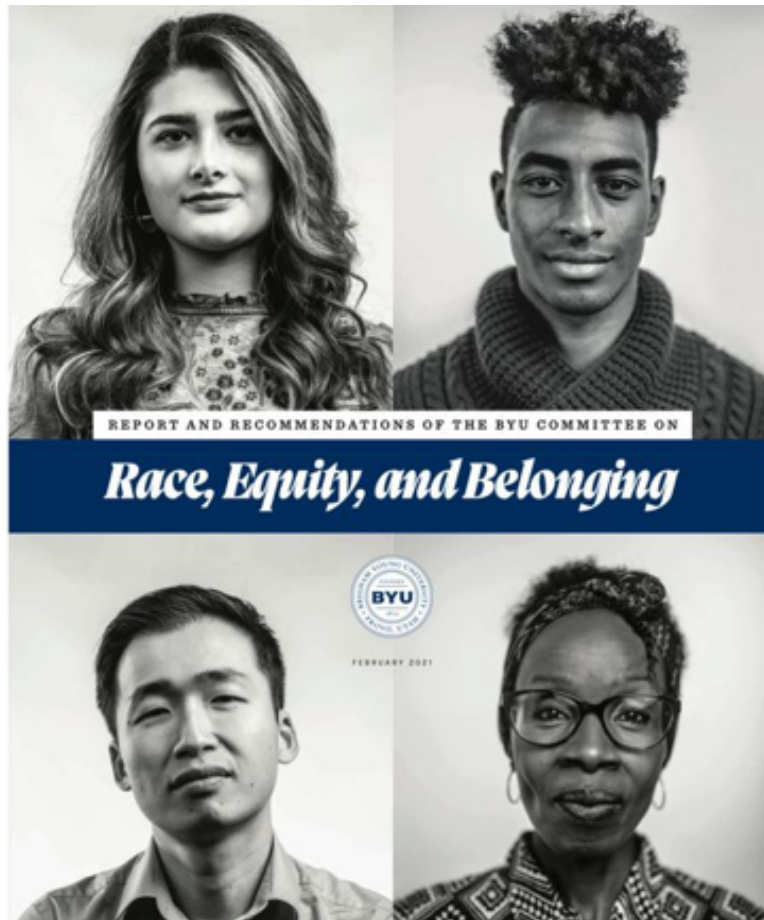




BYU released a report saying its students of color feel 'isolated and unsafe' due to racism on campus

A committee recommends that school leaders take immediate action to address the concerns.



(Screenshot via Brigham Young University) A new report released by Brigham Young University on Friday, Feb. 26, 2021, finds that students of color often “feel isolated and unsafe as a result of their experiences with racism at BYU.”

By Courtney Tanner | Feb. 27, 2021, 8:52 a.m. | Updated: 10:17 a.m.

Students of color at Brigham Young University often “feel isolated and unsafe as a result of their experiences with racism at BYU” — where the campus is predominantly white — and there’s a critical need for leaders to make changes, urges a new report from a faculty committee at the Provo school.

The findings, released Friday, expose widespread and significant concerns about the mistreatment of minority students who attend the private, religious university owned by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. And many students of color end up transferring or dropping out as a result.

There’s no place where students can go to file a complaint about discrimination, [even as some experience racist comments daily](#), the report notes. There are few staff of color, including just one minority faculty member in all of the school’s administration. And a few of the most prominent buildings [feature the names of slaveholders](#).

“These experiences have left many disillusioned, brokenhearted, and struggling,” [notes the 64-page report from the Committee on Race, Equity and Belonging](#).

“Current systems at the university are inadequate for coordinating services for students seeking assistance with challenges related to race.”

The committee, made up of nine faculty members, most of whom are minorities, began studying concerns and potential solutions around diversity on campus in June 2020 at the request of BYU President Kevin Worthen. His charge was in response to [a petition started by minority students](#), which drew more than 18,000 signatures at the time.



