



September 4, 2024

To MU Chancellor Dr. Mun Choi

Dear Chancellor Choi,

This letter serves as a formal complaint from the Black Studies Department about the problem of renaming the annual “Welcome Black BBQ” to the “Welcome Black & Gold BBQ” and offers recommendations for addressing such problems in the future.

While the MU administration, including Director of News and Information Christopher Ave, claims that the original name of the BBQ was exclusionary by stating, “We must not exclude (or give the impression that we are excluding) individuals with different backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives,” we strongly object to this claim as it is superficial and unsubstantiated. Such a claim reflects a lack of understanding of the term “Black” and the extensive scholarship and activism surrounding its use. The administration further indicated that the change was made “in collaboration with event organizers to reflect that our campus is open and welcoming to all.” However, significant notable discrepancies exist between the understanding of the principal organizers of the BBQ, the Gaines/Oldham Black Culture Center and Legion of Black Collegians, who fought the name change. Specifically and most importantly, the organizers agreed to the name change due to the precarious state of their positions as a result of the administration’s dismantling of the IDE Division.

In 1934, W.E.B. Du Bois cautioned against distorting racial and cultural histories through educational mythmaking, arguing that such distortion could lead to disenchantment, despair, and division, ultimately undermining the goal of creating a united and forward-moving society. Decades later, Stuart Hall emphasized the importance of recognizing the self-defining contributions of Black communities to the development of American society, warning that overlooking such contributions could diminish elements crucial to the ideas of freedom and democracy. Creating a welcoming environment for Black students at MU is particularly critical given its long and well-known history of racial injustice against Black students, including those which sparked the 2015 protest that led to senior management and administration changes. Further, African American student enrollment has been noticeably declining in the last 5 years despite a record increase in overall student enrollment. Even current Black faculty representation is noticeably low when compared to other racial groups and the Missouri African American population, which is approximately 11.8%.

Part of addressing these problems must include embracing the term “Black” and fostering an environment that respects and celebrates identities. If we are unable to embrace Black, must we not label Latinx, Italian, Jewish, Greek, Adventist, Christian, Episcopalian, Lutheran, Asian, Chinese, and numerous others as exclusionary?

We request the following actions from the university administration to demonstrate its commitment to a welcoming campus and the principles of shared governance.

1. We respectfully ask that you issue a public apology for the suggestion that “Black” implies exclusion or gives such an impression.
2. We ask that you reopen the dialogue about the name of the BBQ to gather more input from faculty, staff, and students.
3. We suggest the implementation of a mechanism for consulting with the Department of Black Studies to facilitate dialogue before issuing public statements on identity matters affecting Black students, staff, faculty, and other Black communities. This mechanism could be part of developing clear protocols for decision-making processes involving cultural and racial matters, ensuring input from relevant academic departments and student and staff organizations to uphold shared governance principles.
4. We ask that you provide transparent reporting on the progress of the third initiative and its outcomes in the state of the university report.
5. We request the hiring of more faculty to increase our research, teaching, and outreach in Black Studies to help the Missouri Black population in their developmental activities.

We would like to meet with the chancellor to discuss these suggestions as soon as possible. Thank you for your time and consideration, and we look forward to working with you to help address the matters outlined in this letter.

Sincerely,
Black Studies