

Graduate Association of Interdisciplinary Neuroscience Students

Statement on Race and Discrimination

Dear NTP Staff and Faculty:

As scientists, we have immense power and responsibility to create social and political change. With academic freedom comes the privilege to make a difference by using our voice. Today, we ask you to engage with us students to use our collective voice to address the inequalities that exist for our black, brown, and peers of color in our own research community¹.

In the past, student concerns have been brought to the administration and gone unacted upon. Therefore, we feel it is our scientific duty to collectively rearticulate these concerns and recommend concrete policy changes for the Neuroscience Training Program to better address discrimination in the future. As a graduate student body, we are hopeful that the NTP can be an example of how to effectively promote diversity and inclusion at the graduate level. It will take active participation, and not just listening, from all of us students, faculty, and staff to create a more equitable, just environment. The future we envision is well worth the work today. We ask you to imagine this future with us and put in the work to create meaningful and lasting change.

This statement outlines a list of changes that will help progress the program into one that actively fosters a diverse and supportive scientific community. Numbers are not enough to support diversity and inclusion. As a program, we should focus on all of the institutional and structural barriers of the STEM pipeline in order to effectively address recruitment, retention, and sustainability of underrepresented groups. Only then will black and brown students and faculty, as well as students and faculty from other marginalized groups, be comfortable not only joining, but staying in this program. The following imperatives may require negotiation and we, the students, look forward to working with the program to negotiate and implement these changes.

With that, please see below our list of imperatives which have been grouped as actions for NTP to take, handbook changes, and statements to be made from NTP:

Actions we would like the NTP to take

Currently, there lacks succinct, consistent, and transparent communication between NTP students and the Program, such that opportunities to voice ideas, express concerns, or advocate action are limited. In effect, while for the most part there is community amongst NTP students, it is difficult to participate in NTP meetings when they either do not occur frequently or are not known about. Further, it is not well-known how the different NTP committees function together and where ideas or grievances should be brought. Students should have an active role in the

¹ Examples of discrimination in science include, but are not limited to: Outright racist and discriminatory comments made as “jokes”; Being asked to recount every microaggression and discriminatory comment or behavior for people to believe you; Being called by the name of someone the same race as you; Being called honey or sweetheart in class; People touching your hair without your permission; Being asked your relationship status or plans to have children; People questioning your belonging at work (and calling security/police); Being asked to speak for your race; Being asked to teach about discrimination or advise for diversity work without compensation.

NTP and be openly provided opportunities to contribute. We believe there are a variety of actions the Program can take to improve communication, promote community, and address gaps in education surrounding topics like bias and diversity. In doing so, we think the program can be strengthened for current students, future students, and faculty alike.

1. The students, staff, and faculty deserve to know what is happening within the program, and how decisions are made. **We want the administration to maintain clear and explicit communication about the dates and times of programmatic meetings and post all decisions and minutes of these meetings on the website.** The only exception to reporting is sensitive information about students and faculty/staff. Information in the minutes should include who attended and in accordance with Roberts Rules, voting record if roll called. This applies to NTP Steering, Diversity, Curriculum, Outreach, and N&PP committees. We want to see this change immediately with the next committee meeting.
2. Add a session about bias and diversity in science during the first-year professional development course to be taught by a professional. The NTP office has already been included in discussions on implementation of this session. We hope that this will be implemented **this year (Fall 2020) but should be implemented Fall 2021 at the latest.**
3. We want the NTP to hold biannual Town Halls to support program and student communication and feedback about the program. We would like this to be implemented this Fall 2020, but should be started no later than Spring 2021 This can and should be facilitated by an expert: <https://msc.wisc.edu/workshops-trainings/>
4. Institution of an annual diversity, bias, or inclusion training during the NTP seminar in place of a student talk or subgroup presentation for that semester (depending on the needs of students to complete their NTP requirements). The training will be different every year and will be discussion-based. The training must be **required** for all students. Such training requirements are highly encouraged and suggested by the NIH and can be mentioned when applying for program-wide support. We want this implemented by the 2021-2022 school year.
 - a. <https://www.gssaweb.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Best-Practices-in-Cultural-Competence-and-Implicit-Bias-Training.pdf>
5. We ask that NTP holds an annual diversity event that serves to foster community within the program. While not exclusive to marginalized groups, it should focus on building relationships and solidarity, discussing struggles, and supporting marginalized groups. Marginalized groups encompass a vast array of identities including first-generation, LGBTQIA+, intellectual and physical disabilities, etc. Individuals will not be required to share their identities to ensure that attendees are comfortable. This event will be open to

