

Dear Faculty and Staff of Penn Criminology,

We are writing as alumni and current students of both the Master's and undergraduate programs to voice our concerns regarding the Penn Criminology curriculum. With heightened demands to overhaul the U.S. criminal justice system, many of us have taken the time to reflect on our experiences within the world of criminology. We have found ourselves disappointed in the education we received. Penn is a leader in the field of criminology and produces individuals who will contribute to and assume leadership positions within various influential criminal justice organizations and institutions nationwide. Despite this far reach, the Penn Criminology department fails to address the significance of race and ethnicity in a meaningful and productive way, particularly with regard to the criminalization of and disregard for Black lives. We respectfully demand that the Department give race its rightful role in the curriculum – the center – in order to give students a more comprehensive understanding of the omnipresent injustices within the criminal “justice” system.

In the classroom, race is rarely a central topic. When it is briefly touched upon, there is little mention of the deep roots that the carceral and policing systems have in slavery. There is rarely a space to discuss solutions to avoid discriminating against minority communities – all of the reform strategies we learned are viewed through the lens of criminological theory (early interventions, greening vacant lots, increasing street lighting, etc.), with little to no consideration of the frequent and brutal racial injustice that plagues the United States. We are not taught alternatives to policing or prisons. We rarely discuss the inherent bias of data. And finally, we do not discuss the inherent racism built into all past and present criminology theories and criminal policies. While we understand that the history and evolution of criminology is important, it is vital to preface these discussions by acknowledging the rampant racism in the theories.

In many of our experiences, students have had to take on the responsibility of challenging our professors to correct inherent biases. Students have to directly confront professors regarding their language in front of their peers – a task which is often left to the few students of color in the cohort. Students, and particularly students of color, should not have to challenge professors to acknowledge racism in criminology classes. Instead, the language used by professors when addressing race must be altered to make students of all backgrounds feel comfortable in the learning environment.

Further, there is a shocking lack of diversity in the students and staff. Criminology and Criminal Justice encompass systems that, by design, disproportionately target Black Americans. Yet in Penn Criminology, students are rarely exposed to perspectives or writings originating from the Black community, thus perpetuating a cycle of disadvantage and prejudice that creates long-term consequences within our society. Penn Criminology is designed to create the future leaders of criminology and advocates for systemic change – this cannot happen without these voices present in the classroom.

In order to combat these realities, we urge you to consider taking the following actions:

- Create a mandatory class within the criminology department which focuses on the role of race within the carceral system.

- In the existing classes, professors should force students to reckon with the harsh realities of the current criminal justice system. Professors must add evidence-based studies highlighting these injustices to the workload.
- Consider integrating and/or encouraging students to take classes focused on Africana studies and classes relating to Sociology, Urban Studies, and Race, perhaps making at least one credit mandatory. For example, recommend the following classes:
 - Undergraduate
 - SOCI 399: Demographics of Race
 - SOCI/URBS 420: Perspectives on Urban Poverty
 - SOCI/AFRC 235: Law & Social Change
 - AFRC 001: Intro to Africana Studies
 - AFRC 042: Homelessness & Urban Inequality
 - AFRC 437/638: Race & Criminal Justice
 - URBS 210: The City
 - Graduate
 - AFRC 524/PSCI 535: Inequality & Race Policy
 - AFRC 437/638: Race & Criminal Justice
 - EDUC/AFRC 575: Psychoeducational Interactions with Black Males
- Make an effort to diversify the Master's cohort. This can be achieved in part by making the program more accessible to students of all backgrounds through scholarships, work study programs, and other measures to offset the tuition and living costs associated with this program. A diverse cohort should be the norm, not the exception.
- Hire a more diverse staff that can effectively educate students on the profound effects of racism within criminology, and the criminal justice system as a whole. Based on the faculty listed on the website today, there is not a single Black professor.
- Ensure that guest lecturers brought in for symposiums are originating from a diverse range of perspectives and backgrounds.

The study of criminology is vital to understanding how modern society can reduce and eliminate crime. It should teach us about the needed reforms, but also about the efficacy of alternative and non-carceral methods of crime prevention. However, the study of criminology is also the study of historical racism – and this aspect should be heavily emphasized throughout the curriculum. We cannot in good conscience ignore these deficiencies and allow them to continue through future cohorts. We urge you to implement reforms within this department in order to produce race conscious criminologists – these students may become the change makers our country so desperately needs.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter, we look forward to seeing these crucial reforms take effect within the Criminology Department at the University of Pennsylvania.

Sincerely,

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