

Collegiate School

\ Open Letter

An Open Letter to the Collegiate Community

This letter was originally printed in the February edition of the Collegiate Journal, published on February 22, 2019.

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Collegiate must address its own problems with racism and intolerance. As we continue to settle into our new building and our new neighborhood, it is time to shift Collegiate's culture into one that is truly inclusive in all aspects of student life. While we acknowledge the effort to start a conversation about the recent events at Poly Prep, making these conversations optional is counterproductive. Students of color at Collegiate do not have the option to leave our race at the door; it is a part of our existence every single day. Making these conversations optional undervalues the experiences of students of color at Collegiate and what we have to say. Furthermore,

the decision to make these conversations optional stunts the emotional and social education of all students at Collegiate. Simply being there and being exposed to different opinions makes a sizable impact. These are conversations that we must all be a part of.

Over the past few weeks, multiple instances of racism have been brought to light in schools that we have close relationships with. We compete with these schools and share a common thread with them. At Poly Prep, a video was leaked of two students in blackface imitating apes. Shortly after, the Black Student League at Stuyvesant released an open letter that supported the students of color at Poly Prep and addressed issues of racism at their specific school. We stand in complete and unwavering solidarity with the students of color at Poly Prep, Stuyvesant, and other schools across the country. We stand in solidarity with the Poly students and their valiant efforts to bring this incident to light and their organized protests to fight for their value and worth. We stand in solidarity with the Stuyvesant students in their quest to create a healthier and more inclusive environment for Black students.

While we share a gleeful sense of camaraderie through Friday night basketball games and a deep bond unique to the Collegiate brotherhood, Collegiate is a deeply flawed and imperfect community. Collegiate is a place where jokes about rape and gender and sexuality identification have been normalized. Collegiate is a place where Black kids get their hair gawked at and constantly touched without their permission as if they were animals in a petting zoo. Collegiate is a place where Latinx students are pejoratively called “Mexicans.” Collegiate is a place where Holocaust jokes have become scarily normalized. Collegiate is a place where South Asian and Muslim students are subjected to constant “jokes” about terrorism. Collegiate is a place where East Asian students are constantly mixed up. Collegiate is a place where although there are only a handful of Brown or Black students, their names are constantly confused while the forty-plus White students are rarely mistaken for one another. Collegiate is a place where many students of color unfairly feel the need to internalize racist and harmful “jokes” in order to assimilate and survive. None of these things are acceptable. We love this school with all of our hearts, but at times we feel that that love is not reciprocated. We believe that this school has a great deal of potential to truly be a more safe, equitable, just, healthy,

and inclusive environment for all students. Inspired by Poly Prep's Umoja and Stuyvesant's Black Student League, we are asking for the following:

1. For the administration to send an email to the entire Collegiate community (students, faculty, staff, parents, alumni, etc.) explicitly addressing and condemning the use of blackface in the Poly Prep video. It is never too late to do so.
2. For the administration to explicitly denounce the use of slurs and derogatory terms in the school and to hold teachers responsible for holding students accountable when these words and their variations are said. These terms include, but are not limited to "nigger/nigga"; "faggot"; "retarded"; "muzzie"; "spic"; "chink"; "kike"; etc.
3. For the administration to create and enact specific consequences for the (repeated) use of intolerant language/actions. Currently, these actions are prohibited, but no punishments are outlined. In addition, we ask that there be a learning session implemented to explain to the student why and how that type of language is hurtful and inappropriate. We believe that every student should be given a chance to redeem themselves and that moments like these are prime teaching moments. Since there are currently no specific punishments, the current standard puts the responsibility on students of color to report the use of derogatory language. We do not want to constantly be labeled as "snitches" or "social justice warriors."
4. To initiate and require sensitivity training for both faculty and students around racial slurs in the texts that are read in English and History courses.
 1. For the decision to read racial slurs in literary and historical texts out loud to be decided on a case-by-case basis. These discussions should have faculty members of color and students of color present.
 2. A careful reevaluation of the place of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in Collegiate's English curriculum. This reevaluation should have both current students, former students, and faculty involved.

5. A serious reevaluation of our school mascot. We suggest a simple removal of the peg leg. Peter Stuyvesant was a vehement anti-Semite and ruled by hate and racism. Although, current students may not be personally offended by the mascot, is this the man we want to represent Collegiate? Do his values align with ours?
6. To curate a faculty and administration that more accurately reflects the diversity of the student body in terms of race, religion, ethnicity, gender expression and identity, political affiliation/alignment and sexual orientation. We love and adore all of our current teachers and hold them in high regard. Please recognize that there are more-than-capable and overqualified teachers out there from a plethora of underrepresented groups. Seek them out. It is detrimental to every student when their education lacks the frame of reference and point of view of teachers who are not cisgender heterosexual White men, especially in the humanities.
7. To admit more students of color. Here is one interesting statistic: in 1969, there were two self-identifying Black students in the graduating class. In 2019, there are two self-identifying Black students in the graduating class. We understand this can be a tricky one and that quota systems are generally unfavorable. Nevertheless, the current circumstances are grim and classrooms that are mainly majority-White only reinforce the bubble that Collegiate tends to be.
8. The creation of a Student Academic Committee that will work with teachers to ensure a deeper and more inclusive curriculum. Specifically for humanities classes, this committee will help curate a curriculum that features true diversity of thought. For example, looking for historians who are not white men and reading literature that doesn't center black people in the context of slavery, segregation, etc. We need a curriculum that ensures that we cover a myriad of cultures and religions in a non-Eurocentric way. We envision that this committee would be elected by upperclassmen during the same time as elections for Student Government. One or two upperclassmen would be elected per grade each year; once elected these students would not be permitted to run for re-election. The vision for this committee

is flexible, but we believe that something along these lines is imperative to the betterment of every Collegiate student's education.

9. The creation of a block during the academic day for students to discuss world issues and issues that affect their daily lives. Conversations about race, gender and sexuality, sexual assault, etc. must no longer be shoved into whatever Advisory, Clubs or Break period happens to be closest. These issues deserve as much gravity in our daily schedule as any academic class.

In closing, we implore that this letter is understood as one piece of work. We understand that it can be tempting to allow one specific demand, example, or sentence to overshadow the entire letter. Please take time with this letter and read it multiple times. We do not intend that this letter have all the immediate solutions to the problems presented; we want this to be a first step in truly making a difference. We believe that these are reasonable demands that will truly help us work towards a better Collegiate. We thank you for reading and listening to our requests. Finally, we look forward to continuing to work with the administration in the future.

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