It also came amid [the nationwide protests last summer](#) over discrimination in this country, especially at the hands of police. The church's leadership has since urged followers to "[root out racism.](#)"

In a first for the school, the committee acknowledges the problems on campus and recommends that the university make several major changes to better serve students of color there. These are the biggest fixes that they say should happen "expeditiously and without delay."

Black and other minority students should have a center on campus to help them navigate concerns.

First on its list of suggestions, the committee calls for the school to immediately create and staff an Office of Diversity and Belonging. That, it hopes, could be a central place for students of color to get help and find resources and community.

Currently, with so few students of color at the school, those who are there often feel alone and isolated.

BYU's population of 33,000 students is roughly 81% white, according to the school's data. That's higher than any other university in the state, both public and private (though it largely mirrors the breakdown of the church's membership in Utah).



A Native American student told the committee that she never saw another Indigenous person there and wanted to leave after her first year.

Several said that lack of representation also spurred racism — with white students either being ignorant because they weren't exposed to other cultures or acting hostile because they felt emboldened. One student in the Black Student Union said a white classmate repeated the N-word several times during a discussion, and no one stopped him. "I don't feel safe," she told the committee.

Another added: "I got baptized in racism when I came to BYU."

Several said their fears are also growing as conservative groups, such as "DezNat," have more of a presence on campus.

Without a place to go now, many students are turning to the counseling center, for instance, where the staff is generally not trained to handle their needs, the report states, and there's no mechanism to file a complaint about discrimination. "I have heard so much more about [these concerns] this year than in the past," one staffer there told the committee. But she noted the center is more equipped to respond to mental health issues.

Additionally, there's a center for Multicultural Student Services. But it's difficult to find in the campus student center and doesn't really address the concerns of students of color. It's more for academic advising and largely for international students. Meanwhile, the work of the Office for Student Success and Inclusion is too broad, not applying specifically to minorities, the report said.

Having an office of diversity would give students of color a place to go — and could also house multicultural affairs. The committee envisions it as a separate building. There would be a place where students could file a report on harassment, if they needed to, and staff to investigate.

It would provide a much needed space, too, for students to meet and develop relationships with other students of color.

The Honor Code's grooming requirements should be updated to not discriminate against minority students.

The committee recommends that BYU reexamine how it enforces the dress and grooming standards in its Honor Code.

The code, a set of standards for the private school, covers everything from not drinking to not having premarital sex. The part on dress and grooming instructs students to dress modestly. Men should not have beards. Women should not have piercings beyond one on each ear. And no one should wear hair in an “unnatural” style or color.

Committee members said they received accounts from more than 500 students and alumni of BYU during their research. And many said that standard was not applied fairly or consistently to individuals of color. That concern also came up during [the Honor Code protests on the campus in 2019](#).

(Rick Egan | The Salt Lake Tribune) Ron Weaver III tells his experience with the Honor Code, as hundreds of students gather on the campus of Brigham Young University, to oppose how the school's Honor Code Office investigates and disciplines students, Friday, April 12, 2019.

“We were distressed to learn that BIPOC students are charged with Honor Code policy violations at a rate disproportionate to their share of the population,” the report notes. BIPOC stands for Black, Indigenous, people of color.

Some men of color, for instance, cannot shave every day because of skin sensitivity. And several cultures instruct men to grow out their hair. Some said they were cited for that, despite getting permits. Women of color, too, have said when they wore their hair naturally, in curls or braids for instance, **they were written up for being “distracting.”**

The committee said the enforcement has been “unnecessarily adversarial.”

It recommends that the Honor Code standards be adjusted and that anyone enforcing the rules be trained in “cultural competence and sensitivity.”

BYU needs to actively work to recruit and retain students of color.

The report offers a look at some data for the private school that’s never been made public before about how many students of color it accepts and how many graduate. Both metrics show major gaps with their white peers.

In 2020, 2,020 minority students applied to BYU. Of those, roughly 50% were

accepted. That's down from about 60% the year before. And 180 fewer, overall, were admitted than in 2019.

By comparison, 9,987 white students applied in 2020. And about 65% gained admission. That's an increase, too, of 274 white students who were accepted from 2019.

