To our graduate and undergraduate student populations:

To this point, the cognitive science department has not spoken publicly to our full student body concerning the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the more recent and overlapping nationwide protests against injustice and abuse of power as they relate to the attitudes of those who make up the department and as they impact our graduate and undergraduate student populations. We will now speak as a faculty concerning our thoughts and intended actions.

As a faculty and as a department, we stand with those on and off campus in declaring that Black Lives Matter. We stand against the hateful acts and racist words that sometimes occur even in our midst. We stand with those demanding the right to extended peaceful protest in the complete absence of excessive use of police or military force. Justice and fair treatment are rights that we must expect and demand for ourselves and all others. We share with you the fear and sadness that accompany this time where justice for all seems far from our grasp.

We have now witnessed almost two weeks of protests against police brutality stemming from the event in Minneapolis where a black man, George Floyd, was killed by four police officers. This tragedy, alongside a multitude of others in recent memory, justifiably led to widespread and impassioned protest against the racism that is and has been systemic in the United States. This is a time that tests the character of every person perhaps as never before. It should be self-evident that there is no ‘right’ to injustice and dehumanization on the part of anyone, much less our governmental institutions. What we are seeing is a massive act of bravery from those of us that understand that demanding fundamental human rights in the face of intimidation is necessary.

We recognize that the events of late have ramifications locally at UCSD, nationally, and even globally and that they unfold on the backdrop of the upheaval to our lives resulting from the pandemic. On campus, our approach to this point has been to work extensively as a faculty to hear the concerns of students, to provide as much person to person support as possible, to protect those among us more vulnerable to loss of jobs and income, and to find ways to ease the burden of managing coursework and research at a time (end of Spring quarter) when their outcomes are still critical for almost everyone’s success and well-being at the next stage. We hope our good faith efforts have had a positive effect on your lives and livelihood and hope to learn more from you about the ways we can help further. Where we may have fallen short, please know that we are anxious to learn how. We are now working to build a forum that can better enable us to assess the range of difficulties those in our community face now and those that accompany other forms of injustice which will undoubtedly come into focus in the future.

Given the severity of the continuing injustices we see in our society, it is necessary that we also take a hard look at how much we are doing to protect and support the more vulnerable among us as well as those outside campus. We must educate ourselves to see the struggle of others and to recognize the sometimes subtle but significant forms of discrimination of which we may be ignorant. We must do the hard work of finding and implementing solutions and we must find mechanisms to create
sustained attention to eliminating the societal ills that exist. Many of the mechanisms to provide educational and research opportunities through our University exist and thus can readily be enhanced by greater attention and dedication. Others, engagement with the spark society (https://www.sparksociety.org) for example, represent opportunities for concrete action that we can develop for the first time. We need to give greater view to the work of scientists and educators of color and to take more opportunity to make their contributions more apparent in our curriculum. Fellowships for those in oppressed groups and hiring of people of color into prominent positions in our department will help and the department seeks more ways to make this happen. As a department, we have now found the means to allocate at least $100K to fellowships that can support students in vulnerable and disadvantaged groups. We will work to define how to best make this commitment impactful and are already working to extend it. We need to be sure that our student body has safe means by which to get through to us concerning immediate and longer-term issues. It is time to prioritize all of these approaches in our work. Our more immediate responses have been focused on helping students find their way to the end of a complicated year, but we are already devising means of communication within the department to keep longer-term attention to solving the variety of problems faced by our students. This is key because the current crisis on our streets reflects a much longer-standing crisis in creating equal opportunity.

As a department, we have the unusual opportunity to create impactful educational and research opportunities for disadvantaged groups and groups that suffer oppression. As cognitive scientists, we have the scientific power to better understand social dynamics and how they might be redirected in more positive ways. We have built-in mechanisms through some of our course offerings (COGS 200) that offer opportunities to take on these issues in the context of cognitive science and explore what types of intervention are most powerful and why. Finally, our ability to champion the brave and moral acts of those in our community should not be taken for granted as positive examples are sorely needed right now to keep faith that change can happen. As injustice is our collective problem and solutions are our responsibility, leadership in the cognitive science department will work to expand our efforts in all these directions and to devise mechanisms to maintain attention to our role in these important efforts.

Thank you for your efforts current and past to help everyone get through difficult time,

Douglas A Nitz
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