

The Letter I sent to him

Hello Professor Gallagher,

My name is Abigail Lee and I'm writing to discuss what can be improved with the Animation program. I've had this at the back of my mind throughout the year but felt like I needed to speak out due to current events. SCAD gave us an email to send suggestions on how to improve the environment for the Black community but I thought it would be more effective to email you directly. However, I have CC'd the email I received as well as Dean Almy and the associate chairs because this information is important to hear.

I will first talk about some issues I have with the current greenlighting system. Then, I will move on to my experiences before inserting some of my peers and friend's stories. Finally, I will then suggest changes that will hopefully improve the program. I hope you can listen with an open mind as I want to make sure that the system allows for equality and diversity in the stories greenlit.

There need to be structural changes to the greenlighting system if you want to help Black and other marginalized communities in your student body. I understand the intentions of the voting system; the professors all have years of industry experience and can use their knowledge to pick out ideas that might be the most successful. However, this becomes a problem when most of the professors who are selecting films are white, cisgender, heterosexual men. The animation department faculty is made up of 29 professors: 26 men and 3 women, 21 white people and 8 people of color. The disparity when it comes to men vs women and white vs people of color is huge. It should be the department's goal to hire more people of color and women in general. These numbers come into play because there is a problem when the makeup of the people who are greenlighting films do not reflect the student body. There will always be an unconscious bias towards stories that reflect the professor's experiences: ie cisgender, heterosexual, white men. This system needs to be changed on a fundamental level if you truly want to help your marginalized students.

On top of this, the department also desperately needs sensitivity training. Even if the films that are greenlit are diverse and inclusive, the professors need to be equipped in handling these stories. Professors should be required to ask for pronouns on the first day when they are taking attendance. They should also be taught on how to make the space more comfortable for their Black students, POC students, and LGBTQ+ students. There are tons of microaggressions that can happen, and our teachers must be constantly educated on how to make space a safer

place. Diversity in films doesn't matter if the environment for the actual students is toxic. Students should know that they can go to the professors about something they might have said and not receive any backlash. I know that some of my friends were constantly misgendered by their professors. A particular friend of mine corrected both of their classmates and professors who misgendered them but it kept on happening. They didn't feel comfortable calling it out again and had to grin and bear it. This is not acceptable. Professors shouldn't be misgendering their students and instead should strive to actively call out the classmates that misgender them as well.

Now I will talk about my reaction to the greenlighting system. I am a Korean-American woman and was at first, disappointed at the new group film structure. I wanted to make a short which delved into my experience growing up Korean-American. However, I figured that as long there was a film that went into some sort of culture or Asian experience, I would be fine. When I saw the finalized list, I was heartbroken at the fact that I couldn't see anything that represented me. The only Asian film was an anime fighting film that wasn't pitched by an Asian person, 13/27 films featured animals, hardly any of them featured a female protagonist, and there were no LGBTQ+ films. This is not ok when we have such a diverse student body who wants to tell meaningful and important stories.

Here are some experiences from my other friends.

"During the second or third class of fall quarter this school year, 2019, Schindler gave us his review of the first ten minutes of Black KKKlansmen (he himself stated that he 'couldn't get past the first few minutes'). He said it was "Just made to make white people look and feel bad." The scene that had set him off the most, wherein a speaker tells a black congregation that they are beautiful, meant a lot to me, as a black woman. He vilified it for a while, making it all about his own feelings of guilt and thereby missing the point, but what was especially troubling was that he did not stop when I asked him to move on to the topic of class. He instead got defensive and doubled down, wasting even more time and further distressing all of us. The next week, after the second time he started class with some bigoted speech that astro-projected me right back to my high school in Kansas, I did not want to come back.

Throughout the year, he continued to say ignorant and thoughtless things regarding people of color and women. Forgetting that he had a number of international Asian students in the room, he warned us that Asia "is taking over the industry" and asians are "taking our(!) jobs." Which, of course, means that jobs in animation belong to non-asians."

