



**African and African American Studies Program
University of Nebraska-Lincoln**

**Statement in Response to the Current Racial Crisis
June 5, 2020**

We, the faculty of the African and African-American Studies Program at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, are compelled to speak out in condemnation of the most recent string of racist killings of black men and women in the U.S. and to express our firm support for and solidarity with the ensuing protest movement that has arisen across the country and around the world, including in Omaha, Lincoln and other Nebraska cities and towns.

The University of Nebraska President Ted Carter writes on May 30, 2020, “the ugliness of racism continues to plague our country, and too many of our own students, faculty and staff know its pain.” Chancellor Ronnie Green adds, “racism in any form is wrong and has no place in our lives, our communities, or institutions.” Further, Chancellor Green states, “Those of us entrusted to leading institutions must stay committed to truly listening, truly learning and to understanding our own bias” and to “address deeply embedded histories of exclusion.” UNL’s Office of Diversity and Inclusion states that as the land-grant university for Nebraska, “diversity and inclusion are central to our mission and pursuit of excellence. Each person has something to gain from and offer to our community of learning, discovery and outreach. All are welcome here.”

UNL’s N2025 Strategic Plan states, “Every person and interaction matters”. However, this cannot be realized until black lives matter on and off campus.

In particular, at this time, we immediately demand:

- An overhaul of current police procedures that embolden law enforcement officers to use deadly force and escalation tactics. Key elements must include, more robust community oversight of the police; the right of civilians to record police; mandatory body cameras; de-militarization of local and state police departments; legal limits on the use of force; investment in rigorous and on-going training, including implicit bias, procedural justice, relationship-based policing, community interaction, crisis intervention, mediation, conflict resolution, and rumor control; negotiation of fair contracts with police unions that remove barriers to effective misconduct investigations and civilian oversight, keep officers' disciplinary records accessible to police departments and the public, and ensure accountability for officers and departments that kill or seriously injure civilians; true community representation in police forces and administration; and appropriate engagement with black peoples as well as all minoritized groups.
- A formal review and reconsideration of any institutional relationships and partnerships with local and state police forces by the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.
- Guarantees to protect the democratic rights to free expression and peaceful protest by all UNL students, faculty and staff participating in the movement for racial justice.
- Improved student access to on-campus legal, medical, and other services. Specifically, a reduction in the bureaucratic complexity of applying for federal emergency funds. Students should be able to request an enrollment waiver, if necessary, to access these and other emergency services.

We are concerned by the heavy-handed reaction by law enforcement and certain political leaders in response to what have been, overall, largely peaceful protests in Lincoln and Omaha. Demonstrators, including UNL students, have been tear-gassed, body-slammed, yanked by the hair, rammed by cars, shot with rubber bullets and arrested for exercising their constitutional rights to protest. These reactions by local police and National Guard troops have unnecessarily escalated an already volatile situation and further eroded trust between community members and those sworn to protect them. Furthermore, local and state leaders have initiated a mandatory curfew, which raises new and significant questions about the constitutional rights of Nebraskans. We demand that all law enforcement maintain a protective posture with regard to demonstrators exercising their rights to peacefully assemble and protest and that police refrain from using any tools and techniques that might harm community members in the exercise of those rights. We call for a non-partisan investigation into the state's response to the demonstrations and its use of excessive force, as well as a repeal of "state of emergency" declarations that criminalize peaceful protest. While these incidents happened off-campus, local, state, and national events affect UNL students on-campus, in the classroom, and their feeling of belonging at the university.

