DATE: February 18, 2022
FROM: Eric J. Barron
TO: Bonj Szczygiel

I am writing to acknowledge receipt of the Positional Report entitled “Resolution in Support of Academic Freedom and Rejection of Attempts to Interfere with the Teaching of Racial and Social Justice.” As reflected in Penn State policy AC64, Academic Freedom, the University aspires to be “an institution whose members may express themselves, while protecting and respecting the rights of others to learn, to do research, and to carry out the essential functions of the University free from interference or obstruction.” Penn State has a long history of supporting academic freedom for its faculty. We look forward to continuing those efforts and working with the University Faculty Senate so that it may fulfill its central responsibility, as articulated in the Positional Report, to teach “freely, fairly, and without prejudice.”

cc: Kathleen J. Bieschke
Nicholas P. Jones
Laura Pauley
February 8, 2022

Eric Barron, President
201 Old Main
University Park, PA 16802

Dear President Barron:

The University Faculty Senate, at its Tuesday, January 25, 2022 Faculty Senate Plenary meeting, passed the appended positional report titled:

“Resolution in Support of Academic Freedom and Rejection of Attempts to Interfere with the Teaching of Racial and Social Justice”

We forward this positional report to you for your records and look forward to ongoing discussions.

Sincerely,

Bonj Szczygiel, Chair
University Faculty Senate

ENCLOSURE
SENATE COMMITTEES ON EDUCATIONAL EQUITY AND CAMPUS ENVIRONMENT; FACULTY AFFAIRS; INTRA-UNIVERSITY RELATIONS

Resolution in Support of Academic Freedom and Rejection of Attempts to Interfere with the Teaching of Racial and Social Justice

(Positional Report)

Educators across this nation committed to the highest of principles of intellectual honesty and integrity have come under attack through censorship legislation and other tactics to repress the freedom to teach essential critical thinking skills. In an attempt to stifle the right of students to learn and faculty to teach the tenets of racial, social, and environmental justice that reflect not only American history, but that of our 21st-century cultural reality, partisan politics is seeping into our classrooms. We must unite under the principles of Academic Freedom and call upon this University to respect and support open and candid dialogue about our shared histories and present-day experiences. Intending to censure and control content, critics have labelled such teaching approaches “divisive.” As the recognized faculty governance organization for The Pennsylvania State University, the University Faculty Senate holds as our central responsibility to teach freely, fairly, and without prejudice, and therefore reject that label.

Through its “Response to More Rivers to Cross: Part 1 (University Park) Report” April 24, 2020; the establishment of a Joint Curricular Task Force on Racial and Social Justice; and support for the University’s establishment of the Center for Racial Justice, among other initiatives, the Faculty Senate has and continues to demonstrate its efforts to bring equality and inclusion to the forefront of the University.

To that end, we present the following:

WHEREAS the term “divisive” is indeterminate, subjective, and chills the capacity of educators to explore a wide variety of topics based on arbitrary criteria that are inapposite from the goals of education and the development of essential critical thinking skills.

WHEREAS multiple states have already passed, are in the process of debating, and have proposed legislation to curb and limit academic freedom within primary, secondary, and higher education institutions.

WHEREAS, in a nation that has for centuries struggled with issues of racial inequity and injustice, many students do not have adequate knowledge of BIPOC and LGBTQI history and the policies that contributed to inequities, Pennsylvania State University has a responsibility and opportunity to help build equity and social justice.
WHEREAS, in an effort to produce engaged and informed citizens, educating about systemic barriers to realizing a multiracial and equitable democracy should be understood as central to the active and engaged pursuit of knowledge in the 21st century.

WHEREAS Article 1, Section 1(a) of the University Faculty Senate Constitution states that the role of the senate is to “serve as the sole legislative body representing the University faculty as a whole. Its actions shall be authoritative on all matters that pertain to the educational interests of the University (all graduate, professional, and undergraduate instruction, research, and continuing education) and on all educational matters that concern the faculties of more than one college, subject, after consultation, to revision and orders of the president of the University.”

BE IT RESOLVED that the Faculty Senate calls upon current and future leaders of Penn State University to reject all attempts by bodies external to the faculty to restrict or dictate university curriculum on any matter, including matters related to racial and social justice, and to stand firm against encroachment on faculty authority.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that this Faculty Senate stands with our colleagues in higher education and K-12 throughout the country who may be affected by similarly harmful legislation.

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