

For Immediate Release  
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### **WWU Students Open Letter**

The intentionality of this statement is not a direct response to any one Western Washington University entity, but to gain a more systematic understanding of the series of events that have taken place up until now, in contrast to the official statements made by Western Washington University Leadership, and to address a campus climate that has allowed for acts of violence.

In the middle of July 2015 a professor sent correspondence to WWU student government members Belina Seare (student body president) and Abby Ramos (VP for diversity) about the mascot and how it doesn't represent all students. On October 2015 Abby replied to confirm the need/desire for a general discussion about the mascot among all students. On November 19 The Western Front, reported on an effort led by a professor to survey students about the school mascot.

On November 20 - KIRO 7 in Seattle picked up the story, and published news about the survey that misrepresented the origins and nature of the mascot discussion. WWU's administration took no measure to correct the claims reported by KIRO 7. On November 22 - Unheard by the journalists who published misrepresentations, Ramos calls on other leaders of the Associated Students to help clarify that no decisions have been made about the mascot. AS President Belina Seare asks how she can help. She posted on Twitter to clear up the misinformation reported by KIRO 7. Around midnight, Belina was made aware of comments on YikYak. Eric Alexander, Sierra and Hannah Brock knew about the lynching posts at least two hours before Belina was notified by Abby at 2pm.

At 5pm, a meeting was called by University officials to discuss the most violent threat that had been made regarding lynching. Belina requested to have students present. This request was denied on the basis of confidentiality. At this meeting, the administration brought a party of eight people and three campus police. Abby and Belina were asked how they were feeling.

The students were told that the police would not be able to find suspects without a warrant, and couldn't get a warrant with Belina and Abby's statements. WWU President Bruce Shepard assured Belina and Abby that there would be transparency about the situation. He said he would draft a statement that night concerning the safety of all students of color. He said that by 9 a.m., he would send Belina and Abby a draft of the letter, and would send it out on Tuesday at noon. Belina and Abby offer solutions to protect all students, including having the ability to work on the email before it is

sent. They convey their intent to think specifically about ways to let other black students and students of color know their safety is threatened and let the administration know that they will be in touch later that night after thinking about this.

Again the students meet Campus Police on Monday at 10:30 p.m. to discuss the interview for a statement, which police say they need to get a warrant. The students were asked for their statements, even though the students desired the Campus Police to address their concerns about immediate safety. Police responded that they could only offer support by having a patrol come by more frequently around their house (which is off-campus), but could offer nothing else-no one could be posted outside of the students' residence. Also the police advised them to use the "buddy system" and to not walk alone. The students asked that a [WWU Alert](#) be sent out for the safety of all students. They are referred to University Chief of Police Darin Rasmussen, who was unavailable until Tuesday morning. Lack of funding for police is given as an excuse. Students requested WWU monitor online comments. This request was refused. With their options running out, the students asked if they should call the Bellingham Police Department (BPD). Campus Police told them they cannot expect anything from BPD; that BPD is too busy. The police denied the students four requests. The students rounded up support from other students and friends to feel safe and to go home, fending for themselves. They stay up all night monitoring online comments.

On Tuesday, November 24, the students discovered a gun is pictured in a YikYak comment around 2 a.m. The students, themselves, have been monitoring and recording the online comments and posts, since the police and administration has not been doing this.

Concerned, Belina called President Shepard at 2:15 a.m. and emailed him screenshots of the gun. He tells her he needs to contact the chief of police. He called Seare back five or ten minutes later. She reiterated to President Shepard that students are feeling unsafe. Belina suggested cancelling classes for the concern of all students. President Shepard responded that he will call her back. Students send Shepard a follow-up text, restating their lack of feeling safe, their concern about the safety of all students, and the need to shut down campus. President Shepard responds that he will get back to them around 6 a.m. before sending out any statement. Belina believed that they made an agreement to draft the statement together.

On Tuesday 7 a.m., the students learned that classes are cancelled through a [letter](#) that is sent out without their review or input. The letter did not align with many students' views, breaking Shepard's agreement. Shepard cancelled classes but did not shut down campus, so student employees and WWU staff still have to come to campus. Also on

this morning, the Campus Chief Police contacted the students to make a statement and discuss safety. No longer trusting the police, the students decided not to respond. Police then tried to reach them through friends, texting other people. Students desired personal security.

At 6 p.m., students met with community organizers/lawyers. During the meeting, the students received word that Campus Police would provide them with a hotel, but not with personal security. Students felt it was too little, too late. On November 25 the students held a press conference off-campus, with community members, to create some sense of security.

We the students that have been deeply impacted by structural injustices know that the violence of this last week is not an isolated event. Our discussion today needs to shift away from individual people to the collective responsibility of every single person on this campus to prioritize the safety of students of color, and in this case Black students. Official communications to the students and larger community about the threat level to our campus has centered the safety of the general campus population. Racist threats do not target and dehumanize the general campus population in a university that is majority white. This is a question of intent vs impact. If you intend to provide safety for your students, but your students don't actually feel safe then your tactics are failing. Our safety looks different than yours.

Black students and students of color overall have become the collateral damage of this universities "teachable moments". This institution is willing to sacrifice the well-being and safety of a few students, who usually hold historically marginalized identities, for the learning of the privileged majority. For example students of color experience microaggressions in the classroom and workplace and then are expected to become educators at the expense of their own well-being and learning. The inconsistent and optional diversity trainings for faculty and staff on this campus leave them ill-equipped to proactively interrupt instances of racism and harm in the classroom. And yet, when students do take on the burden of to educate this forces students of color to either suffer in silence or to educate people about their own pain instead of using that energy towards healing from the harm.

For the students who do speak on critical consciousness, critical race theory, white supremacy and other issues, they are met with hostility, are punished, and shamed. The diversity model lets go of them. This university and broader institutions can not preach, demand, and encourage diversity while simultaneously punishing students for being "too angry". Upholding diversity means listening and supporting students of color,

especially black students no matter what tone they are using or how “respectable” and “patient” they are.

We all experience harm from partaking in oppressive systems. However, the discomfort of cognitive dissonance is not the same as the oppression and pain of being continually marginalized. The discomfort you may be feeling or wrestling with in addressing blatant white supremacy is not the same as the oppression and harm that students of color -- specifically Black students -- experience when receiving death threats. Discomfort and fearing for your life are not the same thing; the pain of confronting how you benefit from a racist systems is not the same as the pain of experiencing racism. A lack of closure and a lack of easy solutions is not an excuse to opt out of continuing wrestling with this necessary work. This issue will not be neatly resolved by the end of the quarter, or the year. Conversations or solutions that fail to center and include students are inadequate. In your classrooms, in your task forces, in your meetings about student safety on campus, remember: Nothing about us without us