On February 23, 2020, father and son, Travis and Gregory McMichael, hunted and then gunned down 25-year old Ahmaud Arbery as he innocently jogged in Glynn County, Georgia. A third co-conspirator, William Bryan, filmed the murder from a second vehicle. It was not until May 5, that a video of the killing emerged and went viral. On March 13, 2020, Louisville police shot and killed 26-year-old Breonna Taylor in her apartment during a raid targeting two men who law enforcement believed were selling drugs out of a house more than 10 miles away. On May 25, 2020, white Minneapolis police officer, Derek Chauvin, killed 46-year-old George Floyd after kneeling on his neck for more than eight and a half minutes while Floyd repeatedly plead, "I can't breathe" and called out for his mother. Two other officers, J. Alexander Kueng and Thomas Lane helped Chauvin restrain Floyd, while a fourth officer, Tou Thao prevented onlookers from intervening. Multiple videos of the Floyd killing quickly appeared online, sparking the largest wave of urban unrest in U.S. history since the rebellions that rocked more than 100 cities after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968.

In recent days, students and community members in Lincoln, Omaha, and beyond have organized and participated in protests against police brutality and systemic racism and for justice. We stand in solidarity with these actions, particularly those of UNL students, who have been at the forefront of demanding accountability from law enforcement and state authorities, as well as articulating a new agenda for meaningful transformational change and justice. As faculty members in the African and African American Studies Program, we feel a special responsibility to support and protect the free expression of conscience by our students in the name of racial justice.

During demonstrations on Saturday, May 30, an unarmed 22-year old African American man, James "Ju Ju" Scurlock, was shot and killed in Omaha's Old Market by a white business-owner, Jake Gardner, with a history of racism and transphobia. We join thousands of others across our state and nation in demanding justice for James Scurlock and the establishment of an unbiased grand jury to determine if charges should be brought against Gardner.

The Institute for Ethnic Studies, which will be celebrating its fiftieth anniversary at UNL in 2022, has a unique and historic responsibility to marshal the scholarly expertise of its faculty in pursuit of social justice and community uplift. We take that mandate seriously.

As a collective of interdisciplinary scholars with expertise in African Studies, African American Studies, comparative Black history and critical race and ethnic studies, we understand the historical roots and

contemporary manifestations of white supremacy and anti-blackness here in the U.S. and as a global phenomenon. In many ways, there is nothing new about the tragic killings of these four African Americans at the hands of law enforcement and white vigilantes. Sadly, they are a part of an unbroken and on-going history of racist violence against black people across U.S. history. They speak to the entrenched normalcy of racism and anti-black violence in American society and the failure of this nation's institutions and leadership to address them. The pain and rage being expressed by millions of people in demonstrations across the country and around the world are the result of those failures. The declaration that "Black Lives Matter" echoes across more than four centuries of African American struggle in North America to assert the basic rights and human dignity of people of African descent, as well as protect black bodies in the face of constant degradation, assault and destruction.

As scholars of race and society, we understand that after the media spotlight on George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor and James Scurlock has faded away and protests quelled, the underlying issues to these events – white supremacy, anti-blackness, police brutality and the militarization of law enforcement, as well as the broader range of racial inequality that plagues our society - will remain until the next terrible incident. We have seen this cycle repeat itself time and again, year after year, decade after decade. We have heard the promises of political, economic, education, social and civic leaders to respond, yet repeatedly they have failed to live up to those pledges. We are well past the time to take dramatic, transformational, systemic actions across a range of issues, including but not limited to police brutality, to finally ensure the basic human dignity, full democratic rights, and bodily integrity of African Americans and all people of color in the United States. To this end, our university, local, state, and national leaders need to more seriously listen to, include and be responsive to our students, faculty and the Black Lives Matter movement, more generally, in a systematic and sustained manner. Those of us in the African and African American Studies Program stand ready to use our expertise to help develop and implement the kinds of policies necessary to address these core problems on our campus, in our state, across our society and beyond in order to build what Dr. King referred to as "the Beloved Community," a truly just and equitable multi-cultural democracy.

Beyond these immediate demands, the faculty of the African and African American Studies Program remains in dialogue with each other and our campus and community allies to further articulate next steps in response to this on-going crisis. We will continue to be present and active, as we have throughout the five decades of our existence at UNL.

In solidarity with all of those working genuinely to create a more just, democratic and equitable society for all.

A luta continua! Black Lives Matter!

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