June 17, 2020

Re: Statement of Solidarity with Black Lives Matter

Dear UVIC community members:

The University of Victoria Graduate Students’ Society stands with Black and Indigenous communities and People of Colour in the United States, Canada, and around the world. The GSS stands against racism and intolerance, we stand in solidarity with those experiencing racist, anti-Black violence. We stand in support of graduate students and those who are protesting, resisting, and working individually and collectively for social change.

For Canadians, it can be dangerously easy to seek distance as we watch events unfold in the United States. To do so, however, is to deny the reality that Canada is built on continuing systems of colonialism and intersectional oppression that benefit white folk at the expense of Black and Indigenous folks and People of Colour. At the GSS, we acknowledge the importance of the collective effort of continuing to work to dismantle the systemic racism that produces violence, in the US, Canada and around the world.

In academia we may think we are immune to racism, when in fact, we are part of a legacy of racist institutions built upon and with stolen lands, homes, and families. As the next generation of academics, we have the privilege and power to influence university administrations for policy change. Acknowledging the existence of systemic racism is not enough. Universities have failed to address racism through past and current practices. One step towards change is by addressing the gaps in our curriculum, reviewing our admissions criteria for systemic bias, and ensuring that scholarships and mentoring programs for Black and Indigenous graduate students are funded. Amplify, fund, and create space for the work of Black and Indigenous graduate students and scholars.

At both the university and student societies we need to be more inclusive to have diverse representation on our Boards and Committees. While we continue to support our allies, to be effective allies in anti-racist work, we acknowledge that we are still learning ourselves and do not have all of the answers. In order to be more effective in what we do, we must listen and prioritize the voices of Black and Indigenous people, and People of Colour, and follow through on their recommendations on how we can facilitate learning and improve together.
At the GSS, we believe in self-reflection and social transformation. These are times to be active and not passive; times to speak out and create commitments; times to reflect on the systemic nature of racism, internalized white supremacy and the need for a systemic remedy; times to dismantle systemic racism.

Yes, we need to speak out, but we also need to take action. We need to listen.

All that begins with individual and collective transformation and we are committed to it. At the GSS, we are committed to providing a safe space, in our building and our online platforms, for our community members and advocating for their human rights and equity. The GSS pledges to take-action through supporting our community, based on their needs, with respect and valuing human dignity. We will continue to amplifying the voices of the Black students, Indigenous students and students of colour. We are open to having more discussions, input and collaborations to continue working together in the GSS community and beyond.

As a first step, we intend to:

- Demand that the University keep better, more transparent data on racist incidents that occur on campus and that this data is made publicly available. The Ombudsperson office is able to release anonymized reports that influence University policy, there is no reason that the Equity and Human Rights (EQHR) office cannot do the same.
- Demand better follow up from the University on racist incidents that does not amount to the same tired rhetoric about confronting racism without attendant action being taken. This piece should be informed by the publicly available data and not simply guided by optics.

These are simply first steps. We hope to have a more robust platform soon.

The GSS welcomes your feedback, you can share ideas, thoughts, and remember we are here to support you. We are here to listen.

Please contact us at gsoffice@uvic.ca. Alternatively, contact information for specific individual staff and board members is available at https://gss.uvic.ca/contact

If you would rather speak directly to someone (albeit digitally for now), we are available on Blackboard every Wednesday from 9:30am - 11:00am (link: https://tinyurl.com/GSSWedCoffee). If this time does not work for you but you would still like to speak with us directly, please send us an email and we will do our best to meet with you.

In peace and solidarity,

Drake Rushford
GSS Chair

On behalf of the UVIC Graduate Students’ Society