“The data demonstrate that racial minorities are highly underrepresented in our student body,” the report states, “and that the trend is worsening rather than improving.”

At the same time, the number of students of color applying to BYU has dropped. In 2018, it was 2,335. It was 2,095 in 2019. And then down another 75 for 2020. The number of white applicants has generally remained steady or increased.

The school had the fewest number of applications from Black and American Indian students. Those groups also saw the lowest rates for graduating.

White students at BYU have a six-year graduation rate of 79%. American Indian students, comparably, are at 41%. Black students are at 58%. Hispanic or Latino students came next at 66%, followed by Hawaiian or Pacific Islander students at 68% — still more than 10 percentage points behind white students.

The committee suggests several ways to better recruit, accept and retain students of color. It implores: “BYU can and must do better to build a more diverse student body.”

One recommendation is for the school to examine its “race-neutral” standards for admission and audit whether its system for “weighting” applicants based on different criteria, such as test scores, has a disparate impact on students of color seeking acceptance at BYU. The committee also recommends adding an “adversity score” to the admission weighting.

Students of color often face challenges, the committee states, that their white counterparts may not, including lower socioeconomic status, housing instability or needing to work to support their family while in high school. They’re also more likely to be first-generation college students, and less likely to have financial support from their family. Scores for applicants with such experiences should get a boost to even out the impact those circumstances may have had on their GPA, for instance.

Additionally, offering scholarships for Black and minority students would help both to recruit and keep those individuals in school to graduate, the committee suggests.

The report shows that zero “presidential scholarships” went to Black, American Indian or Pacific Islander students in the past five years. In 2020, fewer than 10 went to Latino students. White students received 43.

White students also received a much larger share of full-tuition and half-tuition awards. No full-tuition scholarships were awarded to Black students in 2020. And 770 went to white students.

The committee recommends creating scholarships to recruit BIPOC students, in particular, and recognize the value they add to the university. They suggest naming

the scholarship to honor early Black members of the LDS Church, such as [Jane Manning James](#) or [Elijah Able](#).

The members also say the university should specifically hire someone dedicated to enrolling and retaining students of color. And officials could also start a mentoring program to make sure minority students have a faculty member invested in their progress.

BYU also needs to recruit and retain faculty of color — and give them the opportunity to advance.

The representation of people of color on BYU's faculty is worse than the diversity among students.

Currently, white professors make up 93.6% of the positions at the school. Black faculty are 0.4% — the lowest of any minority group — with just six members on staff. [That's up from two in 2017.](#)

Minority faculty are 6.4% of the school's faculty. The national average for colleges is 24%. And there is only one minority administrator at the school among BYU's vice presidents and directors.

“As a matter of BYU policy, the university maintains a strong preference for hiring members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” the report acknowledges. “Accordingly, BYU's pool of potential faculty candidates who bring racial and ethnic diversity is significantly smaller than that available to other universities. However, there are a number of concrete steps that can be taken at the

university, college, and department levels to increase this pool of BYU-eligible candidates.”

The report recommends that school develop a policy that takes diversity into account in searching for and hiring faculty. And it says there should be at least one candidate of color interviewed for every position.

To help stem the tide of minority staff leaving and to retain those on staff, BYU should also develop programs that specifically support diversity. (Those could, in turn, also attract more applicants of color.) Some ideas the committee suggested are: creating opportunities for faculty of color to get together and connect, starting a grant for research on diversity and honoring a BIPOC member of the staff each year.

They should be given opportunities, too, to advance in the university’s administration. Right now, that’s not happening. And the committee feels many staffers are leaving because of that.

There should be consideration of renaming buildings on campus.

The committee acknowledges that neither BYU’s president — who commissioned the report — nor the president’s council has the power to rename buildings on campus. That would be up to the leadership of the church, which owns the school. But members said they felt compelled to include a note on the topic based on the number of students who expressed concerns.

