

October 28, 2021

TO: Dr. Aaron Hegde, Chair of Academic Senate

FROM: CSUB African American Advisory Council

RE: African American Advisory Council's Support for a CSUB Department of Ethnic Studies

As the community and campus members of the African American Advisory Council created by President Lynnette Zelezny, we submit this letter to the California State University, Bakersfield's Academic Senate in support of the establishment of an Ethnic Studies Department at CSUB.

Established by President Zelezny in 2018, CSUB's African American Advisory Council is composed of representatives from local government agencies, faith leaders, nonprofits, civic and business organizations, as well as members of the campus community. The council was established for the purposes of having the university administration, faculty, and staff collaborate with local leaders of the community to devise approaches to better serve our region and our students. Key goals of the African American Advisory Council are to provide guidance and resources to help ensure that CSUB's graduates are well-prepared to compete in a diverse workplace and equipped not only to thrive in their professions and the communities in which they live, but to develop the skills needed to prepare them for leadership roles. With these goals in mind, this diverse group of voices helps ensure that mutually beneficial professional connections are being made between campus representatives, especially our Black students, and stakeholders in Bakersfield, Kern County, and in our broader service region.

The proposed department will provide ETHS faculty with the institutional support and resources they need to better serve our Black students and provide them with an education rooted in the purposeful origins and premise of Ethnic Studies. While this initial proposal remains under deliberation by the Academic Senate's subcommittees, we would like to voice our intentional advocacy and enduring support for the creation of this department in the strongest possible terms.

Given the racial reckoning that the United States continues to face in the aftermath of the summer of 2020, the African American Advisory Council considers it vital that Kern County's premier and only publicly supported university house an academic department that is responsible for educating and graduating culturally competent leaders. There are shockingly few courses offered that reflect the stories and realities of African Americans in the U.S. Most of the stories that are shared speak to Black pain, adversity, and struggle. More stories of triumph need to be told. Not only would this strengthen the development and persistence of African American leaders who dream of hearing stories of people who look like them, but it would also enrich the

perspective and understanding of majority-group students who have not learned much about Black stories of success.

This is an effectiveness issue. The 2020 United States Census data predicts that by 2045 this nation will no longer have a White/Caucasian majority; the country will consist mostly of people who are nonwhite. As the country undergoes this demographic shift, there is urgency in ensuring that college and university graduates are aware of and can think critically about the role of race and ethnicity in our various social and institutional systems, such as our financial, political, and educational systems, to name a few. The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center reported a drop in Black student enrollment of 19% over the last two decades. California State University has also seen a precipitous decline, and enrollment numbers for CSUB have corresponded to the negative national and statewide trends. The Education Trust also reports that Black student enrollment has declined in the same period at more than 60% of colleges and universities nationally. While numerous factors contribute to lower enrollment, a sense of belonging and the reputation of an institution certainly contribute to attraction. Over the last year, Black students at CSUB have vocalized their support for Ethnic Studies courses and articulated specific incidents of perceived marginalization. Black students are not experiencing the same positive culture as other students. They don't feel as welcome. The national and statewide data coupled with anecdotal stories from CSUB students affirm a simple solution: more Black stories must be intentionally taught and celebrated for African American students to feel a stronger sense of belonging at CSUB. It would likely strengthen enrollment.

This is also a values issue. Sharing the stories and diverse perspectives of multiple ethnic groups, especially minority groups, is simply the right thing to do. The university has a mandate to include all student groups, even those who represent the minority. The inspirational motto "Runners on the Rise" must apply to all students, including Black students, or the elevated language rings hollow. As professionals dedicated to improving our community and steering it toward a better future, we consider it to be of utmost importance and urgency that future generations of African Americans are prepared to take on the myriad of challenges that lay ahead, and can exercise with expert knowledge and informed judgement, the kinds of unbiased decision-making that will be required in leading, serving, and governing a diverse community. This was part of Martin Luther King Jr.'s lofty dream. CSUB speaks to this aspiration on their website with these noble words, "The university strives to be a model for supporting and educating students to become knowledgeable, engaged, innovative and ethical leaders in the regional and global community." We agree with that statement and CSUB's aspirational values of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Now is the time to live those values in real terms for Black students.

Kern County is the epicenter of a rich, dynamic, and inspiring local history in which anti-racism and labor activists have courageously fought against discrimination and injustices. We are Black, and we live here too. It is therefore imperative that the Bakersfield campus of the California State University system ensure that our region's collective experiences and contributions to African American society and culture

remain an integral part of our students' intellectual and socio-cultural development. Every day in Kern County and around the nation, Black students, parents, faith leaders, business professionals, and community advocates overcome adversity to achieve success in America. To combat the lingering effects of systemic inequities across multiple social sectors – those stories must be told in university classrooms. For this region to realize the promise and opportunities of our Black students and future leaders, these stories must be told in CSUB classrooms.

Ethnic Studies is a necessary pathway to ensure that all students receive a quality education rooted in critical thinking, intercultural learning, and anti-racist, liberatory pedagogy. Failure to offer courses that provide this enriching diversity of perspective constitutes a disservice to white and nonwhite students alike. In the aftermath of George Floyd, a Black man, colleges and universities across the nation asked what they could do better to support Black students attending their institutions of learning. This is one clear response that would be embraced by the African American students and faculty at CSUB and local community leaders. In our opinion, there should remain no further barriers to moving forward. We have the ability to make it so – we must now demonstrate the courage to be inclusive and socially just.

Thus, we strongly urge you and your colleagues to support the creation of an Ethnic Studies Department, which will better serve CSUB's students and its alums, and help make them unbiased leaders in a rapidly changing country and world.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Regards,

Representatives of the African American Advisory Council
(Names below)

Traco P. Matthews

Chief Program Officer, CAPK
CSUB African American Advisory Council

Arleana Waller

Founder MLKcommUNITY / ShePower
CSUB African American Advisory Council

Dr. Rhonda E. Dunga, Ph.D

Associate Professor of Sociology, CSUB

Dr. Tracey M. Salisbury

Assistant Professor, Interdisciplinary Studies, CSUB

Jessica R. Grimes, Ph.D

Dean of Economic & Workforce Development, KCCD

Patricia Lane

Coordinator for Black Educator Teacher Residency Program

Uchechi Okey-Dike

President, Hawk Honors Program

Ora Frink

Black Community Member

Shameka Morris

Black Community Member

Michael Bowers

Planning Commissioner, City of Bakersfield

Vice President of Public & Government Affairs, Centric Health

NaTasha Johnson

President, Upside Productions Management

Keith Wolaridge

Trustee, Panama Buena Vista Union School District

Dr. Julian West

Director of Student Success, Porterville College