

June 19, 2020 (Juneteenth)

Dear UHS Deans, Julia, Ezra, and Adam (cc: Tilda and Nate),

We, the members of BSU, want to send you a summary of our reflections in response to the following questions:

- In the context of Black Lives Matter protests across the country and across the world, what are some institutional changes that we would like to see at UHS?
- What are some gaps we see in the curriculum?
- What seem to be gaps in teacher training?

Some of the requests and comments made below are direct quotes from BSU members, and some are synthesized from echoed sentiments among members.

1. Whenever there is a racially charged event or controversy, it generally hits the Black students extra hard on an emotional level. It would be extremely helpful if this were acknowledged on a more universal level by our academic classes. In other words, Alexandra shouldn't always have to write us extensions every time we are struggling to process a racist event; our teachers should automatically be understanding of our circumstances even if they can't empathize.
2. We ask that HUSH teachers find AT LEAST one movie that does not feature a whipping, beating, and/or murder of a Black person, and make this movie required for ALL sections to screen.
3. We specifically request that some serious rethinking be done about the screening of *Birth of a Nation* and/or *12 Years a Slave* in the HUSH curriculum. This may mean removing the films entirely, having separate screenings based on students' race/ethnicity, increased preparation for the raw violence, increased post-film processing time, or a mix of these options. We fervently request that any plans for future screening of these films in HUSH be run by current BSU leaders for approval.
 - a. Every single BSU upperclassmen engaged in this discussion described the experience of watching *Birth of a Nation* and/or *12 Years a Slave* with their HUSH class as "triggering," "traumatizing," and/or "re-stimulating." This cohort includes the class of 2020 UHS graduates, who, in most cases, were the only Black student in their class during this emotionally jarring and traumatizing experience.
 - b. For many of the Black students at UHS, watching these movies felt like we were a part of the lesson for the White students during these movies—especially as a result of our very public physical & emotional reactions, and also due to the fact that typically, we went into these

classes with significantly more knowledge of the topics covered in these movies compared to our White peers. This is not okay, nor is it acceptable or fair to put a student, especially one already subject to increased trauma, through such an experience, year after year.

4. We recognize that White students need to learn about White supremacy, but we, as Black students and UHS students more broadly, would also like to learn about Black power and excellence.
 - a. Generally, Black students feel that the History department excludes the names of powerful Black people in history—for example, not properly covering the Harlem Renaissance, but spending two whole weeks studying the KKK, and not even mentioning the names/specific Black people who came into power post-reconstruction.
 - b. Complaints have been previously raised with current HUSH teachers. They were met with the statement that there is “too little time” to cover these important topics. This makes Black students feel like our teachers value it more that the predominantly White classroom learns about ‘their dark history’ than learn about Black excellence, power, and OUR history. This further reinforces the idea that Black history and strength are on the back burner and do not matter while White hate and success are all that we speak about.
5. In the English department, we would like uplifting books about Black people instead of just depressing ones that feature violence against, torture of, and/or suicide of Black characters. At the very least, we would appreciate it if required books in 9th and 10th grade English which cover these heavier topics (for the rising senior class, these include *The Bluest Eye*, *Song of Solomon*, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglas*, and *Passing*, among others) were paired with more lighthearted, empowering books and/or Black main characters.
6. This is a general statement that is echoed in many of these points, but we think it is meaningful to explicitly state: as an educational system, we only focus on the worst parts of Black history (slavery and trauma), and never take time to celebrate the amazing parts. We, the Black students of UHS, would greatly appreciate it if our school worked to expand beyond this exhausting and demeaning framework.
7. We ask that UHS make a clearly communicated plan to donate a specific amount to our (Black) communities/organizations each year. The goal would be to enforce a constant flow of money and resources to our communities from the school.
 - a. For example, bailout funds and organizations that help Black trans people (whose life expectancy is 35) or Black-run spaces and

organizations could be good places for the school to look into investing in.

8. Generally, the teachers we are comfortable speaking about these issues with are Black, or more generally, at least POC. Explaining an experience to White teachers can feel like twice the burden since not only must we describe the events or frustrations, but we also feel the need to provide context and backup for our emotions and frustrations. We honestly think one of the simplest ways to address this in teacher training is to do one of the following:
 - a. Have a discussion between Black students about their feelings/frustrations/experiences that is recorded, and that faculty can listen to on their own time—like a fishbowl discussion without the need to feel like a public spectacle.
 - b. Have the faculty read over emails like this one, which explain parts of the Black experience in detail so that Black students don't have to do further work to articulate their thoughts & feelings. (Please feel free to share this particular letter more widely, with the entire faculty and staff.)
 - c. Have the faculty read over written work submitted by Black students (with their permission) in any applicable courses (English, History, perhaps Languages, etc.), which discusses the Black experience at UHS. Again, this would serve as a concrete repository, which teachers could refer back to as needed so that Black students don't have to do further work to articulate their thoughts & feelings over and over again.
 - d. Have a panel of Black students for the faculty. It would be nice if this could be recorded so that again, the repetitive emotional grunt work for Black students is eliminated. (Have one or two Black students review the recording each year to make sure it still feels up to date/relevant.)

We hope that you have read this document with open minds and open hearts, and that you will discuss and act upon our requests as a team. If you have any questions about this document, please communicate with Tilda as BSU members are taking a much-needed break over the summer. She will be in touch with BSU leaders as needed.

Thank you.

Respectfully submitted by 2019-2020 BSU members