Department of Biology Statement on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

The Department of Biology vehemently opposes discrimination and exclusion. We believe that all forms of bigotry are indefensible and morally wrong. We recognize that both overt and unintended discriminatory practices severely harm affected individuals and groups across generations. Being passively non-discriminatory cannot break down the systemic racism and inequities that exist in academia and society more broadly. Below, we detail specific actions we will take to actively combat discrimination in all forms and create a more inclusive and equitable environment. Excellence in research and teaching can only be achieved when people from all groups and backgrounds feel supported and can engage in open and equal exchange of ideas and perspectives.

History of Biology at UVA: Uncomfortable Truths

For the Department of Biology to move forward, it is critical to acknowledge our past. The Department was founded in 1914 by Ivey Lewis, a chief architect of and advocate for eugenics at UVA. For the next 38 years, Lewis and others built the Department of Biology and the University into a nationwide leader in eugenics, which misapplied the biological understanding of inheritance to support state and federal laws encouraging forced sterilization and the prohibition of “race-mixing” in the US. Their work was further used as a justification for race purification in Nazi Germany and elsewhere. The members of the UVA Biology Department today refute these incorrect concepts of genetic destiny, the idea that human racial categories are biological, and the notion that any human being is biologically superior to another.

The University of Virginia, as a whole, is reckoning with its own long history of racism and exploitation. UVA was founded by slave owners and built by enslaved workers. As the University grew, Black communities were displaced to accommodate the University’s expansion. We need look no further than the white supremacist rally of 2017 in the community of Charlottesville to be reminded that these aspects of our past continue today.

Where We Stand Today

Today, we embrace any and all challenges associated with making our Biology community more equitable, diverse, and inclusive. At the same time, we acknowledge our history and the role our Department played in establishing and defending institutional racism. As individuals, we strive to recognize and correct our own inherent biases, and to educate ourselves and others on issues related to race and discrimination in all forms. We commit to teach others about the misapplications of biological principles that underscored our Department’s past and to promote fact-based science as the foundation for productive and equitable societies going forward. As educators and scientists, we reject the false narratives of racial superiority, or biological superiority in any form, and will not shy away from uncomfortable but essential conversations. We continue to identify the specific challenges within our Department and the actions that need to be made within our Department to make our community more equitable, diverse and inclusive.

Our Commitments

The process of becoming an actively anti-racist Department requires elevating the improvement of diversity, equity, and inclusion to the same level we expect of research and teaching. To begin this path, we commit to the following four goals, each supported by specific actions and
outcome metrics detailed in the Department’s Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Plan. We will evaluate and reevaluate our goals on a regular basis through the establishment of a Departmental Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee. Our immediate goals are to:

1. Increase the number of Biology members from under-represented groups and from groups of non-traditional backgrounds at all ranks from faculty to staff and students.

2. Increase the curricular and training opportunities for all members of the Biology Department in order to gain a fuller understanding and knowledge regarding issues related to race, racism history in our Department and beyond, and implicit biases.

3. Establish processes by which all members of the Department can engage in developing a diverse and inclusive community and supporting and rewarding these efforts.

4. Formalize new structures within the Department that will enhance our efforts to improve diversity, equity and inclusion and that will provide mechanisms for accountability, evaluation, and transparency.