



**National Black Deaf Advocates, Inc.**  
www.nbda.org

June 16, 2020

To: Seth Bravin, Chair  
Gallaudet University Board of Trustees

Subject: An Open Letter Addressing Concerns for Black Deaf Individuals at Gallaudet University

Dear Mr. Bravin and Members of the Gallaudet University Board of Trustees,

It is with a heavy heart that we write this letter to you.

The National Black Deaf Advocates (NBDA) is a non-profit advocacy organization whose mission is to promote leadership development, economic and educational opportunities, social equality, and to safeguard the general health and welfare of Black Deaf and Hard of Hearing people, many of them who are Gallaudet Alumni with vested interest in the University.

The recent world-wide movement of Black Lives Matter has impacted us and every member of our Black and Deaf community in a very real way. Members of the Black Deaf community must deal with racism and audism compounded. We are first judged on the color of our skin; and then we are judged based on our ability to navigate in a hearing person's world. We face both racism and audism in our everyday lives.

Gallaudet University should, as the identified cultural center for Deaf people all over the world, serve as a shining model of access, education, inclusion, and equity. Unfortunately, as recent (and many past) events have shown, that is not the case.

There has been a long history of ongoing discrimination against Black Deaf individuals - both for students and for those who are faculty and staff at the University. Numerous concerns associated with systematic racism have been repeatedly brought to the attention of the Board of Trustees, as well as the President's office, by the Organization for Equity for Deaf Staff of Color (OEDSOC), but these efforts have not resulted in any substantive resolutions.

There is now a petition circulating online from the Black Student Union that calls for change at Gallaudet University. Their requests demonstrate the ongoing problem of inequity within the hiring process, a lack of training for officers of the Department of Public Safety, and a culture of racist and oppressive behavior at all levels of the University that has severely damaged the lives of Black Deaf students, faculty, and staff. This behavior and the results have a ripple effect on Black Deaf adults and children world-wide.

Recently there was a Student Body Government/Black Student Union Town Hall. At this meeting, students repeatedly brought up issues related to practices and policies within the Gallaudet Department of Public Safety. In response to this meeting, President Cordano inexplicably announced that she was suspending an on-campus fraternity, saying, “They have become the face of systemic racism in our community.” This was a deflection of the highest order. It was a slap in the face to our Black Deaf students who bravely stepped up to address the injustices, oppression, and abuse that they have suffered. This failure to view systematic racism as an overarching priority for the University and to accept accountability demonstrates a lack of leadership, and moral conviction required from her role. It was not only a leadership failure - it was a failure of character. It was myopic, short-sighted, and displayed an incredible lack of social awareness and empathy to Black Deaf Community members, who are only demanding a safe and inclusive space for everyone.

As the face of the Deaf community world-wide, the Gallaudet University President has the power to shape public opinion. Her words carry the weight of her office, and the weight of the history of Gallaudet University. The President has fostered a hostile and unsafe environment on campus and in our communities.

Gallaudet University needs leadership that recognizes the role that they serve within the greater context of the diverse worldwide Deaf community. We need leadership that addresses not only the issues that confront us as Deaf people, but fully recognizes the additional intersectionalities within. As Black Deaf individuals, we feel the knee of injustice and inequity from President Cordano’s deflection from our concerns about systematic racism at Gallaudet University.

President Cordano has failed to display the type of leadership needed for our diverse community that is necessary for healing. The current turbulent time requires a leadership with significant moral empathy which is missing in her leadership.

We call on Gallaudet University to address the systemic racism and creative changes that will transform the University into a more inclusive environment for all people specifically Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) who are Deaf, DeafBlind, DeafDisabled, Hard of Hearing, and members of the LGBTQIA+ community.

We understand that this type of systematic change cannot happen overnight, however, we demand immediate action to address the following items:

1. Resolve the Black Student Union and Student Body Government current concerns enlisted in the public petition that is available through change.org:  
<https://www.change.org/p/gallaudet-university-black-lives-matter-movement-calls-for-change-at-gallaudet-university-31de3280-0219-4b7b-b7ea-076dfa1675da>
2. Allocate a sufficient budget, resources, and expand staff in the office of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion and allow the EDI leaders to exercise their autonomy;
3. Conduct an external audit of the Human Resources hiring process and internal files;
4. The Board of Trustees should meet with the members of the EODSOC and with students of color without the President or University staff present;
5. When complaints of misconduct are filed, immediately place involved DPS officers on administrative leave and start an impartial investigation. Enforce appropriate consequences (i.e. suspension, termination) on the officers as necessary;
6. The Gallaudet University Department of Safety needs to undergo an independent review of the list of all persons not allowed on campus (Persona Non Gratas); and,
7. Most importantly, acknowledge and take accountability for the current President's failure to create a safe space for all members of our diverse communities, remove President Roberta Cordano from the position of University President, and immediately begin the search for an Inclusive Deaf President.

Respectfully,

Isidore Niyongabo  
President,  
National Black Deaf Advocates

CC:

Gallaudet University President Roberta Cordano  
Gallaudet University Members of the Board of Trustees  
Chair, Gallaudet Staff Council  
Chair, Faculty Senate  
Chair, Faculty of Color Coalition

Ms. Brianne Burger, Director/Liaison of the Office of Special Institutions, US Department of Education