all in the hopes of promoting a supportive environment for people of all identities. We would like this to start recurring during the 2021-2022 school year.

6. Require a diversity statement in the application to become an NTP faculty trainer. This should be implemented for any new faculty member that applies.
7. Ask each faculty member to provide the NTP with a list of all diversity, inclusion, or bias trainings that they have completed, so that new students can use this information when planning rotations. Further, we want to require leadership from the NTP faculty, including everyone on a programmatic committee, to attend annual evidence-based bias training. We ask that you strongly encourage and suggest all other NTP faculty and staff to also attend. At these trainings and events, we ask for an attendance form clearly stating faculty name and training attended. We would like this to start being collected during the 2020-2021 school year.

Changes to the NTP handbook

In its current form, the NTP student handbook is outdated and does not accurately reflect the processes students go through. In many places, the handbook text is vague and warrants clarification. We hope to update the NTP handbook in a way that addresses the needs of students and provides clear information.

1. According to the NTP website, the Diversity Enhancement Committee's job is the following:
"The Diversity Enhancement Committee oversees the Program's Minority Speaker Series, arranges visits by minority students from high schools and colleges, attends area recruitment fairs, helps coordinate the Program's participation in the IBS-SRP Neurobiology program and sends representatives to schools with large minority enrollments in an effort to increase the number of minority student admissions. Members of the committee also participate in the Biosciences Opportunities Program, an annual preview weekend hosted for prospective underrepresented students at UW-Madison."

However, this committee has not invited a speaker since 2017, the BOPS program no longer exists, and it has not arranged any visits for underrepresented students. Further, while its main concern is encouraging minority recruitment, it has no domain over current students of color and their progress. **We want to reorient the goals of this committee to focus not only on recruitment and speaker series, but also on retention and support of current minority students, faculty, and staff.** Of the last five years of incoming students (2015-2019), to our knowledge, 4 out of 12 (33%) underrepresented minority (URM) students have left the program without completing their PhD as compared with 2/41 (5%) non-URM students (Fisher's exact test $p=0.04$). This is concerning and needs to be addressed. A strategic planning meeting for this committee should be completed before the end of the Fall 2020 semester.

2. Addition of two students to the admissions committee, with a combined vote. These students will sign confidentiality agreements to preserve the privacy of applicants. We want this to be implemented no later than the 2022 admissions process, but ideally would be in place for this next (2021) admissions process. The following universities and departments have already instituted this:
 - a. University of Wisconsin-Madison CMB program
 - b. University of Cincinnati MSTP and MD program
 - c. University of Michigan-Ann Arbor Biomedical Sciences
 - d. University of Michigan-Ann Arbor Cancer Biology
 - e. Stanford Neuroscience
 - f. UC Denver-Anschutz Pharmacology
 - g. UC Denver-Anschutz Neuroscience
 - h. UC Denver-Anschutz Cancer Biology
 - i. University of Minnesota-Twin Cities Neuroscience
3. Students serving on the Steering committee recently acquired voting rights. We want to expand student voting rights to **all** NTP committees. This applies to Diversity, Curriculum, Outreach, and N&PP committees. Regardless of if a committee at this time holds regular votes, we want it written in the handbook that students will be guaranteed a vote if a vote should occur. This should be implemented for each committee's next meeting.
4. During recruitment, multiple students have reported substantial concerns about the racial and religious intolerance of interviewees to the NTP office. Despite student feedback, students in question have been admitted to the program without explanation. If discriminatory words or actions are heard or found from a prospective student during the recruitment period, individuals should report using the online student comments responses. To streamline the reporting process, **the current online interview feedback form should include an option for the reporting student to be followed up with by a member of the NTP office or Admissions Committee to resolve the issue or ensure that it is being accounted for.** In the case that the reported recruits have been admitted and choose to accept, we want to ensure that they are held accountable by the Admissions Committee. Therefore, **we ask the NTP to enforce a two-strike policy for student actions that are discriminatory, threaten or harass others, or otherwise go against the NTP values of promoting an inclusive environment. We want this implemented for the next (2021) admissions process.** For students whose actions are first documented during the recruitment process, **the Admissions Committee should institute a policy to follow-up with these individuals before they matriculate.** This follow-up may include, but is not limited to the following:
 - a. Identification of the problematic behaviors/words that were made.

