

**Testimony to the University of Pennsylvania
Public Safety Review and Outreach Initiative
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I want to thank the Presidential Advisers of the Penn Public Safety Review and Outreach Initiative, Dorothy Roberts and Chaz Howard, for inviting me to testify at this hearing.

For 28 years, the Netter Center has worked with community members of all ages to help develop and implement democratic, mutually transformative, place-based partnerships that advance research, teaching, learning, practice, and service and improve the quality of life on campus and in the community. Community voice is necessary for developing these partnerships and co-creating effective solutions to locally manifested universal problems, such as problems with policing. Among our closest partners is Penn's African-American Resource Center (or AARC). I believe that AARC, as well as the Netter Center staff (45% of whom are Black), and the Netter Center's Community Advisory Board (comprised of West Philadelphia public school administrators, communities of faith and non-profit leaders, and community organizers), could serve as valuable resources in helping orient and advise Penn Public Safety on how to better interact and work with the Black community.

In addition to this idea, I would like to suggest an approach in which Penn Public Safety is part of a larger university and community effort. It is imperative that *fundamental* change occur in how police treat black and brown people. While improving police departments, including campus police, is essential, it will *not* in and of itself effectively solve the problem at hand. The savage inequalities and persistent, pernicious prevalence of systemic institutional racism embedded in 400 years of history, laid bare by COVID-19 and the brutal murders of George Floyd and so many others, are the problems that need to be solved. To do so will, among other things, require marshalling the full range of university resources—human (students, faculty, staff, and alumni), institutional (employment, procurement, real estate, etc.,) curricular, cocurricular, and extra-curricular. A *main* priority of higher education institutions, in my judgment, should be working to eradicate injustice and racism on campus and in the community through democratic, mutually transformative partnerships with their neighbors.

Put another way, focusing on improving policing is a necessary but insufficient response to the problem of policing. The causes, not the symptoms, need to be attacked. Doing so would mean deepening institutional partnerships (including but certainly not limited to public safety) with the community, as well as significantly increasing the number of Penn faculty working democratically with our neighbors (particularly through their research and teaching) to help solve community-identified problems. Among other things, every school, department and program should seriously consider what it could do to make advancing social justice and equity in West Philadelphia/Philadelphia an important focus of its research, teaching, learning, practice, and service.

It must be said that Penn has changed considerably for the better since the late 1960s when I was an activist college student protesting against the War in Vietnam and racism, particularly racism

manifested in the university's treatment of the West Philadelphia community. Indeed, Penn has taken notable strides in recent years as it has deepened and expanded its partnerships with the schools and communities of West Philadelphia.

A particularly positive development is the President's and Provost's selection of the Year of Civic Engagement as Penn's Academic Theme for 2020-2021. The theme year draws on Penn's historic and ongoing tradition of civic engagement while recognizing a commitment to help solve the complex problems so visible at this time and providing opportunities to engage with communities outside of campus, beginning with West Philadelphia. The focus of the Penn Reading Project on pieces by James Baldwin, Benjamin Franklin, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Toni Morrison, and a short documentary on Parkland, will help introduce all incoming first-year students to this crucial theme.

As an alum and Penn lifer, I am enormously proud of what students, colleagues and community members have done and are doing.

Conditions in Philadelphia, however, indicate that much more significant change is needed—we have miles and miles and miles to go before we sleep. As is well known, Philadelphia's poverty rate (over 25%) is the highest among the country's ten largest cities. During the COVID-19 crisis, we have seen African Americans in Philadelphia account for 54% of the coronavirus-related deaths while being 40% of the total population; and, according to a Penn study, Black and Hispanic pregnant women in Philadelphia tested positive for antibodies to the coronavirus five times as often as their white counterparts in April and May.¹

As this brief snapshot of data indicates, there simply cannot be a 'return to normal' after COVID-19, because normal was immoral, cruel and degrading.

In 1899, W.E.B. Du Bois in his classic study, *The Philadelphia Negro*, written while an instructor at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School, succinctly captured the purpose of university research "as the scientific basis of further study, and of practical reform."² In line with Du Bois, John Dewey argued that major advances in knowledge tend to occur when human beings consciously work to solve the central, highly complex problems confronting their society. There is no more central problem facing American society, indeed societies all over the world, than how to contribute to the substantial reduction and eventual eradication of inequality and injustice, particularly racial injustice, and help to build the Beloved Community called for by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

¹ <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/reports/2017/04/philadelphia-2017>
<https://www.inquirer.com/health/coronavirus/coronavirus-covid-19-race-disparities-african-american-hispanic-deaths-20200502.html>; <https://www.phila.gov/programs/coronavirus-disease-2019-covid-19/testing-and-data/#demographic-data-of-cases>;
<https://www.inquirer.com/health/coronavirus/coronavirus-covid19-black-hispanic-test-positive-vaccine-update-offit-20200709.html>

² W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro: A social study*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1899/1966), 4.

If the university, indeed *all of us* at Penn, were to make creating the beloved community with our West Philadelphia neighbors a *top* individual, academic, and institutional priority, it would, in my judgment, significantly improve the quality of life and learning on campus and in the community, fundamentally change policing and public safety for the better, lead to increased advances to knowledge, and make a powerful contribution to creating a just, equitable, inclusive democratic society where Black Lives *finally* Matter.