

Department of Environmental Science (DES) response to current racial injustices

In response to the racial injustices and disproportionate impacts of COVID 19, the Department of Environmental Science (DES) headed by Dr. Jon Chorover responded as follows:

June 1: Created a Space and Supportive Climate

The Head of DES sent out the following email to the faculty, staff, and students,

“The past several days have been enormously intense and troubling since we all witnessed the horrific murder of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police. The uprising we are now engaged in, in cities across the U.S. including Tucson, reveals the fury over how black and brown people are systematically mistreated, harmed, and murdered by law enforcement in our country. The murder of George Floyd sparked the current unrest, but it is part of a pattern of racist violation of humanity that we have all become much too familiar with, and that has been far too long a persistent pathology in our country.

Here at the UA, the trauma being felt by our African American colleagues and students and their families is palpable. Our department seeks to be a safe space where we can all speak openly about our concerns, and where we can provide each other the support and protection that we need during this time.

Change for the better has come as the result of protests like those happening now across the U.S. New change leaders are emerging, planning, organizing, mobilizing, and taking action, working to ensure that George Floyd’s death will not be in vain.

Please support each other in this challenging time. I am always available to hear from any of you who want to talk.”

June 1 to 3: Use of Created Space

Black, indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) communicated about racial injustices and disproportionate impacts of COVID 19 blacks and indigenous communities. Students shared an article titled “*Graduate Students of Color: Race, Racism, and Mentoring in the White Waters of Academia.*” In addition to sharing students’ emails with the department, the Head proposed to schedule an hour “for an open and inclusive departmental Zoom discussion of the issues that are being raised in this fruitful dialogue so that we can start to develop a path forward for our own department.”

June 4: Uncomfortable Conversation

The department met at 3 pm and 67 faculty, staff, and students attended. A graduate student (BICOP) facilitated the meeting. The purpose of the meeting was to talk about the following questions:

1. What are ways we can support Black, Indigenous, and Latinx students during this time?
2. What are problems people perceive regarding race inequities in our department?

3. How can both individuals and the department commit to taking actions that address these problems?

In the opening speech, the Head emphasized that *'we all worked hard to get where we are and we need to recognize that BICOP journey is harder...'* The conversations were emotional and uncomfortable for some. *BICOP* students, faculty and staff spoke earnestly and passionately. White students, faculty and staff listened with horror and disbelief. One *BICOP* professor has been with the university since 2001 and it was the first time she shared her experience with anyone in the department.

The outcomes of that meeting:

1. Formation of informal anti-racism reading groups. As the Head sent out an email to encouraging people to join and he said it well "we believe this can be a productive space for white scientists to educate themselves and discover ways to be actively anti-racist on a personal/interpersonal and structural level.
2. Establishment of the departmental resource documents
3. Schedule of two other subsequent bi-weekly meetings

June 19 and 26: Intergroup Dialogue

After June 4, the Head consulted the campus leaders on organizational inclusion, and the decision was to hold two separate meetings concurrently on Friday – one for faculty, staff, and graduate students who identify as BIPOC, and the other for those who identify as White. The meetings took place Friday, June 19 and 26 at 3-4 pm. Two facilitators led the *BICOP* meetings and one the white ones. The BIPOC groups raised the issues they face in the department and different actions we can take to address them

The next step: Merging the Intergroup

Now that both groups have met separately, the next step is to bring the two groups together and talk actions. The date is not set yet.