- b. Required attendance at evidence-based bias training or diversity/inclusion event. This requirement will be in addition to any NTP requirements for such training or events.
 - c. Inform the individual of the NTP two-strike policy and the previously mentioned problematic behaviors/actions count as a first strike.
5. Currently, with regards to “Grievances and Appeals” the NTP handbook states, “If you feel that you have been treated unfairly by the program, faculty, staff or another student, there are set procedures for trying to resolve the grievance or conflict. In general, the policy is to initially try to resolve the conflict at the lowest level but make your way step by step to higher levels as necessary. For example, if you have a grievance with your mentor, try to resolve it by talking to him/her first. If that is not satisfactory, contact the chair of the department or the Director of NTP. The next levels are the Associate Dean of the School of Medicine and Public Health and the Dean of the Graduate School. More information can be obtained at the following website: <http://grad.wisc.edu/acadpolicy/#97>.”

Conflict resolution, particularly for instances of discrimination, hostile and intimidating behavior, or harassment, places students at risk of exposure and retaliation. This policy does not provide adequate support or protection for students to report misbehavior. In the past, student concerns of faculty and work environments have not resulted in the program addressing these issues. We recognize there are formal processes set up by the University. However, these systems largely undervalue student complaints and often result in no actions taken against the perpetrator. The burden and risk of reporting largely fall on the student. Therefore, **we ask NTP to update the handbook and programmatic actions to make it easier and safer for students to come forward with complaints. We want updates to be made by the end of the 2020-2021 academic year.** We do not have one concrete policy change to accomplish this, but rather provide a list of possible changes the program may implement individually or in conjunction with others. Below are our ideas that promote a comprehensive approach for handling student complaints:

- a. Update the lab rotation form to ask about student concerns with the lab, PI, work environment, co-workers. These forms must remain confidential and not subject to viewing by the faculty listed on the form.
- b. GAINS will reach out to NTP students to solicit anonymous input about their labs (working environment, PI, all lab personnel, etc.). This anonymous information will be compiled and shared with 1st year students.
 - i. If a faculty member is not getting new students and they were identified as needing improvement, GAINS will provide them resources based on student feedback to address problematic behaviors.
- c. Designate GAINS as the starting point for students to report misconduct. GAINS then can bring concerns to the diversity committee and program administration. This will reduce individual student risk exposure and burden.

- d. Establish a secure reporting system within NTP. Students may choose to stay anonymous, share their name, or ask to be followed up with by GAINS, the diversity committee, or NTP administration.
- e. Hire an external entity to create annual or biennial reports of misconduct and recommendations for improving the handling of misconduct.
- f. Have the Diversity Committee reach out to incoming students and discuss possible rotating PI's and offer recommendations.

Statements for the NTP to make

As a scientific program, we want to use our collective voice to bring support to social and humanitarian issues. Science does not occur in a vacuum. Our work is inherently political, whether we choose to engage it as such or not. The COVID-19 pandemic and Black Lives Matter movement highlight the critical role scientists play in working towards a more informed, just world. We believe it is important for the NTP to use its power and privilege to actively stand against racism and for a more holistic approach to diversity and inclusion. Statements are one way for the Program to demonstrate its support for students from diverse backgrounds and create an anti-racist track record. GAINS and students will follow up directly by providing these drafted statements in a timely manner. None of the statements should take longer than 6 months.

