

Presidential Task Force on Opportunity and Equity Town Hall Meeting with Auburn Graduate Students
An anonymous summary of the meeting

March 11, 2021

An email invitation was sent to all Auburn graduate students inviting them to a Zoom meeting on Thursday, March 11, with members of the Presidential Task Force. The email stated the purpose of the meeting was to better understand the specific concerns as well as more broadly understand the needs and interests Auburn graduate students regarding racial equity and DEI matters. About 70 people attended the meeting, including task force members, graduate students, administrators, faculty and staff.

- **An administrator** began by stating the goal of this meeting was to begin a framework for graduate students to work in collaboration with the task force in order to create an inclusive and equitable environment at Auburn. The forum was an opportunity to create space for everyone to feel seen and heard and the hope was that this is just the beginning of meaningful dialogue between the two groups.
- **A graduate student** spoke of their conversations with other graduate students who said they are hesitant to speak up about racial equity and DEI matters because of possible retaliation and the fear of losing their funding. Across campus in various programs, graduate students said they've been traumatized, alienated and abused.
- **A graduate student** said the Graduate Student Council is always overlooked. Graduate students did not have a representative when the task force was formed last summer. The graduate student said if the graduate students are not clear about the task force's methods, then they are not going to believe in the outcomes. The graduate student added that the task force needs to be more transparent with its minutes.
- **A graduate student** said there has been a gross misrepresentation as to why the graduate students stepped down from the task force in November. The graduate students did not leave the committee because it wasn't moving fast enough, as has been said by others about their departure. The graduate students were not being heard and they thought administrators on the task force were trying to gaslight the graduate students, according to this graduate student.
- **A graduate student** asked if there were going to be top-down directives from the task force for the schools and colleges at the university who are not engaging graduate students on DEI issues. The graduate student said some colleges are doing this, but not all.
- **An administrator** said there will be some directives from the top. A graduate student subcommittee chaired by Dean George Flowers and Dr. Jared Russell would start soon. The administrator reminded everyone that faculty and academic issues are handled through the Office of the Provost, but the administrator expected the academic side to also encourage and implement DEI initiatives.

- **An administrator** asked if colleges will have an option as to whether they want to participate in DEI initiatives. What will be the incentive to ensure colleges are participating and listening to the needs of their graduate students and making sure they are seen and heard?
- **An administrator** said discussions are ongoing as to what various departments are doing in terms of DEI and how the university can incentivize them to make progress.
- **An administrator** encouraged the graduate students to work with the international programs office if they encounter problems or have immigrant issues. That office is a tremendous advocate for international students.
- **An administrator** said after the graduate students left the committee that the task force had a frank and open conversation as to the reasons why they left. The university as well as the task force is a place of learning. The administrator said the task force members are listening and attempting to make progress. Culture takes time to change, but the task force and the university's leadership are committed to making change.
- **An administrator** said culture change is difficult, but is required in order to reach the task force's goals. Adjustments to the culture need to be made in order for underrepresented populations to experience the climate in a manner that allows them to flourish and thrive. If that change isn't made then the institution will continue to be challenged.
- **An administrator** said from their understanding and conversations with graduate students that their issue with the task force were not related to a timeline. The graduate students thought they were not respected as the adults they are and what they bring to the table as graduate students. Graduate students want to hear that the task force is going to listen to them and take into consideration what they are saying because they are relaying their experiences.
- **A graduate student** said graduate students are adults. Graduate students know that change takes time and that is not why graduate students left the task force. The graduate student members left the task force because? they were being dismissed, felt like their voices weren't being heard and they were gaslighted, according to this graduate student.
- **A graduate student** said the university system is set up where graduate students are funded and that makes students afraid to speak up because they could lose funding.
- **A faculty member** said there is a lot to gain from having the perspective of graduate students because they hold a unique position within the university. They are adult students, but also are privy to the inner workings of the university because they are GTAs. Graduate students are not necessarily beholden to the politics of the university, which may hinder employed faculty from speaking up. There is also a concern, the faculty member said, that change is not in the hands of the students, but in the hands of people who donate money to the university, who may not be in alignment with how the students feel or what they think. There will continue to be a level of distrust if students are not convinced the task force is acting in the best interest of the students.
- **An administrator** said the task force made a misstep at the beginning by not including graduate students. The graduate student subcommittee will look at the most pressing needs of the

graduate population through their subcommittee. The listening sessions will help the graduate student subcommittee understand what the graduate student needs are and the subcommittee can start to prioritize those needs.

- **A graduate student** thanked everyone for providing a space for discussion and hoped that there would be more conversations like this one because it will facilitate change. The graduate student also thanked everyone who has attended, listened and/or contributed to the meeting.
- **A graduate student** thanked everyone who attended the meeting as this was important to all graduate students. The graduate student said it shows that more communication between the graduate students and the task force needs to happen since it took three months for the Graduate Student Council to be contacted about the task force resignations.
- **An administrator** thanked everyone for being on the call. The administrator said in order to come up with a vision and goals as it relates to graduate students that trust needs to be built between the presidential task force and the graduate students.