Black Lives at Mudd group and others demand better support for Black students

Several student groups are demanding the Harvey Mudd College administration more thoroughly address systemic racism after receiving multiple official statements from the college administration they say fell short.

While a recent statement from President Maria Klawe mentioned the Black Lives Matter protests against police brutality and promised to meet some demands of Black Lives at Mudd, the affinity group for Black students, it came after various students groups criticized a vague earlier statement.

In this June 1 statement, Klawe's did not mention Black Lives Matter, use the words "Black" or "police" or reference any of the names of Black people killed by police.

"I write this message as Los Angeles County again prepares for another night of curfews in the wake of protests in cities across the U.S.," Klawe wrote. "This is a time of great challenge, extreme frustration and deep sadness in our community and in our country, with inequities and injustice all around us."

Through petitions, emails, and at a June 23 virtual town hall, groups such as Black Lives at Mudd, HMC Take a Stand, the Living-Learning Community and ASHMC.students demanded that Klawe and the college administration officially recognize Black Lives Matter and police violence. "I read the statement and I was like, wow, this really didn't address anything,"BLAM co-president Natasha Crepeau HM '21 said. "It was frankly insulting to not have any mention of Black people, Black Americans, or police brutality."

"As someone who cares a lot about the college and the Harvey Mudd community, I felt really let down by the Mudd administration in that moment," she added. "They had a moment where they really could have comforted and stood by Black students and they wasted it, in my opinion."

In a June 6 response to Klawe's initial message, BLAM said the statement "speaks to the administration's neglect of Black students at Mudd and ignorance of the Black community at large."

Black students make up 13 percent of the United States, but only four percent of Harvey Mudd's student body. The Black 4-year graduation rate for the Class of 2019 was 50 percent, the Class of 2018 was 40 percent, and the Class of 2017 was 75 percent compared with 88 percent, 91 percent, and 92 percent for the total classes respectively.

BLAM co-president Camille Simon HM '21 also criticized Klawe's lack of specificity.

"It seemed like a generic half-hearted, 'something is going on in the world' type of message … Nothing in there addressed how she felt or how people on campus could be affected by it," Simon said.

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BLAM is demanding that Klawe address the issues of racism and police brutality, asking the college to drop Sodexo, and asking Mudd to hire a tenure-track Black/Africana studies professor, hold workshops addressing systemic racism for all faculty and staff, and include material about systemic racism and prejudice in the new Core Impact course.

“While we appreciate President Klawe making a statement, we are alarmed by the failure of her message to address the issue at hand: continuous police brutality and the murder of Black people,” BLAM said in the statement.

The underrepresentation of Black students and their disproportionately higher withdrawal rate is a problem that BLAM wants the school to address.

“I am glad that they are at least talking about the retention rate. I feel like Black students at Mudd always knew that was a thing,” Crepeau said. “Because you see your friends and members of BLAM dropping out in the middle of their college careers or they go somewhere else or they just disappear.”

The BLAM presidents met with Klawe June 11, but didn’t feel she addressed their concerns or was receptive to their demands.

“She did not come prepared to discuss our statement, which to me was a big deal. She just asked us [what we wanted], again putting the burden on us to fix what we want to fix,” Simon said.

Crepeau said the meeting exemplified a longstanding issue regarding the relationship between Black students and Mudd administrators.

“It takes both sides to be open to having a conversation and sometimes when Mudders and Mudd admin have conversations, it feels like the admin isn’t as open to having an honest conversation about what is going on or not as receptive to student thoughts,” she said.

The President’s cabinet also hosted a June 23 webinar and student Q&A with the HMC Take a Stand advocacy group.

“I’m in an official role as the president of HMC and I have said very clearly that Black lives matter and that antiracism efforts matter, and that changing the way all aspects and all organizations in this country, in ways that support Black people, is really important,” Klawe said during the webinar.

Klawe acknowledged room for growth in Harvey Mudd’s support of its Black community members.

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“One of the things I like a lot about Harvey Mudd is we say everyday we’re not perfect, we can get better,” she said. “And I certainly think that with respect to the support that we give to our students of color, our Black students in particular, and our faculty of color, our Black faculty in particular, our staff of color, our Black staff in particular, there is absolutely no question we can do better.”

During the webinar, Klawe announced a partnership with Shaun Harper, the head of the center for race and equity at the University of Southern California. Dean of Faculty Lisa Sullivan also announced membership with the national center for faculty development and diversity and a plan to talk with the HSA department about hiring a Africana studies professor.

But not all of BLAM’s demands have been met.

Vice President for Administration Andrew Dorantes said that Mudd was not planning on dropping Sodexo at this time, but they were open to continuing the conversation with students.

Klawe’s June 24 statement, coming out in direct support of Black Lives Matter, came one day after she emphasized at the webinar that she could not publicly support the Black Lives Matter organization as the president of Harvey Mudd.