1. We ask for a statement from NTP to all faculty, staff, and students detailing their **solidarity with their Black, Indigenous, and students of color, that they are against police brutality, and in support of the Black Lives Matter movement and its ideals of racial justice and equity.** The statement should also detail specific policy changes the program will implement to show their commitment to ensuring NTP is a welcoming and inclusive space. Such policy changes can be taken from this letter as an example.
2. Partner with GAINS to write a letter that can be sent to any professor leading a course with NTP students enrolled. This letter will encourage professors to consider how their curriculum incorporates diversity. It will also suggest promoting diversity through discussing more publications and contributions from women and BIPOC and addressing bias and its consequences in science (e.g. lack of studying sex differences, ethical breach of conduct in LGBTQA+ and BIPOC communities, the destructive and pervasive idea of eugenics, etc.). Many publicly available resources provide guidance on broaching such topics.
3. As a student body, we are concerned about the use of force on Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) in Madison and on campus. For the 2019-2020 academic year, the University allocated \$12.8 million dollars to the UWPD (p.12²), five times the national

² [BUDGET REPORT 2019–2020 | BOARD OF VISITORS EDITION](#)

rate³. In 2019, 40% of UWPD use-of-force incidents involved Black people⁴. Yet, Black students make up only 2.5% of the student population. Further, the officer that killed Tony Robinson is still on the force. For the safety of your BIPOC students, **we want you to send a letter to Chancellor Blank asking her to cut ties with and divest from the Madison Police Department.** This action has precedence, as The University of Minnesota, Milwaukee Public School system, and the Madison Metro Public School District recently cut ties with their city police⁵. Community events affect us students and we ask you to think of the safety of our Black, Indigenous and POC students at this time.

4. Develop an official statement to the Graduate School, SMPH, and other departments represented by NTP faculty that advocates for the addition of measures of diversity, inclusion, and equity actions, such as volunteer efforts or training, to hiring and tenure decisions.
5. Write a statement of solidarity from NTP administration (director or administrative staff) to students in support of international students that will also outline ways international students can seek support from the program. Further, this statement must condemn the support of the current law or any future law that discriminates or intimidates based on racial background, immigration status, or country of origin.
 - a. Statements should support groups specifically affected by current events.
 - b. Use the current administration's statements and actions against Chinese students as an example (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/proclamation-suspension-entry-nonimmigrants-certain-students-researchers-peoples-republic-china/>)
 - c. Directly address the ICE SEVP rule change that requires international students take in-person classes during the COVID-19 pandemic to be allowed to remain in the United States (<https://www.ice.gov/news/releases/sevp-modifies-temporary-exemptions-nonimmigrant-students-taking-online-courses-during>).
 - d. In the future, if a national issue dealing with discrimination against a certain race, religion, or group arises, the NTP must make a statement of solidarity and make clear the steps they are taking to be anti-discriminatory and support students that are being targeted.

In summary, we hope it is clear that the students of this program will not stay silent on issues of race, systemic oppression, and discrimination. We have the power to change these structures and we must do so. The Neuroscience Training Program has a duty to support, uplift, and protect its scientists. This statement and list of policy changes can serve as the groundwork for the construction of a graduate program that does not simply train students to conduct experiments,

³ [On the heels of the George Floyd killing, colleges have a moral imperative to not work with local police \(opinion\)](#)

⁴ [Use of Force Data: 2019 Totals | UWPD | UW-Madison](#)

⁵ [No Cops In Schools': Protesters Shut Down Madison School Board Meeting](#)

but rather actively champions holistic student education to become socially engaged, mindful leaders of the future. There must be change and as students, we will work with the administration to develop a more just and equitable community. It is our hope that you too share in these aspirations and will take action to further the goals of equity and justice within the Neuroscience Training Program. We can and must do better.

Thank you for your time and consideration. Signed,

Spencer Cooke

Grace George

Brian Barnett

Charlene Rivera-Bonet

Alejandra Canales

Lizzi Holland

Claire Erickson

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Akshay Kohli

Lauren English

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