



UNIVERSITY of
DENVER

ARTS, HUMANITIES
& SOCIAL SCIENCES

Department of
Communication Studies

January 10, 2016

University of Denver
2199 S. University Blvd.
Denver, CO 80208

Re: An Unofficial Letter on DU's "Racial Climate"

Dear University Community,

On November 13th, much of the Western world became French. That night, 130 people were killed in attacks throughout France. The University of Denver issued multiple emails to update its community on the status of 29 students studying in Europe. One of the first emails from November 13th seeks to let us know that "the University's Office of Internationalization is working to confirm the status of DU community members in Paris." Another from November 14th states: "Our hearts go out to all in Paris who have suffered from the tragedy that unfolded yesterday," noting that all 29 students are safe, but "one of the risks of sending students abroad is that they may find themselves in harm's way." While these emails appear neutral, they do two things: first, they note a necessary condemnation of the loss of (white) life; second, they situate the spaces in which people of color have lost their lives, like Baghdad, as not necessary (or deserving) of response. Three days after condemning the Paris attacks, DU finally released an email that vaguely alludes to harms suffered by nonwhite people in Beirut, Syria, and Baghdad. Yet, even this email's concerns lie with Paris: "Life in Paris...is starting to go back to normal..." There is no concern with life returning to "normal" when "terrorists" attack Muslims.

Ironically, the end of 2015 saw a few emails from DU's administration about the campus's "racial climate." One of the most recent on December 21st reassures the university's Muslim community that DU will strive to be inclusively excellent and encourage "openness to new ideas, challenges to the status quo and compassion when discussing challenging topics." It is our opinion that, despite these emails, DU participates in making its "marginalized communities" feel unwelcomed because of an implicit bias toward white life not extended to the lives of nonwhite people. Our discussion of Paris is not meant to ignore the loss of life there, but to point out the valorization of white life assumed by DU. Whether it is a lack of acknowledgement of hurricanes in Mexico, or mass murder in Kenya, or Muslims killed in Baghdad, the assumption is that DU is *most* impacted by events that occur in Western countries. The assumption is that "our" students are not in, or from, Mexico, Kenya, Baltimore, Palestine, or Baghdad.

Put differently, if "we" are "all" French now, this is clearly not meant to apply to DU's Muslims. If a risk of study abroad is students finding "themselves in harm's way," what concern does DU have for its Muslim population (and all its people of color) *here*? If DU's handling of racialized issues in 2015 is a hint, the answer to this question is none. Two examples stick out: (1) In response to anti-black racism faced at the University of Missouri, a group of largely students of color in the Fall painted the wall near Driscoll with the words: "DU Stands in Solidarity with Mizzou." No less than a day later, the wall was defaced with the words: "Pi Kappa Phi, DU's #1 online fraternity." While the fraternity denies painting the wall, DU's email response is a simplistic colorblind argument: "Over the last two days, there have been community conversations about the experiences of people of color, particularly students, at the University of Denver. And while it may make us uncomfortable to admit it, the stories that students have

shared highlight the prejudices we all carry and the inequalities we perpetuate...” Who are those uncomfortable with admitting racism exists on campus? Who is this “we” that perpetuate prejudice and inequality? It is clearly not DU’s people of color. (2) In relation to the nationwide campaign, “We’re a Culture, Not a Costume,” many DU students of color made posters of themselves holding stereotypically racist pictures of Halloween costumes. “We’re a Culture, Not a Costume” is a serious endeavor to get white students to think before dressing as an Asian, black, or Latinx character. However, many white students’ responses on social media were far from serious. One Latinx student reportedly received pictures from white students dressed in Dia de Los Muertos makeup, with the caption “When people judge you for supposedly judging them—or rather, become a victim of their own delusions.” This same Latinx student was later demeaned by white classmates *and* a professor in class for speaking out about the pictures. Here, racism is her burden alone, because DU says nothing.

We are all part of DU’s racial climate—though in different ways. The racial climate (and silence) of DU is linked to settler colonialism (“Go Pioneers!”), but also anti-black, anti-Latinx, anti-Asian, and Islamophobic racism. They work together to perpetuate the reality that some lives matter more than others. As such, we seek to address *this* climate and hope DU’s administration will join us.

Sincerely,

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