

Open Letter from the Faculty

On Tuesday, May 21st 2019, Rachel Chapman and Dani Tirrell facilitated an event for the Department of Dance titled "Calling in Dance: A Student Testimonial Forum" held in the Ethnic Cultural Center. At this forum, all five full-time faculty members were present (Alethea Alexander, Rachael Lincoln, Juliet McMains, Jen Salk and Hannah Wiley) and were asked to listen to the voices of students. The fifteen undergraduate students and one graduate student who attended the forum were mostly people of color, and those who boldly spoke their experiences of hurt, frustration and silencing within the Department of Dance were primarily people of color. The faculty was asked to remain silent and not respond because many students felt that they had shared their stories and experiences before under other circumstances, and were frustrated because they had not felt heard. This format was decided on by the students who were present, and facilitators Rachel and Dani.

The document below is a letter that the faculty composed to the students at this forum. All five faculty members were a part of the process of composing and agreeing to and with the words in this letter. The letter was sent to the students to whom it was addressed on Wednesday, May 29th. We would now like to make this an open letter to all who work and learn in the Department of Dance. We recognize that this work is never done. We are sharing this letter in an effort to make visible our intentions to keep listening and working toward a more equitable and inclusive community.

May 26th 2019

We have been sitting individually and collectively with all that we heard from you in our circle on Tuesday. In our short check-in during the faculty meeting on Thursday, each of us expressed our profound gratitude for the chance to hear you - for your bravery, vulnerability, and generosity in taking the time to speak your hard truths to us. We feel deeply sorry and ashamed that we needed this vulnerability expressed so repeatedly and at such cost to you - the people we are trying to mentor, learn with, and aid in artistic and scholarly growth. We want to express this to each of you.

We also want to say: we hear you. We hear your anger and hurt, the ways we have harmed you, the ways we have been complicit in our silence, and the ways our inaction has sent a message that we don't care. We heard that your experience in the dance department has not been one of respect, care, and consideration. We also heard those of you who did not speak in the voices of those who did.

So much of what you said resonated, including Alicia's insightful comment that with our curriculum change in 2015, we opened our doors to invite you in without doing the work that needed to be done first. This may offer no solace, but we want you all to know that your courage in coming forward (repeatedly) with your hurt and anger is catalyzing some

much needed changes for each of us personally, and for the department as a whole. We are so aware of how imperfect and painfully slow these changes are. We want to do our work. This work is going to take some time. We are now seeing just how much we need to do - and understand that no amount of trainings or books or videos will be enough. We commit to practicing seeing our biases, listening, being uncomfortable, and risking personal and departmental change until we get better at this, despite the inevitable missteps and failures coming along the way. There is so much that is hard for everyone in our department at the moment - you all, in particular - but, perhaps, as dancers, we can lean into our belief in the process of practice as growth. We, as faculty, need to step up our practice.

We heard you want action, and we are taking steps to make changes at many levels. We realize that so much will feel like too little too late, and for that, we are sorry. First and foremost, we believe change will come from our individual work. We are the people at the core of the department and our subtle and overt ways of speaking, teaching, and acting make a huge difference. As a department, we also have structural changes that need to happen. We do not want to ask any more of you in this process - you have all spent tremendous time and energy showing up to endure, document, express, and survive - but we do want to open channels of communication.

Attached are two documents. One is more specific thoughts about needed and upcoming changes, written by the faculty. The second is the notecard responses to Anu's prompt from the April town hall with some attached responses, written by the Diversity Committee. We'd like to invite you, specifically, as students who have done the hard work of considering the needs of the department and risking coming forward with real concerns, to meet with us and give feedback on any of the content of these documents. This could happen as a group conversation facilitated by Rachel and/or Dani, one-on-one with any faculty member, or through writing. We welcome, but do not expect, your input on some of these structural changes that we are already working on implementing, and others that we need to sit with longer in order to develop effective plans of action. All of this is just the beginning.

With gratitude and respect,

Rachael, Juliet, Jennifer, Hannah, and Alethea