

Presidential Task Force Meeting Minutes 9/24/2020

General Ronald Burgess:

Called the meeting to order and summarized the Presidential Task Force Committees progress as to date. The sub-committees have briefed out to senior leadership. The committee will need to execute, solve and add metrics. On this past Monday, Dr. Taffye Benson-Clayton, Dr. Melody Russell and Mrs. Gretchen VanValkenburg attended the Black Student Union general meeting. It was a great exchange. General Burgess asked that committee member Ms. Mya Strickland to brief out who was also the moderator for the meeting.

Ms. Mya Strickland:

Reported the one-hour meeting went well and the BSU members found the meeting very informative. BSU had invited Mr. Kelvin King from Campus Security, Dr. Taffye Benson-Clayton from the Office of Inclusion and Diversity, Dr. Joffery Gaymon from Admissions and Dr. Bobby Woodard from Student Affairs to be panelists for the meeting to answer the student's questions. This was the most attended meeting for BSU this semester. Since it was a great meeting, BSU would like for the committee to come back next semester to keep the momentum going. She also asked if there were questions that had come up since the meeting if they could be emailed to the committee to respond to.

General Ronald Burgess:

Stated that questions come in as they come and the committee would answer any questions that the students might have. The Presidential Task Force will come back next semester and it is important that we continue to get the student perspective. He shared that Dr. Vini Nathan and Provost Bill Hardgrave represented the Presidential Task Force at the Black Caucus Meeting that was held Tuesday of this week. He asked that Dr. Melody Russell out brief the committee on the meeting.

Dr. Melody Russell:

Shared that the Black Caucus Meeting went extremely well but asked if the committee could do another session at an upcoming Black Caucus Meeting to do the sub-committee presentations again. It had been brought to her and Dr. Taffy Benson-Clayton that there were a lot of people that were left off of the list that was sent out. Dr. Vini Nathan did a phenomenal job on the presentation. It would be consistent if she could do the presentation and General Burgess was present again if possible. She believes that this will continue the positive feedback that has been received. She suggested that Mrs. Gretchen VanValkenburg should also present her sub-committees' presentation to the group as well. This would give everyone an opportunity to hear the presentations if they choose to.

Dr. Taffye Benson-Clayton:

Shared that the Black Caucus Meeting was a great opportunity, a great meeting and positively received. Dr. Vini Nathan and Mrs. Gretchen VanValkenburg have done great job with doing the presentations and this is a great opportunity for Auburn.

General Ronald Burgess:

Stated that Dr. Vini Nathan and Mrs. Gretchen VanValkenburg have presented both sub-committee recommendations so professionally that they both should do the presentation to the Black Caucus meeting. He will work with Dr. Vini Nathan offline about the Black Caucus meeting to ensure that everyone listening will receive the same message.

Dr. Vini Nathan:

Stated that she is flexible but unavailable on Tuesday and Thursday.

Dr. Melody Russell:

Shared she has been in touch with the Black Caucus to schedule another meeting and would forward the availability that they had provided her with.

General Ronald Burgess:

Asked Mrs. Gretchen VanValkenburg to reach out to the Staff Council and A&P to include them in the invitation to see the presentations.

Dr. Melody Russell:

Shared that staff and A&P employees are included in the Black Caucus membership.

General Ronald Burgess:

Stated that this is a great opportunity to hit everyone at the same time. He has been asking the committee for input and Dr. Royrickers Cook has had an opportunity to meet with President Jay Gogue and himself to further discuss needs for the Diversity Business initiative in his area after the presentation to the committee last week. The committee needs to be thinking about and taking on issues. He told the committee that he had some concerns that needed to be addressed. The Presidential Task Force Committee are doing a great job. If anyone is feeling fatigue at this point he would like for them to contact him offline. He does not want anyone to feel like they have to prioritize the committee over additional duties and responsibilities. He wants the committee to stay engaged and have conversations. We need additional ideas as we continue to make change here at Auburn and the need to be sent to General Burgess once you have an idea.

The first Presidential Task Force Committee Meeting was frank and open discourse which required a need to be uncomfortable. The Auburn Students and Community for Change Organization have written a letter demanding that the committee be transparent specifically. He does not believe that the current Presidential Task Force members should be going outside of the committee to advocate for change and be effective on the committee.

The Auburn Students and Community for Change Organization have the following demands:

(1) asking for recordings. The committee has begun to post the minutes for the meetings on the website. He will not approve recording outside of the minutes. This is a safe space and people should be allowed to speak freely and know that this will not be something that can be used against them. Recording could cause microaggressions and shaming.

(2) They are requesting that the 2016 All Together Climate Study has been asked to be release in its entirety. This is currently available on the website.

