

October 20, 2020

Dear President Schapiro,

As a group of Black and African American Studies faculty members and affiliates at Northwestern, we are extraordinarily troubled by your email to the Northwestern community decrying the nonviolent student protests calling for the abolition of the NUPD. Perhaps we are saddest given that this denunciation is the most full throated expression of “disgust” or call for “accountability” that we have heard from you or your office over the last 6 months—months in which our University and our country have seen so many displays of actual violence against Black people, Indigenous people, Asian and Asian American people, Latinx people, international students, transgender people, people with the temerity to wear masks, queer people, people speaking Spanish in public, and other marginalized groups nearly too numerous to name. Here at Northwestern, Black students wrote to you on [June 3](#) and the Department of African American Studies wrote to you on [October 15](#) detailing concerns about police violence and structural racism at Northwestern, and outlining a long list of remedies. Both were, at best, met with a pusillanimous response.

It is only when your own pleasant suburban life was disrupted by student protestors that your expression of outrage and dismay to our University community rose to a level beyond the banal, the tepid and the timid.

It is offensive in the extreme to read your prompt and strongly worded denunciation of nonviolent student protests given that there was NO letter denouncing the remote Zoom attack on the University’s Women’s Center this past spring, despite the vile and criminal child pornography that accompanied this attack, and NO letter reassuring Northwestern’s faculty of color—and all faculty who have dedicated their lives to writing, researching, and teaching antiracist scholarship—that the White House’s recent executive order criminalizing our work would find no purchase here. Even the police’s killing of George Floyd in Minnesota, which many people denounced months ago as nothing short of municipally-sanctioned murder, became, in your exceedingly brief statement, their “[fatal mistreatment](#)” of an unarmed man.

To read your damning letter to students in this context forces us to hear the shallowness of your concerns and priorities with excruciating clarity. It is beyond tone deaf for you to ask this group of protestors to imagine what it would be like for their families to be disturbed in the middle of the night “by such vile and personal attacks.” In the wake of the murder of Breonna Taylor—who was shot and killed in her own home while sleeping in her bed in the middle of the night, and afforded no justice even in death—this is precisely what Black and brown people have been imagining and experiencing. These images are regularly, consistently accompanied and occasioned by the specter of the police’s terrifying power, and their failure to serve or protect communities of color. Here on campus, reporting by the [Daily Northwestern](#) documents the disproportionate policing of Black students. Whereas Black students comprise roughly 6 percent of the student population, 22-40% of NUPD field-initiated stops over the past two years have been of Black people.

Given these realities, it is difficult to conceive of the level of ignorance, narcissism, or disingenuousness that would have to be present for you to personalize students referencing “pigs” as an antisemitic slur, rather than to understand these students’ anger as a product of nightmarish experiences that you—as an adult who in fact wields a great deal of power—bear substantial responsibility to address. As President, it is your responsibility to reverse the historical refusal of Northwestern to institute structural anti-racist change, policies, practices, and programs.

You have made it clear that you will use the power of your office to “shame” and thereby control dissent, but we must speak truth to this misguided power. We therefore condemn your inability to imagine that injustice is something that is bigger than your own injured pride and hurt feelings. We condemn your absent presence at this university during the past 6 months of staff, faculty and student distress, dismay, exhaustion and struggle. We condemn your allowing sour, small and moribund leadership to flourish here while visionary innovators must dissemble, wither and fade, or simply escape. We condemn your failure to lead and imbue Northwestern with a grander and more humane vision for the present and the future.

Signed,

Faculty and Affiliates of the African American Studies Department