Another student in Professor Bill Tessier's class talked about how they were uncomfortable with his suggestion for King and the Pawn. The film is a heartfelt story about a father and his son bonding. However, Professor Tessier suggested things such as making the off-screen mother a victim of sex-trafficking, the family being involved in a shoot and run, and the 12-year-old protagonist being involved in teen pregnancy. This last statement was suggested because Tessier wanted a way to show that time was passing. This is uncalled for and there are a lot of racial implications to all these suggestions. Even by going through the "right" channels, nothing has changed. I know that people went to the dean and spoke to Professor Tessier about these issues, but we need to see actions if you want to gain the trust of the student body. Students should not have to constantly advocate for themselves to just exist as a minority.

I don't feel comfortable if I see that either of these professors oversee senior films next year.

I will now move on to ways that the program can be improved to deal with these issues. I know that these suggestions are a start and can be improved upon.

1. Hire more professors that are women, BIPOC, and LGBTQ+. I know that the department is currently hiring right now, and this is something that should be kept in mind. The students of these marginalized communities would be inspired by seeing these professors and could ask questions that are unique to these different communities. I think that would be the only reason that the greenlighting system could continue.
2. Encourage the marginalized students to tell their stories and uplift their voices. Some students might feel uncomfortable because they think that no one cares. Create an environment that shows that you are there for them.
3. Instead of the greenlighting system, consider these suggestions:
 1. Follow the group film structure of Sheridan College. Their group films involve 12 students coming together and collaborating to make a pitch. This will also show that you trust the students and the ideas that they have. The brainstorming and development of the film's concept can occur during the pitch class.
 2. Follow SCAD Atlanta's film system. I know that anyone can make their own film or work on other people's. Looking at the success of their films this year, I know it's something to consider.
4. Make sensitivity training required. I already touched on this, but this is something that needs to be mandatory.
5. Create a space where students aren't afraid to report on a professor's microaggressions and take action to show that you are listening.

I sincerely hope that the animation department and SCAD will be making changes to create a space that will be welcoming for their Black, POC, and LGBTQ+ students. I know that most of

the professors care about their students, but we need action to comfort those that are hurting right now.

Thank you for your time,

Abigail

The Letter he responded with

Hi Abigail,

First, thank you for bringing your concerns to SCAD, it's very important to keep open communication.

I just want to answer on a personal level. I never was your professor, but from the students that know me, you'll see I have a very different background than most of the professors.

I am not American. I'm a French guy, who has to adapt to another culture. It's not a problem because I'm used to that. I come from a family that escaped the Spanish civil war, never spoke french at home, and always had bi-culture. That's something extremely common in France, and because I'm from a poor family, and living in Paris, I'm used to living with an extreme mix of different cultures. Because of the history of my country, I grew up with a large group of black and Asian friends (and also some greek, Portuguese, Arabs, south-American, etc...). But I never thought about them in a different way, they were all my friends, and they were all French, even the ones born in another country.

That's why from a French point of view I feel very uncomfortable with some of the things you said, that is very common here in the US. I've been working in France, but also in other countries, with a lot of different nationalities. Of course, I had to deal with a lot of problems concerning my nationality or culture. But it's the first country where I can see comments about my "race", and accusations just on the fact that my skin is white.

I'm sorry to say this but from a French perspective, this is exactly the definition of racism: pointing fingers on people only because of a phenotype. I don't use the word race, because scientifically race doesn't exist. It's a word invented by people that want to say they're different (and usually better). Animals have races, humans only have one race, we all share 99.9% of our DNA.

To give you an example, the solutions you suggest are illegal in France. You could meet a judge just for writing this. Making any kind of discrimination in hiring connected to your ethnicity is strongly punished.

We're not allowed to ask or classify people by their skin color, origins, or anything like that, even for the purpose of statistics. And it's an amazing thing to fight against discriminations.

I don't want to discuss the specific problems with some professors. I wasn't there and this needs to be taken seriously by the university. We can discuss history or politics in a class, but as an open conversation, and not denying any input from the students. My main problem is the quality of greenlighted films.

