Protect Our Web: A Statement on Black Student Welfare

To the University of Richmond Community-at-Large,

As Black students at the University of Richmond, we have felt the cold face of disregard time and time again. We look on from the margins as this institution, which claims to be invested in "diversity, equity, and inclusion," continuously betrays the interests of Black students. Though we have pledged our labor, time, and dedication to UR, this is not a reciprocal relationship. Black students continue to struggle to bear the heavy load of pursuing higher education while simultaneously managing social isolation and the lasting bitter taste of prejudiced peers, professors, and policies. We deserve a suitable environment where we may cultivate our highest selves. The constant pressure of racism interferes with that goal.

It is evident that there is an institutional culture of justifying and upholding white supremacy: the most recent and egregious example of this being the refusal to remove Robert Ryland and Douglas Southall Freeman's names from campus buildings.[1] The choice to continue to uplift these violent racists implicitly devalues the lives of Black people and is further evidence of just how deeply ingrained white supremacy still is at UR. The reminder that white supremacists fundamentally shaped this institution recalls the long history of Black exclusion on this campus. Black people were enslaved under Robert Ryland and others, forced to work and generate wealth for UR's founders.[2] Integration was a long battle due to the University's unwillingness to comply with the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the continued racism of the student body, particularly students involved in white Greek life, with little interruption by administration.[3] Today, the hostility we face on this largely homogenous campus is exemplified by the decision to keep Ryland and Freeman's names on our buildings. It

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[1] Crutcher, Ronald A. "Institutional History Update: Our Commitment to a Fuller Historical Narrative." Office of the President. University of Richmond, February 25, 2021. https://president.richmond.edu/initiatives/letters/institutional-history/february-2021-update.html.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Mukk, Kristi. "Civil Rights Act of 1964, UR Integration (1964-1973)." University of Richmond Race & Racism Project. University of Richmond, 2018. https://memory.richmond.edu/exhibits/show/racisminfraternities/integration.

reminds us that disrespect and inhospitality are inherent to the Black experience at UR.

As Black students, we see that our work is not valued and is instead disregarded. For example, UR greatly diminished the work of the Race & Racism Project when restructuring from above left the project hollowed out and insufficient, with the original leadership position of project archivist eliminated.[4] Resources are continuously allocated away from initiatives and organizations run for our benefit. For instance, the Multicultural Space was ultimately placed in the former Whitehurst Game Room, which does not provide sufficient space for gathering and serving other social and academic functions, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Multicultural Space that was reluctantly created hardly mirrors the original student plans for a Multicultural *House*, which even included a requirement that the Multicultural House host a permanent workspace for the Race & Racism Project.[5] UR administration has not released a plan to allocate space, funding, and other resources to create such a space as called for by the student body. Additionally, though the approval of the Africana Studies program was an exhilarating triumph, the process did not come without significant strife and stress to the students advocating for Africana Studies, particularly the Africana Studies Student Committee. The Africana Studies Student Committee persevered in spite of being questioned on the integrity of their proposal and the necessity of an Africana Studies program. Yet despite the recent success of Africana Studies, we as Black students will not rest until we claim the rights we are due—we refuse to stand still and we recognize the need for further academic, social, and mental resources for Black students. UR's reluctance to meet the needs of Black students and allocate resources to ensure our success shows the reality of the institution's priorities.

On top of these bleak circumstances, the COVID-19 pandemic illuminated the University's commitment to money above all else, as students returned to campus with no allotted break time during the on-campus portion of the Fall 2020 semester and no available academic accommodations. We as Black students make up a significant

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[4] Ness, Kiersten. "Race & Racism Project Gets New Name, Undergoes Leadership Change." The Collegian. The Collegian, November 15, 2019.
https://www.thecollegianur.com/article/2019/11/race-racism-project-gets-new-name-undergoes-leadership-change.

[5] Tann, TJ, et al. "Deconstructing the Narrative: Claiming Our Campus." Google Docs. Accessed March 3, 2021.
https://docs.google.com/document/d/1xgrtj7WtQ9nr_2khcEEvR0ORgWwYyG-iN4O475B859o/edit#heading=h.lgitz1tw1jns.

number of student leaders on campus, and we are doing more work with fewer resources and less mental space to do so. The situation as it stands is unacceptable.