(3) They would like to publish a plan for the rotation of Presidential Task Force members and would like to know how the replacement will be selected. The committee member replacements will come from the three governance groups, just as the current members were chosen from the SGA, Faculty Senate, A&P and Staff Council.

Dr. Taffye Benson-Clayton:

Stated that when we engage in this learning moment that there are ground rules and what is shared in the group stays here among us. She stated that what is said here stays here but what is learned should be shared. Trust is at the very center of diversity and inclusion. It's a critical point of trust and building it with matters of race. It erodes and closes people off from being transparent. Groups speak up and share their concerns. What we need to do in this environment is share more. Trust is an important aspect of the task force and the hard work of sharing needs to continue along with teamwork.

Ombudsman C. Kevin Coonrod:

Shared that people are less likely to be genuine when recording and some people begin to talk to the larger audience that might listen rather than the task force. He suggested that we advertise the website, solicit ideas and invite others to come and talk to us.

General Ronald Burgess:

Shared he has been in contact with the Opelika-Auburn Newspaper about running an article.

Mrs. Elizabeth Devore:

Suggested that an update be sent out by President Jay Gogue to transition from updates coming from him to people knowing to look at the website for updates. In reference to the Presidential Task Force committee members selection, no graduate students were originally included or BSU representative and was surprised by the question from the organization about the committee makeup. She also suggested that the Presidential Task Force have conversations with Greek Life and provide weekly updates and have intentional meetings with any groups that might have gotten overlooked. She feels that there is distrust among the students and other areas and the committee should think about ways that they can begin to build trust by creating situations that force us to trust, so that over time the culture will change.

General Ronald Burgess:

Agreed with Mrs. Elizabeth Devore. He stated full disclosure that the main governance quickly found the areas that were overlooked but never said that it wouldn't be a need to add additional positions. As the committee at some point and time expand the horizon there will be a need for additions. The LGBTQI+ community is another group that might require an addition to the committee or someone to leave. There is a commitment to having the right people on the committee to be effective and be transparent.

Ms. Mya Strickland:

Expressed that the Presidential Task Force should be proactive as well. The committee should consider answering the Auburn Students and Community for Change Organization demands and information should be shared before it gets to the point that information is being demanded. There is a great need for transparency that will increase help and support of the task force committee but she doesn't think that it will be more transparent which will continue the lack of support at AU. She fears that she will become a token advocate on the committee. She feels that nothing is really getting done and the committee should deliver the demands of the Auburn Students and Community for Change Organization. She stated that this has not shown accountability at this point.

General Ronald Burgess:

Responded that the Student Government was another group that has not been connected with directly but that this is why Ms. Ada Ruth Huntley is a committee member to make sure that they are aware of things that might affect their group. He shared that the students didn't feel safe so he meet with the police chief about how to address this. The police chief couldn't do much with that because a feeling changes person to person but if it was something specifically that could be something that could be improved.

Ms. Ada Ruth Huntley:

States it is important to advocate for tangible actions like eliminating the rolling Toomers Corner because of the ideology. There have been conversations all summer with Black Student Union and others to also come up with additional tangible items.

Dr. Taffye Benson-Clayton:

Reflected on the Richard Spencer event that had been approved by Student Affairs that happened during Welcome Week her first week as an employee on campus. There was a message spreading through social media after the event at 7 pm any students of color that were out might be hurt. She took the student and had them to present the information to the President and the Provost which in return created a buddy program that made the students feel safe. She also took time to sit with the students and hear them unpack the very real situation of being fearful on campus was a meaningful way that the students could see that they are cared about.

Ms. Ada Ruth Huntley:

Stated it is important to have your feeling validated. She has feelings about being a black female and the first black SGA President.

Mrs. Elizabeth Devore:

Shared that when she sat in on the Monday meeting with BSU, she thought about the impact that allowing the students to do reflections direct and indirect could also change the culture here at Auburn. There is an Instagram page called "Black at Auburn" that has a lot of stories about what has happened here historically and presently at Auburn. The committee should go and review it, seeing how people are sharing their stories and others are thanking them for sharing and agreeing that the same thing happened to them. She also suggested that the

committee should include resources like a toolkit that would highlight BERT as an example which she believes very little people know about it. Students are feeling unsafe and the more she reads their stories the more she become upset and begins to reach out to people see how improvements can be made.

Coach Bruce Pearl:

Apologized in advance, but stated that the task force cannot solve everything and the country is divided everywhere. Students in athletics have also expressed that they feel unsafe. In athletics, students have registered to vote to make a difference and have been raising awareness with other students. They are looking at the recruitment plans for future and have been blown away by the support for the efforts. Last night he hosted donors and they talked about the many social injustices and had great conversations around this. As a task force committee member, he values and respects the privacy of all. He trusts all the task force members and hopes that they trust him.

