## BLACK LIVES MATTER IN BOTANY, TOO

by Prof. Anne Pringle

he killing of George Floyd on May 25, 2020 was a reckoning for our country and also for Botany. In an important sense, the Black Lives Matter movement accelerated an ongoing dynamic within our department. Let me explain: last year, our department began to grapple with a long, complex history of sexual harassment. At a series of meetings with faculty, and then staff, and finally with graduate students, leadership began a conversation about what are now named as Title IX issues. In retrospect, these brutally honest and difficult conversations were the start of a new commitment to equity. In this context, Botany established what is now the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) Committee. The DEI is made up of faculty, staff, and three graduate students elected by the graduate student body.

The newly established DEI quickly got to work drafting an ambitious agenda of change. We wrote and circulated a "howto" manual for travel to field work and conferences. Advice ranges from the totally obvious ("fieldwork and conferences are not the time for public nudity") to the more nuanced (see thepregnantscholar.org). We gladly revamped a display in the Birge Hall lobby to showcase photographs and stories from current scholars and relegated the photographs of our history to... well, history. We drafted a statement on diversity, writing "The Department of Botany at UW-Madison... is committed to becoming a more inclusive department and to advancing the interests of all students, staff, and faculty. Our goal is to be a diverse department where all members are recognized, respected, safe, and empowered, irrespective of cultural background or identity." This statement was first read at a departmental meeting in early May.

When George Floyd was killed just a few weeks later, the department issued a statement, as did many other biology departments and professional societies. It read in part:

"As students, staff and faculty, and as teachers and scientists, we remain committed to education and see education as one critical path towards a more just future. Our department wants to attract curious minds from everywhere and create a community in which knowledge is pursued without hindrances or barriers of any sort. But to create that community, we must recognize the forces of racism and discrimination in our larger world and acknowledge the historical role academic institutions have played in supporting inequity. Please continue to work with us as we acknowledge and learn from our past struggles with sexism, racism, and inequality of all kinds. Work with us as we move forward to do whatever we can to achieve an inclusive education that meets the needs of all kinds of students."

But what happened next became the start of a different effort, one that now involves our entire department. Our graduate students, who are emerging as leaders not only in our department but across campus as well, sent the department a letter. It outlines seven action items, ranging from "raise funds to enable Black students to join the *Black Graduate* and *Professional Student Association* (BGPSA)" to "establish a relationship with the UW-Madison chapter of *Minorities in Agriculture, Natural Resources and Related Sciences* (MANRRS)" and "celebrate and teach Black History". The statement concludes:

"For the future of the Department: We cannot ignore the racial injustice in our country. As a department, it is imperative that we pursue an actively anti-racist agenda that recognizes the role Academia has played in perpetuating a culture of anti-Black violence and discrimination. Our departmental culture has not been improved by incremental changes; this is evident in our recent failures in attracting BIPOC students, staff, and faculty. We can no longer be reactive; we must be proactive."

As was true of our conversation focused on sexual harassment, some of the conversation around BLM is difficult to hear and some of it is controversial. For example, not everyone agrees that divesting from the UW police is sound policy.

But while there isn't consensus on all of the action items suggested by the letter, there is a commitment to talking and moving forward. The letter was written by our students, but a number of staff and faculty signed the letter too. In that spirit, at a departmental meeting in October the entire department committed to joining one of 10 working groups, each charged with thinking through different problems: Group A is charged with thinking through pipeline and retention issues for BIPOC undergraduates, Group D is charged with "identifying resources and training to help us become educated about race and how to discuss race in constructive ways", etc. Each person in Botany is a part of a working group and this fall each working group is meeting to come up with a set of actions that we can take to improve our climate and become more diverse. Thus far suggestions have ranged from "post more explicit instructions about how to apply to our graduate programs on our website, to make it easier for any undergraduate to apply" to "use available data to identify potential grade gaps between majority and minority students" to "establish more formal community partnerships". We are in the thick of our working group efforts now and I look forward to reporting back to you about our accomplishments.

In the last year we have really changed as a department. Although we've got a lot of work left to do, and continue to make mistakes, I am proud to say we are better than we were. We are in the midst of an ongoing process to educate ourselves, engage, become more diverse, and emerge as leaders in the ongoing fight for equity.

