

Dear Neuro community,

In response to the messages sent by various leaders in the Harvard community regarding the recent injustices, the executive board of the Underrepresented Scholars in Neuroscience (USN) would like to voice a call to action for our entire community. Police brutality towards black people is just the tip of the iceberg – the sad reality is far more pervasive within American culture as inequality in healthcare access, wage distribution, and education persist. The current political and socio-economic climate fails to value, affirm, and protect members of our community from distinct backgrounds. As one of the preeminent scientific departments in the world, we have both the power and responsibility to create an inclusive environment that can catalyze broad systematic change necessary across academia. **It is from this lens that USN requests the Department of Neurobiology and Program in Neuroscience (PiN) to mount a meaningful response to issues of diversity and inclusion through concrete actionable items.**

- **Diversity training:**
  - **For PIs:** There has been past discourse between USN and PiN leaders on the need for mentorship and diversity training for current PIs. Such training has only been completed by certain faculty such as those with HHMI Gilliam fellows and has been encouraged for SAC faculty. With a community of over 100+ faculty, this is unacceptable. We request this training to be expanded to all faculty, including PiN faculty affiliates. It is imperative that our faculty is equipped to handle the needs of students and postdocs from all backgrounds to facilitate their success.
  - **For students:** In coordination with Dean Segal, Samantha Reed, and the GSAS Office of Diversity and Minority Affairs, the GSAS Diversity and Inclusion Fellows have planned a DMS Culture and Community Workshop to take place during orientation and follow-up workshops during the academic year. These workshops aim to establish and sustain an inclusive culture and community for incoming and current students and are aligned with the University's commitment to [inclusive excellence](#). These workshops must be required for our incoming students and strongly encouraged for our current students. This effort mirrors established and effective workshops in the BBS and SysBio programs that cover the interpersonal, internalized, and institutional components of racial and gender bias in academia.
  
- **Statements on Diversity and Inclusion:** As we strengthen our department through the recruitment of new investigators and students, it is important for us to understand how they will contribute to our shared values of diversity and inclusion. From this, we ask the department to require all applying students and faculty to submit a statement of equity, diversity, and inclusion. Several California based institutions have included this requirement for several years and can serve as a model to structure our own. Both faculty and student statements would be reviewed by designated members of USN.

These statements would play a significant contribution to the final admissions and hiring decisions.

- **USN Involvement in Recruitment and Admissions:** The dearth of Black, Latinx, and Native American students in PiN is apparent, often leading to feelings of isolation or imposter syndrome. For several years USN has led efforts for recruiting minority graduate students on behalf of the Program in Neuroscience. While the opportunity to engage and advise students has been fulfilling, we often feel we are given this responsibility without any authority in the decision making process. The opaque nature of the admissions process gives students little say in who our future colleagues will be. Additionally, the admissions committee consists of members with almost no ethnic diversity. This can create avenues for implicit bias in the selection of incoming students. To this end, we ask that senior members of the USN board serve as advisors in both the application triage and final admission decisions. This should be paired with the creation of paid department-based Diversity and Inclusion Fellow roles held by senior members of USN who would be devoted towards managing the extra burden recruitment activities place on USN. As advisors we can provide perspectives and insight on the applications of minority students that the admission committee may miss. An Oversight Committee that recently evaluated PiN suggested that students should be involved in the admissions process as done in other institutions such as Stanford, UCLA, and Brandeis. They also highlighted the need for PiN to have a stronger presence at conferences made for students from underrepresented backgrounds such as ABRCMS and SACNAS. These comments from the Oversight Committee serve as an external validation for the needs to act towards the measures we propose.
- **Community Engagement:** A primary issue we would like to address is the severe lack of community engagement in the discussion of the barriers that underrepresented groups face during their scientific training. For far too long the conversations on improving diversity and equality on our campus have fallen under the jurisdiction of the minority affiliation groups. *It is not the sole responsibility of the diverse members of our community to tackle these conversations.* The tragic murder of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Tony McDade, and Breonna Taylor allowed many of us to glimpse the reality of social injustices and inequalities that minority communities face everyday. However, such tragedies should not be the impetus for discussions about diversity and inclusion. We ask our department to provide town hall discussions centered on broader systemic injustices in academia where underrepresented groups have a chance to be heard, and others to be informed. These discussions may seem difficult or uncomfortable, but they would serve to educate and strengthen our community and must become commonplace.
- **Invest in external facilitators to coordinate culture and institutional change in the department:** We ask that the department make a multi-year investment in facilitators who can guide the department through the process of becoming an [antiracist institution.](#) Profoundly changing our departmental culture will require a sustained and structured

effort that needs the guidance of trained professionals. The facilitators will keep us accountable and provide expertise on best practices. They will be essential for coordinating the efforts described in this letter and can serve additional key roles including consulting with leadership, leading an ongoing task force, and leading racial affinity-group and community-wide discussions.

In his recent email, Mike Greenberg suggested that we still have a long way to go in working to eliminate the prejudice, implicit bias, and feelings of isolation that underrepresented minorities feel. Unfortunately, the politics of everyday society cannot be separated from our lives as scientists, as political decisions and our socioeconomic structure greatly impact who is able to do science and what resources they have at their disposal. Towards a better future, we urge the department to create a standing Diversity and Inclusion Task Force to not only enact the changes described here but also to serve as a platform for continued discussion about what it means to be an inclusive community in the years to come.

Since its establishment USN, in cooperation with leaders of our department and PiN has played an active role in our efforts to foster a more inclusive and welcoming community. **However, our goals cannot be achieved without action from our broader community. We ask that you show your support by adding your name to this [petition](#), regardless of academic title. Whether you express your support, or remain silent is a decision that ultimately determines if change will happen.** As this is a time to promote dialogue rather than silence or indifference, USN is also hosting a [zoom conversation](#) on **Tuesday June 9th at 5pm** for all USN members as well as allies in the PiN and HMS-Neuro community to have a place to discuss. We invite those who are able to share stories about injustices they have faced on our campus as a result of their diverse backgrounds. If you would like to remain anonymous, you can send your message or story via [this google form](#). And we invite *everyone* to help these voices be heard. In this time, as always, USN is committed to fostering a welcoming and inclusive community for all of us already here, and for those to come. We are extremely grateful for the help and guidance we have received so far and hope that our voices are heard in these actionable items.

Sincerely,  
USN Board Members



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