Ms. Mya Strickland:

Expressed that the task force committee should have actionable items for our efforts and be heard. Stated it feels like everyone has a negative disposition and the positivity goes away from the efforts.

Coach Bruce Pearl:

Shared that he would rather put actions to the committee recommendations than publicize them.

Ombudsman C. Kevin Coonrod:

Shared that the committee should care about the composition of the recommendations and any input given should be given respect.

Mrs. Kim Brown:

Shared her screen so that the Presidential Task Force Committee members could see the mission statement on the website.

Dr. Melody Russell:

Shared that she had asked that Kim pull up the Presidential Task Force Committee mission statement. She stated that she was confounded. She appreciated the passion but did not see the purpose. If you are a committee member and have agenda with the Auburn Students and Community for Change Organization that you are annoyingly and unwittingly pushing than the committee might not be the place for you. The committee has its own agenda that has been planned and needs to be followed as agreed. The recommendation will be full of failures but we must first sweep around our own door first before we find fault. The committee may not ever see the immediate success of it but this will be work of a lifetime. The work will come to fruition but will not do so with committee members being double-minded and judging the work itself concerns her. All committee members have to be dedicated to the recommendations and have been here already to dedicate their time. This is a very organic process. The concern for being recording incident is a misguided idea of what transparency really is. The committee won't

have intentional fails but they will happen. Everyone cannot be on the task force committee. The task force committee members have to be the ambassadors of trust with an open-heart and cannot betray the trust of others on the committee. She shared is what really bothering her the most is knowing that someone on the committee feels like there is not trust within it. Appreciated Allen Greene in the athletics department pulling together a committee and rolling out recommendations in 6-weeks that we have begun to see coming out. We cannot solve the world's problems and that everyone will not be satisfied but we must, listen, learn and grow as a committee and community.

Mrs. Lastella Paradise:

Shared that she was at a loss for words, and had been sitting listening in today's meeting. She listens a lot but she also contributes to the committee in a meaningful way but may not say much. She has sent emails out to staff council members and asked for feedback but didn't receive but one response. She asked if the recommendations made by the staff could have a place on the website to provide feedback. She feels that every committee member should be able to share among the group when they feel the need. There are some things that will naturally occur once there is trust. She feels that the committee should only share things that are concrete, the importance is in the outcomes from the meeting not the details. The committee should continue to move with purpose.

Ms. Mya Strickland:

Expressed that outside of the task force being at the service of Auburn University that there are a lot of questions about what is happening with the scholarship funding and how it will be disbursed since it has not been made clear or available for others to see. She feels that the committee should take responsibility of what is wrong and offer practical solutions.

Dr. Melody Russell:

Shared that letters are not actions, they only talk about what to do.

Ms. Mya Strickland:

Stated that the task force committee has to be proactive and not retroactive as much as possible for things to change.

Dr. Melody Russell:

Shared that the 2016 All Together Climate Study was only data and that the recommendations on it were not tracked which makes it a resource but not a roadmap.

Ms. Mya Strickland:

Shared that some Alumni had complaints about visibility of the task force as well.

Dr. Melody Russell:

Expressed to Ms. Maya Strickland that this is not about her and encouraged her to move forward.

Ombudsman C. Kevin Coonrod:

Expressed that in the future the committee should (1) discuss future acknowledgements and accountability and (2) create credibility were the work it is doing can speak for itself.

General Ronald Burgess:

Thanked Dr. Vini Nathan for her service as she rolls off. He shared that speaking for himself he believes in the Presidential Task Force mission and vision. He was excited when asked to lead the committee but will be retired before the work is probably finished. He shared that he should be held accountable for this committee and the buck stops with him. The input of the committee is vitally important. If anyone has anything that needs discussed, to talk to him offline and please feel free to do so. He asked the committee if they have their T-shirt to please wear it on Friday and the next Friday. The next Presidential Task Force meeting will be via zoom, Tuesday, September 29th at 3:30 pm.

Ada Ruth Huntley
Amanda Carr
Amy Weaver
Angela Cannon
Bill Hardgrave
Bruce Pearl
C. Kevin Coonrod
Donielle Fagan
Elizabeth Devore
Gretchen VanValkenburg
Ja'lia Taylor
Jaime Hammer
Joffery Gaymon
Katrina Akande
Kim Brown
Lastella Paradise
Madison Birckhead
Melody Russell
Mya Strickland
Oladiran Fasina
Ronald Burgess
Ronny Isaac
Royrickers Cook
Seymour Irby
Sylvia Masango
Taffye Clayton
Vini Nathan