

Recent Actions at UT Austin to Address Its Own Institutional Racism

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*The following opinions expressed below are our own.
We are speaking for ourselves as individuals.*

We are confronted by the intersection of racial injustice, gender inequality, and economic injustice laid bare by the COVID-19 pandemic and societal discrimination. We have been rattled by the murders of George Floyd, Mike Ramos, Breonna Taylor, and other people of color by the police; the suffering of 50 million unemployed who are disproportionately people of color¹; and the devastation of the COVID-19 pandemic and its disparate impact on communities of color. In the midst of these events, The University of Texas at Austin is confronting its own historical institutional racism.

Since its opening in 1883, UT Austin excluded Black students until the landmark US supreme court case, *Sweatt v. Painter*, forced UT Austin to admit graduate/professional Black students in 1950 and eventually Black undergraduates in 1956.⁴ UT Austin then hired its first African American faculty member, Ervin Perry, in 1964.⁵ Through most of the twentieth and early twenty-first century UT Austin continued to struggle through different issues related equity around admission and hiring of faculty. For example, during President William Powers' administration (2006-2015), several key actions were taken to address equity issues at UT Austin, including the creation of the Division of Diversity and Community Engagement and the support and opening of departments, institutes, and centers focused on ethnic studies and racial inequality.

Since 2008, the Central Administration has continued to take increased measures to understand systemic inequities in faculty hiring, compensation, promotion, retention, and leadership roles. Common themes emerged for gender equity^{7,8} and racial/ethnic equity.^{9,10} In response, the Central Administration has been improving administrator training, family policies, and search committee diversity training, and increasing salaries of tenure-track and tenured faculty towards parity with respect to gender, race, and ethnicity in each of the 18 colleges/schools. Central Administration has also been evaluating endowments and access to leadership positions in departments and colleges/schools.

In Summer 2019, President Fenves announced an expansion of the Texas Advance Commitment¹² for UT Austin undergraduate students who are Texas residents. Starting fall 2020, all new and continuing students from families making less than \$65k/year will have all tuition covered without student loans, and students from families making \$65k to \$125k/year will have all tuition covered with the possible inclusion of student loans. The coverage of all tuition loan-free will apply to more than half of all Texas families because the median family income in Texas was \$60,629 in 2018.¹³ The Texas Advance Commitment is permanent due to a \$160M endowment.

In 2018, UT Austin adopted its first university-wide diversity statement, which had a student emphasis. After two years of discussion and debate, catalyzed in May by motion by the Graduate Student Assembly, the Faculty Council (Academic Senate) co-authored and endorsed a new university Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Statement.¹⁴ The new statement includes staff, faculty, and a wider array of identities. At the same June 15, 2020 meeting, Faculty Council also endorsed a Black Lives Matter resolution¹⁵ and a resolution for Addressing Systemic Racism at UT Austin¹⁶.

In his July 13, 2020, message on “A More Diversity and Welcoming Campus”, President Hartzell took several major steps to address systemic racism at UT Austin.² Concerning racialized campus symbols, he returned the Robert Lee Moore to its original name of Physics, Math, and Astronomy, and announced contextualization plans for other racialized markers.² These actions are natural follow-ups to the action that President Fenves took in August 2017 to move public statues of Confederate leaders to the Briscoe Center for scholarly study.⁶ President Hartzell also presented new ways to honor prominent alumni of color. There are also on-going campus discussions on how to acknowledge racial history of the school song (“The Eyes of Texas”).

Concerning the campus community, President Hartzell announced in the same message a major investment in recruiting, developing and retaining world-class faculty members who bring more diversity to our research and teaching missions.² He also announced expanding undergraduate recruiting centers in Dallas, Houston, San Antonio, and other locations, as well as widening the scope and function of the Police Oversight Committee, which is composed of student, staff, faculty and administrators. On-going discussions include how to better support American Ethnic Studies (Asian American Studies, Black Studies, Latinx Studies, and Native American & Indigenous Studies) as it confronts internalized, interpersonal, institutional and societal racism, including making UT Austin a more diverse and welcoming campus.

In the coming years, UT will to continue work toward addressing key shifts within the state and university. For example, in 2020-21, the undergraduate Latinx student population is expected to exceed 25%, which is one of the eligibility requirements for UT Austin to become a Hispanic Serving Institution. The above confrontation of systemic racism at UT Austin will also be vital in recruiting, retaining, mentoring, and graduating Hispanic students. While the messaging offered by President Hartzell is promising², it will certainly require long term institutional support and resources to ensure that UT Austin is truly a diverse, equitable, and inclusive university.

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