

STATEMENT FROM NEUROSCIENCE GRADUATE PROGRAM
University of Iowa

June 24, 2020

(Note: The Program is grateful for the substantial input from Neuroscience Program students in preparing this statement.)

The recent killings of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd and others have illuminated an ugly truth: that police brutality and vigilantism in America disproportionately affects Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC). The protests taking place across the country— including in Iowa City— have exposed further examples of police brutality as our Black colleagues, collaborators, friends, family, and students are tear-gassed, maced, beaten, and even murdered on our TV screens. This is to say nothing of the injustice that regularly happens off-screen: Black people and BIPOC have been sharing personal stories of police brutality that were not recorded and the many murders that have gone unannounced and unnoticed. The Neuroscience Program recognizes the painful impact of these recent events and stands in support of Black and BIPOC students and their allies.

Program Position:

- We condemn police brutality and vigilantism against all people.
- We reject heavy-handed use of excessive force against non-violent protestors, both locally and across the world.
- We affirm that it is patently true that Black Lives Matter. In so doing, we do not intend to diminish the value of any lives but recognize that Black individuals and POC have long been, and continue to be, adversely impacted by systemic racial oppression.

Program Response and Commitments:

Recent events have brought to the forefront the urgent need to address ongoing disparities and disproportionate underrepresentation of Black and BIPOC students and faculty, including within our STEM communities and Neuroscience. This is a widespread and significant problem requiring attention and commitment at Program, Institutional, and broader societal levels. As a Program, we need to redouble our efforts to improve representation of Black and BIPOC students and faculty, and provide inclusive support systems to ensure that all students and faculty thrive. To address these issues, we commit to the following:

1. Amplify Black Voices in Science

Our Program is uniquely positioned to highlight and provide a professional platform for the excellence of Black neuroscientists. At a Program level, we will intentionally seek to increase representation of Black and BIPOC neuroscientists as speakers at our Seminar Series. We encourage all Program faculty and student members of journal clubs to identify, read, present, and cite relevant papers by Black scientists.

2. Recruit Black and BIPOC Students

Despite major progress in diversifying our student cohort over the past 20 years, we recognize the urgency to further diversify the composition of the Program with increased representation of Black and BIPOC students. Progress on this front will require continued attention and investment by Program-level structures (e.g., Recruitment and Admissions Committee, Diversity Affairs Committee) as well as committed students and faculty working to encourage and promote recruitment of Black and BIPOC candidates both on- and off-campus. To accomplish these goals, the Program commits to:

- a. Maintaining a consistent and recognizable presence annually at relevant recruitment venues, including SACNAS, ABRCMS, and the Atlanta University Center Consortium conferences.
- b. Visiting Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) annually for targeted recruitment of future Black neuroscientists.
- c. Working with other entities on campus, we will help identify Black and BIPOC undergraduate students at the University of Iowa who are interested in graduate training and careers in neuroscience, and encourage them to explore and meet with members of our Program at all levels (student, faculty, leadership). We will explore ways to facilitate this by: (1) establishing a student mentor program, where undergraduate students are matched with graduate students with similar interests; (2) greater engagement with existing organizations on campus including the Iowa Biosciences Academy, Black Student Union, and Iowa Black Alumni Association.
- d. Targeting our outreach efforts to underfunded high schools to maximize the impact we have on budding scientists who may lack this level of exposure otherwise.
- e. Recognizing the burden that the graduate application fee presents to Black and BIPOC students who have limited resources. To address this, our Program will continue to provide application fee waivers upfront for first generation students, students from HBCUs, DACA, etc., so they do not face this barrier when considering joining our University of Iowa family. In addition, we will strive to make information about application fee-waivers clear, transparent, accessible, and promoted across all digital and social media platforms.

3. Enforce Ongoing Diversity Training

Scientific communities are not immune to the deep-rooted systemic racism and anti-Blackness present in all facets of our everyday lives. As a field, neuroscience has even been used to perpetrate harmful stereotypes against Black people and BIPOC, e.g., through eugenics, phrenology, and standardized testing. As part of our training as future faculty, industry professionals, PIs, and teachers, and as part of the continued training of current faculty members, it is important that we have ongoing training to address our own implicit biases. We will work within Institutional structures to implement such training consistently across all levels of the Program (students, faculty, staff, leadership).

4. Provide Resources for Black and BIPOC Students

- a. **Tab on the Program website.** The Program will modify the website to facilitate the dissemination of resources available to Black and BIPOC students.
- b. **Financial aid.** We will provide assistance for Black and BIPOC students for the costs associated with moving to Iowa City (extended to all students in need, as appropriate). We acknowledge that some barriers to Black and BIPOC students may be the result of lower socioeconomic status and/or first-generation student status. A significant barrier to success in transitioning to graduate school rests in the expenses associated with moving to a new city, typically from out-of-state. We will be transparent about when the first paycheck will be placed into the accounts of new students, as new students do not receive a first full paycheck from the Institution until

October (more than a month after the semester start date). Also, we strongly encourage the allocation of funds to assist Black and BIPOC students (and other students in need, as appropriate) through the moving process, which may include rental fees and deposits, moving expenses, the purchase of furniture, and a grocery budget for the first few weeks (to name a few). Full transparency for expected moving expenses and other associated costs and financial assistance with those expenses will facilitate the transition to Iowa City.

- c. The Program will have a fully active, innovative, and impactful **Diversity Affairs Committee**. This Committee is already set up structurally. Its scope and impact can be expanded considerably, engaged faculty and student members can be added, and the Committee can work with other units within the Program (e.g., the Recruitment and Admissions Committee, Seminar Committee, Outreach Committees, Program leadership) to accomplish impactful short- and long-term goals regarding diversity and inclusion.

5. Facilitate Black and BIPOC Leadership.

- a. Intentionally encourage and elect Black students, faculty, administrators, and postdoctoral researchers for **leadership positions** that are not just focused on Diversity and Inclusion, but in all aspects of the Program (administration, committees, TAs etc.).
- b. Work with the Iowa Neuroscience Institute and neuroscience-associated departments across campus (e.g., in the Carver College of Medicine, College of Liberal Arts & Sciences), and the University of Iowa College of Medicine and Research Centers, to **recruit Black and BIPOC faculty**.
- c. Promote hiring of Black and BIPOC persons beyond PhD and PhD-training positions, such as **administration, lab management, and communication offices**.

Now is the time to act:

The Neuroscience Program is committed to action, now, and ongoing. For example: We have revamped and revitalized our Diversity Affairs Committee. We are reaching out to Black and BIPOC scientists for Seminar speaker invitations. We are compiling lists of HBCUs that we can visit (virtually) this Fall (we are aspiring to 3-5 such visits). We are planning specific diversity training experiences for students and faculty. Going forward, we will maintain dedicated efforts to the recruitment and retention of Black and BIPOC students and faculty. And perhaps of greatest importance, we will maintain dedicated efforts to a culture change. Such change takes time, and starting now is imperative.