Those largely centered around the Abraham O. Smoot Administration Building. Smoot, a 19th-century pioneer, [had at least one slave and argued against](#)

emancipation in the Utah territory. The sign outside of the building was vandalized last year, as was a nearby statue of church leader Brigham Young, who opposed interracial marriage and started the church's ban on Black members holding the priesthood and entering temples (which was lifted in 1978). Both were covered in red paint. The report, though, did not mention Young or the name of the university.

(Photo courtesy of BYU Police) Pictured is the statue of Brigham Young on campus that was painted red on June 14 or 15, 2020.

And other buildings on campus also have names tied to racist benefactors, such as the Harold B. Lee Library, named after a man who said if his granddaughter got “engaged to a colored boy” while she was at BYU, he would hold administrators accountable.

Last year, the BYU Black Student Union had asked the school to remove the names from all buildings and name them based on their function, such as the science center. That would stop honoring those who were racist without singling out any one specific person. The committee included that as a possibility in its report.

Committee members also said the school could put up detailed plaques outside of buildings named for people that provide a full history of their actions, good and bad. This “would acknowledge the complexities of history and help us come to terms with our shared history in truthful and nuanced ways” and “should include an openness regarding their involvement with slavery or racism, where applicable.”

Another possibility to address that, they say, could be creating a memorial to honor

early BIPOC members of the church and creating an endowed professorship with those names.

And, to support Indigenous students, the campus could publish “a land-acknowledgment statement” that recognizes that BYU is located on the traditional homelands of the Ute, Paiute and Shoshone peoples. Many colleges, including Salt Lake Community College, have done so.

BYU should update its curriculum to include discussions on race.

There have been some efforts already, by individual departments and faculty, to improve diversity on campus. But overall, the committee found, “there’s lack of coordination and support from the university level.”

That allows many white students and staff to carry on not knowing or acknowledging that there’s an issue, the members stated, and sometimes creating an environment where students of color feel unsafe.

To address that, the committee recommends that the university update its general education and religion curriculums to include discussions about race, ethnicity and discrimination. The general education part of that [came out of the student petition started last year that prompted the committee’s report](#).

(Rick Egan | The Salt Lake Tribune) BYU students Jonathan Mena, Kennedy Madrid and America Andrade started an online petition to ask the school to make a race and ethnicity class a requirement for all students.

The committee decided to include religion classes in its proposal after “many students reported that some of the most hurtful experiences they have had occurred in [those], where sensitive gospel topics such as [the \[former\] priesthood and temple ban](#) and skin color in the Book of Mormon can be misunderstood or insensitively presented.”

The members say improving conversations will make students of color feel more supported. And, they believe, it will also help white students understand the world and “navigate cultural and racial complexities.”

The committee suggests faculty, too, receive mandatory training on the same topics to better interact with students of color and be mindful with class discussions. Currently, BYU’s Center for Teaching and Learning, which assists faculty, “has scant information and no formal training on how to effectively teach racially and ethnically diverse populations,” the report notes. “We view this as a serious shortcoming.”

What’s next

The committee acknowledges its report is a first step in addressing the issues with racism at BYU. To that end, it recommends that the group become a permanent part of campus.

“I am encouraged and hopeful for meaningful change to improve the experience of Black, Indigenous and People of Color at BYU,” Michalyn Steele, a law professor and the only Native American member of the committee, said [in a statement released Friday](#).

Some of that future work might include looking at BYU’s marketing materials and the

representation of minority students, the report notes. It could also expand to surveying students about their experiences. The school also released Friday the first results of one of those efforts, finding that [16% of the 20,000 respondents indicated they'd experienced racism while at the university.](#)

Worthen, the president of the university, said in a statement Friday that the committee's report offers guidance on changes that need to be made.

"Some of them," he said, "such as making curricular changes to general education, religion and elective courses that educate students on race, unity and diversity, as well as establishing college-wide statements on race and belonging, are already in process. Others will take more time; some will require additional consideration."

The committee concluded its report by suggesting that "with committed leadership and sustained efforts, we envision that 2021 will mark the start of a new era of healing and belonging at BYU."

The full report

[Race, Equity, and Belonging report from BYU](#) by Courtney on Scribd

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REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE BYU COMMITTEE

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