

# In Defense Of Dr. Jonathan Higgins

An open letter to Miriam Feldblum, Vice President and Dean of Students and Jan Collins-Eaglin, Associate Dean of Students for Personal Success and Wellness at Pomona College from outraged Student Affairs Professionals

Dear Dr. Miriam Feldblum and Dr. Jan Collins- Eaglin:

We are writing this letter to express our outrage with the firing of Dr. Jonathan Higgins as the Director of Claremont College's Queer Resource Center. We, a collective of Student Affairs professionals from across the nation and with a multitude of identities, are united against the actions you've taken and the impact that they'll have across our field. We understand your choice to end Dr. Higgins' employment to be a form of gatekeeping that keeps Black queer professionals out of key positions to create change in higher education.

The College Fix, a right leaning student written news website published a piece about tweets from Dr. Higgins reflecting on his lived experiences as a queer Black man. The website chose to focus on an April tweet in which Higgins replied to the question "who are you automatically wary of/keep at a distance because of your past experiences?" - "White gays and well-meaning white women,". If history has taught us anything, we know that Dr. Higgins' experiences and caution are valid. White gay men have become the primary enactors of violence toward queer people of color. Recently in Philadelphia, white gay men were angered because the city introduced a new pride flag with added black and brown stripes. The colors, according to the Philadelphia Office of LGBT Affairs' More Color More Pride campaign, represent inclusion of people of color in the LGBTQ community. Dr. Mamta Motwani Accapadi has written about and presented on the ways white women have enacted violence on people of color and served to perpetuate and benefit from white supremacy.

Dr. Higgins' work has always centered queer students of color and has spoken out about the harm of heteronormativity, homonegativity, White fragility and White supremacy in relation to queer students. As quoted from the QRC website, "The Dean of Students staff is committed to building and maintaining a vibrant community which is inclusive and open to new and differing experiences and viewpoints." As a public serving institution, Claremont has the obligation to serve a broad constituency to ensure it fosters an inclusive and supportive campus environment where its members feel valued, respected, are able to flourish, and continue to be unobstructed in their pursuit of their fullest potential. The commitment to diversity has to acknowledge that there are differences that make a difference, with the idea that historical inequities, legalities, and legacies negatively impact marginalized students and their ability to thrive in many campus environments. With that in mind, when we aim to create an equitable space, we should strive to center those who have historically and contemporarily been marginalized and ignored by our institutions of higher education. Specifically, these spaces should value and celebrate the voices and lived experiences of those historically marginalized by systems of oppression as catalysts for institutional equity and social change, we can't uphold the systems we seek to dismantle.

We would like to state in no uncertain terms that the firing of Dr. Higgins is a gross injustice and serves as an act of violence and silencing of queer black voices. The actions of Dr. Feldblum and the Dean of Students office at Pomona College goes directly against its stated mission of "[p]rioritizing lived experiences and centering voices of those who have multiple marginalized identities" It seems

clear that this statement isn't enforced through action. This is an example of representational diversity without a structure to support the lived experiences of those with multiple marginalized identities.. Our lived experiences as Student Affairs professionals inform and support our work with students with multiple marginalized identities.

The firing of Dr. Higgins sets a dangerous precedent for the field of student affairs--that those who directly and unapologetically challenge white supremacy, white fragility, and the multitude of problematic aspects of higher education and the dominant culture, will simply be discarded in favor of someone who will perpetuate the status quo. As Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once stated, "...large segments of white society are more concerned about tranquility & the status quo than about justice & humanity." This has proven, time and again, to be true.

We refuse to sit idly by as Dr. Higgins, and by extension, countless black and brown queer and trans students, faculty, and staff, is denied his humanity and publicly shamed. To that end, we demand the following things as a response from Dr. Feldblum, Dr. Collins-Eaglin, Pomona College, and the Claremont Colleges:

1. The resignation of Dr. Feldblum for the gross missteps of both firing Dr. Higgins and continuously refusing to support marginalized students. For context, please visit <https://goo.gl/2Rqn3V>.
2. A public apology to Dr. Higgins from all involved parties that acknowledges the harm done.
3. A fully transparent search process while searching for Dr. Higgins' replacement to ensure that queer and trans students of color will be supported and their perspectives will be actively included and valued.
4. A carefully thought out plan for supporting queer and trans students of color and queer and trans faculty and staff of color. This is crucial in minimizing the suffering of queer and trans students of color that is inevitable now that their advocate has been ousted.
5. A carefully thought out plan for addressing White fragility and White supremacy in the Claremont Colleges.

Moving forward, we, and those who join us through their signature refuse to apply to positions within the Claremont Colleges, as this environment is clearly not safe for anyone who fights for, promotes, or supports social justice.

In Solidarity,

Celeste Demby

Caley Logsdon, Arizona State University

Nicole J. Johnson, Virginia Tech

CJ Venable, Kent State University

Kayla Tyson, Emory University

S.R. Gibson, Gonzaga University

Meghan Dooley, University of Missouri - Kansas City

Alden Jones, University of Texas-Austin

Robert Alberts, Arizona State University

Tim Dufresne

Bradley Brooks, Northern Virginia Community College

Amanda Baker, University of Maryland

Dawn Morgan, African American Cultural Center, NC State University

Gayatri Sethi, (Former) Agnes Scott College

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Brittany Harris, Med, Washington University in St. Louis

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David Polizzi  
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Becca Hammond-Cahill, UC Davis  
Jose Arce, University of Florida  
Krista Benson, Grand Valley State University  
Evan Thornburg  
Kim Martin  
Katie Schmitt, Berklee College of Music  
Michael Brick, University of Maryland  
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