“I try to take into account the fact that there are many different viewpoints about various things on our campus,” Klawe said. “And in particular, I try to pay attention to the fact that we have a lot of staff of color who are not highly paid, they're non-exempt staff, and I try to reflect on the fact that not all of those people of color are in support of the Black Life Matters protest.”

Crepeau disputed the notion that Klawe was supporting staff members of color by not saying Black Lives Matter.

“I don’t know if staff members are aware of how she is portraying them,” she said. “There is a lot of subtext about her talking about non-Black POC not being comfortable with her saying ‘Black Lives Matter.’”

HMC Take a Stand was also dissatisfied with the June 23 webinar and sent Klawe and the Cabinet a statement June 29.

“We asked for a conversation about the petition, and we neither discussed the petition nor got a proper conversation,” the response said. “Furthermore, we are upset at some inconsiderate, insensitive and prejudiced comments that were made during the webinar; however, we do acknowledge that the Cabinet has responded to many of the complaints from students.”

In response to concerns from BLAM and Take a Stand, Mudd spokesperson Judy Augsburger said Klawe was open to dialogue.

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“President Klawe approached those two conversations as opportunities to listen to the concerns of our students, faculty and staff so that all members of the HMC community can continue to collaborate on finding the best path forward,” Augsburger said in an email.

Klawe and her cabinet released a follow-up statement with the President’s cabinet a day after the webinar.

“Black Lives Matter. We condemn these senseless killings. We condemn police violence. We condemn the crushing sense of injustice that we feel when we hear these stories day in and day out,” Klawe and the cabinet said.

“We believe that no Black person should be afraid of a traffic stop, of a jog in their own—or any—neighborhood, or of just sitting in their own home. But they are,” the statement continued. “And it is incredibly challenging for those of us who are not Black—who’ve never experienced that fear for a single moment in our lives—to even remotely comprehend what that is like. To understand that for some members of our community, this is everyday life. And it has got to stop.”

The statement laid out a plan for how Harvey Mudd would address systemic racism on campus. Klawe highlighted initiatives such as joining the National Center for Faculty Development & Diversity, “anti-racism sessions as part of the 2020 New Student Orientation,” and starting “to develop curriculum that addresses systemic racism.”

“It felt like too little too late, almost. You should have been here weeks ago in terms of her stance, not just now,” Crepeau responded.

Simon added that she wanted to see a more explicit acknowledgement that Mudd can do better to support Black students.

“President Klawe has stated clearly and unequivocally that ‘Black Lives Matter,’ and she stands behind her [June 24] statement,” Augsburger said. “She has been quite open and firm maintaining that this is what she believes—and that this message is an important and vital one for both our campus community at Harvey Mudd College as well as in all communities across the country.”

The BLAM presidents asked Klawe to work with Black students directly.

“You have to be willing to put in active work and consider your own privileges and how that impacts you and I don’t think she considers the privileges of her being a white woman versus being a woman of color,” Crepeau said. “I would like to see her acknowledge the amount of work Black students put in to try to make Harvey Mudd a place for Black people. I think the Mudd administration has a problem with using its Black students as tokens.”

Augsburger said the actions in the college's June 24 response are the "beginning stages" of addressing support for Black community members.

"The College anticipates continuing this work well into the future," Augsburger said. "[Klawe] and the entire Cabinet are committed to continuing the College's work to ensuring a more diverse, equitable and inclusive community.

BLAM asked for an apology from Klawe for her earlier statement and for taking so long to address racism in the Harvey Mudd community. Augsburger did not address whether or not Mudd would release an apology.

"I would like an apology. It doesn't even need to be addressed to the entire campus in my opinion. I think she needs to apologize to BLAM, especially the people who met with her and had this conversation with her," Crepeau said.

During Klawe's 14-year tenure as president, Mudd's gender equity has increased significantly. HMC was 29 percent female and computer science majors were ten percent female in 2006. Female representation increased to its current level of 50 percent female and computer science majors are now 49 percent female.

The BLAM presidents see increasing Black representation in STEM as the next battle for Klawe and Mudd to undertake.

"If Harvey Mudd really is going to be an institution that prides itself on being all about equity in STEM and impact on society, then you have to acknowledge that in order for that to happen you will have to have a lot of discussions with people who disagree, because that is all part of making sure that people's voices are heard. Having equity in STEM means all kinds of things, it doesn't just mean gender," Crepeau said.

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Timeline of Events:
June 1: First Klawe statement "Message from the President"
June 6: BLAM Statement
June 11: Klawe meets privately with BLAM
June 23: Webinar hosted by HMC Take a Stand and Klawe's cabinet
June 24: Klawe's second statement: "Addressing Systemic Racism"
June 29: HMC Take a Stand "Response to the webinar" email