It is from this context of institutional failure that we write today with the following demands. These demands are by no means exhaustive, but rather, an attempt at addressing some of our most pressing concerns at the present moment.

Demands

1) *We demand the names of Ryland Hall and Mitchell-Freeman Hall be changed, specifically, removing the names of Robert Ryland and Douglas Southall Freeman from these buildings.*

Statues, street names, and building names are all powerful forms of commemoration that communicate who is worthy of honor and respect. By continuing to leave these buildings named after enslaver Robert Ryland and segregationist and eugenicist Douglas Southall Freeman,[6] the University of Richmond continues to perpetuate white supremacy by communicating that these men are worthy of being honored on our campus. We as Black students reject this notion. Therefore, we reject the administration's plans to justify leaving Ryland and Freeman's names intact on these buildings by adding the names of those whom Ryland enslaved on the courtyard adjacent to Ryland Hall and adding John Mitchell Jr.'s name alongside Freeman's.[7] We believe that the University's plans as stated create a dangerous false equivalency between Ryland and the people he enslaved as well as between Freeman and Mitchell. This false equivalency suggests that all parties are worth honor and respect when that is simply not the case concerning Ryland and Freeman. Thus, we are calling on the administration and the Board of Trustees to heed the student body's wishes and remove the names of Robert Ryland and Douglas Southall Freeman from Ryland Hall and Mitchell-Freeman Hall.[8]

We propose Ryland Hall be renamed to Walker Hall, after prominent Richmonder Maggie Lena Walker. Walker's many accomplishments include being the first Black woman to organize and run a bank in the United States, the St. Luke Penny

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[6] Crutcher, "Institutional History Update."
[7] Ibid.
[8] 104th Westhampton College Senate, and 103rd Richmond College Senate. "Joint Resolution On Changing the Narrative: Regarding Building Names." Google Docs, April 3, 2019. https://docs.google.com/document/d/1SJiOBbREUjznOU-zATcj_YiutQHqYjGzA5BHOFeFD8k/edit?usp=sharing.

Savings Bank, as well as establishing a newspaper entitled *The St. Luke Herald*.[9] We feel that naming a building after her would promote greater awareness of Richmond history among students, and help strengthen our ties to the greater Richmond community.

In addition, we propose Mitchell-Freeman Hall be renamed Mitchell Hall. Due to John Mitchell Jr.'s prominent role in Richmond history as editor of *The Richmond Planet*, we agree with the UR administration's decision to name a building after him.[10] However, we reject placing his name alongside Douglas Southall Freeman's and we insist his name stand alone. Furthermore, we reject the rhetoric used thus far to characterize Mitchell, particularly the framing of the bank fraud conviction of which he was acquitted.[11] Should there be informational displays installed in Mitchell Hall, we want peer-selected student representatives to serve on the committee which finalizes the context surrounding Mitchell's life and legacy given in these displays.

2) *We demand expanded academic accommodations for all students in light of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.*

The COVID-19 pandemic has eliminated opportunities for respite from the fast-paced environment of higher education. It is unreasonable to expect students to continue to work at their standard productive pace in this situation, especially given that tragedy or sickness might strike them at any given juncture. Students' should not be penalized for prioritizing their physical and mental wellbeing during this time. If UR is truly committed to "wellbeing," we demand academic accommodations to alleviate the struggle of students during this troubling time.

Thus, we call on the Faculty Senate to host a re-vote on a credit/no credit proposal that would allow students to elect to take one class this semester on a credit/no credit basis. Having a credit/no credit option will address the unending pressure of achieving highly without rest, which has contributed to towering amounts of stress. Additionally, we demand a higher number of Wellness Days in future semesters where breaks are canceled. These Wellness Days must match the number of days off given during standard semester breaks and should be evenly distributed

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[9] National Park Service. "Maggie L Walker." U.S. Department of the Interior, December 4, 2020. https://www.nps.gov/mawa/learn/historyculture/maggie-lena-walker.htm.

[10] Crutcher, "Institutional History Update."

[11] Ibid.

throughout the semester. Without sufficient time for rest, it is unreasonable to expect students to function at a high level.