First, concerning the process of selection, I can tell you that your Chair will listen to all your ideas. For the last 3 years, the organization of the films changed a lot. It's always in discussion and we change things every year, and we all agree that you need to be heavily involved in the stories of your films to do a good job. I personally agree with some of your suggestions (that have been discussed with the whole department), but also keep in mind that there's a lot of things that make changes a lot slower in real life.

But that doesn't change the fact that it will always be the best pitches that will be chosen. And honestly, when I see the overall quality of what was greenlighted, it's extremely easy to get your film there (and if you don't believe me you can ask my students that already led collab projects in my class, and that got their films picked without hesitation).

I've been working at the Gobelins and the style, originality, and depth are way higher than that. I had several films with Asian

vibes because the influence of Asian animation, and not only Japanese, is extremely strong in France, and Europe in general. And these films were pitched by people from all over the world (half of the class was a special international class).

You're taking the film *Itch* as an example. First I don't understand why it's a problem that she wouldn't be an Asian person, she's still a human being that can make a movie about whatever she wants, and she worked very hard to get greenlighted. I personally like to work on these kinds of projects, and that's a film that I wanted to lead. I didn't for a very simple reason: I don't think that we were able to bring a team that has enough culture in Asian animation to understand and deliver what I'd expect. It doesn't matter where you come from, if you have no culture about animation in general, and about specific styles, it won't work.

I'm sure you can understand this part. You're American Korean, and you'd like to show a little bit of your culture through your work (I know it's different from talking about the multicultural aspect, but that's just an example). And this is where your personal background and culture can bring something cool about your projects. Now imagine I'm a student, I would never be greenlighted on a film about a guy that goes to buy a baguette, and that's it. It's not a story, it's boring, it's a cliché, and I personally would never show something like this, because there's so much more about my culture.

If there was any pitch regarding an interesting aspect of Korean culture, it would catch my eyes right away. I would love to be in a film that talks about the stress of Koreans that go all in in any activity, because after that they go to military and then start "real life" (Korea are #1 in the world in breakdance, in front of USA and France, and for very specific reasons, the most viewed show in the world was a Korean drama, the remake of *Winter Sonata*, they lead any strategic e-game in the world, K-pop is one of the favorite musics of young ones in the world, and sadly they're competing with Japan in the number of suicides). I could do a film just about the importance of these stupid choreographies in K-pop clips. Or the importance of beauty, for women and men. And what

about the political situation, the real feeling of people that have brothers on the other side of the DMZ. Or a story about the tunnels. Or just Jeju, it's an amazing setup place, it looks like a fake background from a Miyazaki. Or holidays in Busan during the break, fish market during the day, and beach and clubs. Or if you want to talk about racism, not that many people in USA knows about all the story between Korea and Japan. Or how sad it is when you met a cute girl that thinks she's ugly because her face is "too round, like the people in the fields".

If you do a film for yourself, you already failed. If you really like animation, and have an important topic you want to talk about, then the first thing is to think about how to make an amazing movie, and find a great concept that will make people think about your topic. If you want to do a film about discrimination, for example, 90% of the projects I see at SCAD are about their personal feelings and how they felt. There's no empathy for the character at all, no story, so of course, nobody will care about your film. If you want to make people care you need to make them feel and think. A sad story, for example, should be funny until the conclusion, this is where you catch your audience because they didn't want to think or see that.

So you could change all the professors at SCAD, the result would still be the same. The pitches that were not chosen are overall extremely bad in my opinion. We could have a percentage of films greenlighted only because it's about a little girl, the moon, and a dragon. You wouldn't be happy either, and that's an extremely poor and immature representation of some kind of Asian culture.

The only way to improve the diversity of the films, in my opinion, is to work with our students to open their minds about what is animation, and the amazing world of possibilities that this opens.

I know that this doesn't answer to some specific problems you felt at SCAD, I'll let the university deal with that. I'm only answering to give you my personal experience and feeling about the films.

Whenever you feel talking about animation, you know that our office is always open.

Have a great summer !!!

Thomas Meseguer