

What Supports Students, as Told By Alums and Current Students to Faculty

LTC Session on Tuesday, November 10th, 2020

12:25 – 1:25 pm

Context for These Discussions:

During the summer, Kristin Bloomer launched a call to faculty to discuss racism on campus and what actions we might take as a faculty to combat it. A subgroup then formed to consider how we might best **support students** at this time. A list of those faculty appears below, and we encourage you to contact any of us to further this discussion if you are so inclined. We decided to meet directly with two groups to learn directly from them about their experiences at Carleton, the alums who were responsible for organizing the [Open Letter for Carleton College](#) and the students who wrote the list [Black Students' Demands](#) last spring. We asked them what professors had done or could do to make the experiences of BIPOC students at Carleton more inclusive and more fulfilling. The synopses that follow document those conversations, which we hope will be useful to faculty across the College.

For further discussion, please feel free to contact anyone in the Supporting Students Group:

Deborah Gross and Cathy Yandell, conveners; Palmar Alvarez-Blanco, Mihaela Czbor-Lupp, Susan Jaret McKinstry, Tom Journell, Kiley Kost, David Lefkowitz, Tammy Metcalf-Filzen, Helen Minsky, Susannah Ottaway, Sandra Rousseau, Xavier Tavera, Caroline Turnage-Butterbaugh, and Joel Weisberg.

Prompts for Today's Discussion:

1. **What effective practices do you do or have you implemented in your interactions with students?** Are there suggestions described in these lists that you have found successful?
2. **What are the themes that you see running through these lists?** Are they the same or different between the lists?
3. **What resources would help you improve your interactions with students?**

Meeting with Signatories of the Open Letter for Carleton College

Approximately 21 alumni, signatories of the Alumni Letter (mostly Black, but Latinx, Asian, and white alumni were also present) and 33 faculty met on August 26 to discuss what faculty can do in the future to support more fully our students of color. While the alums spoke of other issues that concerned them and that they would present to the administration, the principal topic of our discussion was what their most supportive professors at Carleton had done to encourage them to become their best selves, both academically and personally.

Alums felt supported by faculty and staff who:

- Take the initiative in reaching out to Black and other students of color, realizing that the students' backgrounds may have not prepared them to contact faculty directly.
- Speak from their own experience and express humility and vulnerability. The best relationships are reciprocal.
- Are interculturally competent – they were curious and open to learning more about diverse cultural backgrounds.
- Make clear what exceptions were possible in a class. For example, one alum described that, in a particularly difficult course, she did not know that it was even possible to ask for an extension, although she later learned that many of her peers had already been granted one.
- Listen actively—not to respond, but to take in.
- Believe in each student's individual worth. Even with students who were not gifted in a particular subject, the profs did not lose sight of their other talents and potential.
- Give students of color a sense of belonging at Carleton, which these alums did not always experience in classes or office hours. This can be as simple as professors' stating that they are happy the student is in their class/ in office hours/at Carleton, etc.
- Recognize that Carleton can be a culture shock for many students of color.
- Challenge students while still being understanding. If students turned in an assignment late, for example, the professors asked why and expressed concern rather than accepting the late assignment with "no questions asked." The students then felt supported rather than ignored. The same is true for students who take a leave of absence. Involved faculty check in on these students and ask why they took time off, if students are open to this conversation.
- Acknowledge students' differences rather than trying to treat them all as identical beings.
- Inspire confidence in students by talking with them privately and pointing out their strengths.
- Allow students to become scholars in a welcoming environment.
- Invite students into their intellectual areas rather than acting as a gatekeeper who gives the impression that students aren't welcome.
- Remind students not to compare themselves to others but to recognize their own gifts.
- Encourage students to make a difference at Carleton.
- Do not confuse offering students extra support with lowering standards.
- Push students to explore and try new experiences.
- Treat students as adults, but at the same time realize that they are growing and navigating complex interpersonal and institutional situations.

Meeting with Ujamaa Student Leaders, Authors of Black Students' Demands

Twelve student members of Ujamaa met with faculty members in the Supporting Students group on September 18. The discussion focused on variants of the questions created by the alumni for the earlier discussion, focusing on how faculty and staff who were considered instrumental to students' success were helpful. The timeframe emphasized in the question includes pre-Carleton experiences, given that some participating students had only had 2 terms of on-campus experience at Carleton (given remote learning during spring term), but the majority of the conversation focused on Carleton experiences.

Students feel supported by faculty and staff who:

- Recognize what has happened to Black people in the US and talk about it directly (e.g. the disproportionate impact of COVID-19).
- Acknowledge their place in the system [especially for white faculty].
- Do not expect BIPOC students to talk about their personal experiences in order to educate them, particularly since this kind of expectation seems to happen repeatedly.
- Express compassion and support towards Black students in times of challenge, not by staying quiet but by checking on the individual students as people.
- Consider that financial resources are not as available for all students and don't require unnecessary texts, identify online/free texts when possible, and acknowledge when students express specific needs and help find ways to meet them.
- Support students' academic goals and interests, rather than directing them away from "harder" majors. "This discipline is not for everyone" is not an encouraging response to a request for assistance.
- Help to keep the College as a whole responsive to needs of Black students, when the official actions are absent or slow to materialize.
- Focus on global, not only US, aspects of their subject matter.
- Come from similar backgrounds as those of the students.
- Tell students that they are welcome and appreciated.
- Are authentic and straightforward when they interact with students.
- Pay attention to how Black students (and other BIPOC students) feel in class and reach out to check in if students are not participating or seem uncomfortable. Simple gestures can often be enough.
- Realize and try to counteract the imposter syndrome that their students may be experiencing by affirming that they belong and that they have something valuable to offer the class.
- Start early, especially with first-year students.
- Take the initiative to reach out to Black students and actively work to empower their students.
- Support Black faculty, both to stand with them and to recognize the work that they do in supporting Black students.
- Endorse the efforts of Black students to inform and create change on campus, to improve the environment for BIPOC students.
- Make an effort to diversify the content of their courses -- which authors are being read, which thinkers are being privileged, and on which areas of the world the class is focused.