

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

October 2, 2020

The Honorable Betsy DeVos
United States Secretary of Education
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20220

The Honorable Robert King
Assistant Secretary
Office of Postsecondary Education
400 Maryland Avenue, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20220

Dear Secretary DeVos and Assistant Secretary King,

We write today in response to your letter sent to Princeton University on September 16, 2020. We were both alarmed and disappointed in the Department of Education's response to Princeton University's efforts to grapple with our nation's painful history of systemic racism and discrimination. We stand with Princeton University ("Princeton") and urge you to reconsider your decision to open an investigation into this university.

In his letter to the Princeton community dated September 2, 2020, President Eisgruber outlined steps that Princeton is taking to address systemic racism at the University in response to the national reckoning with racism that was spurred by the killings of unarmed Black Americans at the hands of law enforcement. These steps include measures such as exploring the possibility of a "new credit or degree granting program that would extend Princeton's teaching to a new range of students from communities disproportionately affected by systemic racism and related forms of disadvantage," assembling a more diverse faculty, diversifying external advisory committees, and collecting and publishing a report on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, among other ideas. We commend Princeton University for taking these steps in an effort to address our nation's painful history with discrimination and segregation.

Princeton University's efforts to confront and examine the ways in which it contributes to and perpetuates systemic racism are in line with efforts being made by businesses, schools, and institutions across the country, including the federal government.¹ By definition, systemic racism is less perceptible than individual racism because it "originates in the operation of established and respected forces in society," and are "the rules, practices, and customs once rooted in law with residual effects that reverberate throughout society."² For example, we can still see evidence of this country's earlier legalized exclusion of people of color in our higher education system. This is evidenced by the fact that only six percent of college professors are Black, compared to 14 percent of university students, while just five percent of faculty members are Hispanic compared

¹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/powerpost/democrats-unveil-broad-police-reform-bill-pledge-to-transform-law-enforcement/2020/06/08/1ed07d7a-a992-11ea-94d2-d7bc43b26bf9_story.html;

² Carmichael, Stokely, Hamilton, Charles V, *Black Power: Politics of Liberation* 4 New York Vintage (1992); <https://abc7news.com/systemic-racism-definition-structural-institutionalized-what-is/6292530/>

to 20 percent of students.³ Additionally, Black students who began college in the fall of 2011 had higher dropout rates and lower six-year completion rates than any other racial group – 46 percent at public institutions and 57 percent at private institutions.⁴ Princeton’s efforts to examine and address these types of disparities should be lauded, not punished.

We are also deeply concerned that the Department of Education’s effort to undermine Princeton’s efforts to combat systemic racism on campus will have a chilling effect on those institutions also undergoing a similar type of examination. We should be actively encouraging and supporting colleges and universities to examine the institutional and broader barriers that disproportionately impact underrepresented groups in this country, especially in the midst of a global pandemic. In addition to necessary broader policy changes, action at the individual level to address systemic racism, is an important step in ensuring a fair and just society for all Americans.

We respectfully request a meeting with our staff to discuss the Department’s process for opening this investigation into Princeton University, as well as jurisdictional concerns that we have about the investigation. Please contact Nia Lesesne (Nia_Lesesne@booker.senate.gov) to arrange a time for this discussion.

Sincerely,



Cory A. Booker
United States Senator



Robert Menendez
United States Senator

³ Flaherty, Coleen *Professors Still More Likely Than Students to be White*, Inside Higher Ed (2019).

⁴ https://www.chronicle.com/article/nearly-half-of-undergraduates-are-students-of-color-but-black-students-lag-behind/?bc_nonce=yxczok38sqaqm9iimgmeh&cid=reg_wall_signup