3) *We demand the University subsidize off-campus mental health services for Black students due to the underdevelopment and understaffing of Counseling and Psychological Services.*

Mental health among college students has been a pressing issue for years and is of utmost importance during the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing movement for Black lives in the wake of police violence. Research has demonstrated Black people in the United States are 20% more likely than white people to experience serious psychological distress,[12] and 40% of Black college students in the United States meet the criteria for a mental health problem, with only 21% of those qualifying receiving a diagnosis in comparison to the 48% of qualifying white students who have received a diagnosis.[13] Bias from mental health providers and an inability to provide culturally competent care contributes to misdiagnosis and inadequate treatment,[14] highlighting the need for mental healthcare providers who are able to deliver culturally competent care—namely, mental healthcare providers who come from the communities they serve. At the University of Richmond, there are only two Black CAPS therapists, one of whom serves in an additional CAPS leadership position.[15] Yet, there are over 200 Black students who may need to speak with a therapist at any given time,[16] many of whom desire a therapist that shares their racial background. It is unfair to expect the two Black staff members at CAPS to bear the load of Black student mental health at UR, and

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[12] "Brother, You're on My Mind: Mental Health Snapshot of African American Men." National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities. Accessed March 3, 2021. https://www.nimhd.nih.gov/docs/byomm_factsheet02.pdf.

[13] Samuels, Michelle. "Racial Disparities in Nationwide Mental Health Services for College Students." The Brink. Trustees of Boston University, September 28, 2018. https://www.bu.edu/articles/2018/significant-disparities-in-mental-health-treatment-across-race-ethnicity/.

[14] NAMI: National Alliance on Mental Illness. "Black/African American." NAMI. Accessed March 3, 2021. https://www.nami.org/Your-Journey/Identity-and-Cultural-Dimensions/Black-African-American.

[15] This sentence originally read "At the University of Richmond, there are only two Black CAPS staff members, only one of whom works as a therapist." It was updated 3/8/21 to correct a factual error, as both staff members serve as therapists. Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS). "CAPS Staff." University of Richmond. Accessed March 3, 2021. https://caps.richmond.edu/contact/index.html.

[16] According to a calculation done with data from the following sources, there are approximately 240 Black students (graduate and undergraduate) at the University of Richmond. University of Richmond. "Facts & Rankings." University of Richmond. Accessed March 3, 2021. https://www.richmond.edu/about/facts.html; University of Richmond. "Student Diversity." University of Richmond. Accessed March 3, 2021. https://www.richmond.edu/about/consumer-info/diversity.html.

it is unfair to expect Black students to sacrifice their need for culturally competent care.

Given that UR is woefully underprepared to meet student demand for Black therapists, we propose a program that allocates funds for Black students to access off-campus mental health resources. This program should be open to all Black students regardless of financial need. This program should not merely be limited to the duration of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, but should serve as a resource for students so long as the number and makeup of CAPS therapists remains out of proportion with the demographics of our student body. Consequently, we request that the University prioritize hiring more Black, Indigenous, and other therapists of color to meet the needs of our diverse student body.

Conditions of Unfulfillment

We expect the release of a plan to meet our demands in a reasonable timeframe by Thursday, April 1, 2021. Should a plan not be released by then, Black seniors and other seniors in solidarity with us will begin to disaffiliate from the University, meaning they will cease involvement with any university task forces, student organizations, and fundraisers, and will not engage in future interactions with the University upon graduation. Should a plan not be released by Thursday, April 15, 2021, other undergraduates will follow suit in disaffiliation. Should students disaffiliate, they will not reaffiliate until these demands are sufficiently met.

Conclusion

We are making these demands because we believe that we as Black students on this campus deserve better. We work too hard and contribute too much to this campus for our needs to be ignored in service of white supremacy. We feel an obligation to advocate for better treatment not only for ourselves, but for the Black students that will come after us. Yet, our concern is not only limited to our community—we feel that improving our own circumstances will benefit all students and contribute to a richer, more vibrant Richmond experience for all. Ultimately, we believe these demands are a crucial step toward making the University of Richmond a place where all students are able to learn, flourish, and graduate as individuals who are equipped with the knowledge and experiences to better the world around them.

