

Statement on Institutionalized Racism from the Criminal Justice Faculty at
Bethune-Cookman University, and the Criminology Faculty at the
University of South Florida

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The long history of racial biases and tensions that have become part of the social fabric and organization of American society has periodically been brought into high relief by seemingly unconnected incidents involving police violence against Black peoples. Each of these extremely unfortunate individual incidents forms part of a larger pattern of institutionalized racism in the US. Before proceeding, it is important to note that police violence, and inequality in arrests, conviction and sentencing along racial and ethnic lines are only a few of the adverse outcomes associated with broader evidence of structural and institutionalized racism in American institutions. Thus, addressing the adverse racial biases and disparities seen in the criminal justice process requires more than limited policies specific to one manifestation of institutionalized racial bias in any given sphere of the criminal justice system.

In the recent context of the tragic killing of George Floyd, different groups and individuals have pledged their support to help end these injustices. Those pledges mean little without action. Toward this end, our two departments -- from different Universities on opposite coasts of Florida (Bethune-Cookman, and the University of South Florida) -- have previously come together to respond to the under-representation of African Americans in the field of criminology and criminal justice. It should be noted that while the proportion of Blacks under the supervision of the criminal justice system is very high, their representation among those managing that system, and among researchers and University faculty is shamefully low.

Here, we take this opportunity to briefly describe what we have been doing to support greater access to our graduate programs in criminology and criminal justice to improve African American representation in those disciplines. We encourage others to take similar steps. To be sure, USF's graduate program is not ideal, and suffers from some issues we hope to address, such as the under-representation of People of Color, the failure to require courses addressing racial diversity/inclusion and criminal justice, and a failure to address concerns among local communities of color in the Tampa area. That said, we believe the co-sponsored Bethune-Cookman/USF program represents the kind of active engagement project academics and Universities can sponsor to address some of the structural barriers to success African Americans face within academia, which also hopefully help dismantle the legacy of institutionalized racism in America.

The beginnings of the program our two universities constructed began a decade ago, when the University of South Florida was invited by Bethune-Cookman and its Director of the Criminal Justice Graduate Program, Randy B. Nelson, to create an enhanced access entry program for African American students into USF's criminology graduate program. Bethune-Cookman committed to pay a stipend for one of its African American criminal justice graduates to attend USF's criminology graduate program. In exchange, USF provided a tuition waiver and other expenses, and a scholarship to complete the final year of the Ph.D. program. USF also established a dedicated mentoring program for the selected student. As part of this experience, the student in the program agreed to return to Bethune-Cookman

upon graduation to serve as a faculty member there for a period of two years to teach in an historically-Black institution.

In envisioning this project, we endeavored to construct a program consistent with the vision and values of Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune, who founded Bethune-Cookman University in 1923. Dr. Bethune, who for many years fought for social justice in various forms, is recognized as being the only African American woman to serve on the US delegation that drafted the United Nations charter. She later served as cofounder of the United Negro College Fund.

To date, the first student in that program has completed an MA degree, and is entering the third year of the Ph.D. program. In the meantime, a second Bethune-Cookman student has also joined the program. While it is too early to speak of the successes of the students or the program, our departments hope that our initial project and experiences can be used to attract outside donor support for this initiative to further enhance access to doctoral education in criminology and criminal justice for African Americans. We believe that the institutionalization of similar programs throughout the US in departments of criminology/criminal justice can help change the nature of these fields, which, after all, deal extensively with questions of race-linked disparities in criminal justice processes, and issues of fair treatment in the criminal justice system and law.

We believe similar programs and partnerships provide an opportunity to increase the percentage of Blacks receiving terminal degrees within criminology and criminal justice. While we recognize that such an outcome in itself does not undo the historical legacy of racial bias in the United States, we believe it will establish an environment that allows for additional scrutiny of racial biases in the criminal justice system from new generations of scholars who bring fresh perspectives and energy to efforts to address this serious situation.

With hopes of peace and justice for all, The Faculty of Criminal Justice, Bethune-Cookman University, and the Faculty from the Department of Criminology, University of South Florida