diverse backgrounds”, we would like to see it reflected in the recruitment of qualified candidates of color - especially with respect to faculty. We are well aware this is an ongoing process and one that is quite an endeavor. We want you to know, Dr. Freidman, that we aren't asking for increased diversity on campus with the expectation that it will occur overnight. We are simply asking that the college consider ways to improve the staff and faculty diversity in the years to come.

We believe in working hand in hand with the school and the community to eradicate the ism's of the world. We understand at times it can feel like a futile battle; every day seems to birth new challenges, setbacks, and difficult moments; however, we also understand what is at stake. We understand just how and why those before us carried the torch and we share in those same dreams. We understand that “freedom ain't free” and that if we do not push and persist “nothing will ever change”.

As a club filled with passionate members from differing backgrounds, we also understand the power of unity. I've spent most of this letter detailing “demands”, so to speak, and would like to, now, change the tone. We are crafting a calendar of events that supports all of the endeavors we asked you to undertake if you decide to implement them (no pressure). As the BSA President, I personally invite you, Dr. Friedman, and your administration to attend of our Wednesday meetings and any of the many events we have planned for the upcoming semester. We are thankful for your consideration and are awaiting your response.

Sincerely,

Miss Sheketa S. Payne

PVCC Black Student Alliance President