Black Student Signatories as of March 4, 2021 at 4 p.m.:

A'kayla Williams, Class of 2022
Aiyah Adam, Class of 2023
Akeya Fortson-Brown, Class of 2022
Alexis Cobbs, Class of 2023
Amanda Schmitt, Class of 2021
Amara Nwangwu, Class of 2022
Amarachi Ugochukwu, Class of 2024
Amaya Jackson, Class of 2022
Amna Ali, Class of 2022
Angel Burgos, Class of 2023
Anthony Lawrence, Class of 2022
Anthony Thomassey, Class of 2021
Ashley Frazier, Class of 2022
Beau English, Class of 2021
Benjamin Queen, Class of 2023
Brendan Crockett, Class of 2023
Brianna Charlton, Class of 2022
Cameron Keeley-Parker, Class of 2022
Chandler Barrett, Class of 2022
Charles Miller , Class of 2022
Charles Scriven, Class of 2021
Chris Mitchell, Class of 2024
Christopher Wilson , Class of 2023
Cia Pierre-Kernizan, Class of 2021
Ciera Bryant, Class of 2022
Daniel Ketema, Class of 2021
Devon Perry, Class of 2021
Drew Strong, Class of 2022
Elijah Michel, Class of 2023
Elle Jackson, Class of 2022
Erika Wilson, Class of 2024
Eyga Williamson, Class of 2022
Faith Pinckney, Class of 2021
Imani Mustaf, Class of 2022
Ivy de SOUZA, Class of 2024
Jabril Hayes, Class of 2024
Jada Muir, Class of 2024
Jaden Jones, Class of 2021
Jaylen Barrientos-Collins, Class of 2023
Jesse Amankwaah, Class of 2021
Jillian Yates, Class of 2024
Jordan Richardson, Class of 2023
Jordann Carter, Class of 2024
Jordyn Lofton, Class of 2022
Julian Starks, Class of 2022
Justin Butler, Class of 2023
Kacy Workman, Class of 2021
Kaiden Pritchett, Class of 2024
Kamene Mang'oka, Class of 2023

Kamryn Ross, Class of 2023
Katiana Isaac, Class of 2024
Kayla Corbin, Class of 2021
Kayla Schiltz, Class of 2022
Kendra Smither, Class of 2022
Kieron Douragh, Class of 2021
Kristen Starks, Class of 2022
Kyle Mincey , Class of 2023
Lauren Stenson, Class of 2022
Lesley Boadu, Class of 2024
Lex Misoka, Class of 2023
Madyson Fitzgerald, Class of 2023
Maiana Russell, Class of 2021
Maria Murphy, Class of 2023
Marissa Goodall, Class of 2022
Mark Johnson, Class of 2024
Mayen Obot, Class of 2023
McKenna Dunbar, Class of 2023
Mimi Laws, Class of 2022
Miquell Shaw Junior , Class of 2022
Moriah Williams, Class of 2021
Na'Dyay Wynn, Class of 2024
Naomi Mitchell, Class of 2022
Nhyira Asamoah , Class of 2023
Nile Harris, Class of 2022
Omar Ibrahim, Class of 2021
Phil Daniel, Class of 2021
Raven Baugh, Class of 2021
Rebekah Greene, Class of 2021
Regenia Miller, Class of 2022
Sadiesha Taylor, Class of 2022
Sal Girma, Class of 2021
Savannah Payton, Class of 2024
Savon Smith, Class of 2023
Shamim Ibrahim, Class of 2021
Sherley Arias-Pimentel, Class of 2023
Shira Greer, Class of 2023
Simone Reid, Class of 2023
Sydney Seignious, Class of 2022
Tamar Accius, Class of 2022
Tanéha Fincher 2021, Class of 2021
TaShira Iverson, Class of 2023
Tazle Sumpter, Class of 2021
Tiara Fulmore, Class of 2022
TJ Tann, Class of 2021
Tyrone lee, Class of 2024
Vahn Corrothers , Class of 2023
Vanessa Obro, Class of 2024
Victoria Huxtable, Class of 2022
Will Walker, Class of 2021
Zariah Chiverton, Class of 2023