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Monday, March 22, 2021

Kathleen McCartney
President of Smith College
College Hall 201
Smith College
Northampton, MA 01063

Dear President McCartney,

We, the undersigned, are writing as Black Americans to express our outrage at the treatment of the service workers of Smith College in light of the incident of alleged racial profiling that occurred in the summer of 2018.

Before investigating the facts, Smith College assumed that every one of the people who prepare its food and clean its facilities was guilty of the vile sin of racism and forced them to publicly “cleanse” themselves through a series of humiliating exercises in order to keep their jobs. When an investigation of the precipitating incident revealed no evidence of bias, Smith College offered no public apology to the falsely accused and merely doubled down on the shaming of its most vulnerable employees.

Many of us participated in the Civil Rights Movement, fighting for equal treatment under the law, which included due process and the presumption of innocence. We didn’t march so that Americans of any race could be presumed guilty and punished for false accusations while the elite institution that employed them cowered in fear of a social media mob. We certainly didn’t march so that privileged Blacks could abuse working class whites based on “lived experience.”

In your February 22 letter to the community you wrote, “At Smith College, our commitment to, and strategies for, advancing equity and inclusion are grounded in evidence.” Have you gathered any verifiable evidence of success from the “anti-bias” training you forced your service employees to undergo as a condition of their employment?

Please consider that many Black Americans find training that reduces us simply to a racial category profoundly condescending and dehumanizing. Not only do such activities often increase racial animosity rather than reduce it, but they also deeply harm students of color by teaching them to process every one of life’s difficulties through the lens of race. Elite institutions like Smith should be teaching all their students to work through misunderstandings and offenses with the very grace you ask for in your letters, not punishing its least powerful employees in order to virtue signal.

Imagine an institution that responded to an allegation of theft by a Black employee by searching the pockets of all its Black employees before they left the workplace. Then after an investigation showed that the employee in question had not actually stolen anything, the institution only increased the frequency and invasiveness of the searches. Such treatment would rightly be condemned as racist. Yet that is exactly what Smith College has done to its service workers.

We applaud Smith’s desire to provide a welcoming environment for all its students, including its students of color. But this is not accomplished by throwing its employees under the bus over a misunderstanding. Students today do not need to be taught moral cowardice or how to impulsively rush to judgment. They need models of maturity, courage, and positive conflict resolution.

We implore you to rethink how you have handled this situation. We ask that you publicly apologize to the falsely accused service workers, that you cease forced, accusatory “anti-bias” training, and that you compensate your service workers for the harm that you have caused them.

Sincerely,

Robert “Bob” L. Woodson, Sr.
Founder and President, The Woodson Center

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