The National Black Action Plan
United States of America
Brandeis University
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Abstract: The Black Action Plan is a template for making organizational change. This initiative started as a student-led initiative, created by Sonali and DeBorah, whose purpose has become advocating on the behalf of the concerns of their peers, and being a liaison between student concerns, administration, and the enactment of change. Through a 10 week-long program the National Black Action Plan will assist University students around the nation in creating plans to dismantle systemic racism at their schools. With mentorship and intentional programming, students will garner key leadership qualities of empowerment, accountability, diligence, and negotiation.

Background: The Black Action Plan (BAP) was birthed during the summer of 2020 as America and the world witnessed the increased visibility of police brutality which took the lives of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and countless others. In response, many organizations temporarily changed the themes of their websites to strategically display that they stood in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement. Yet for many, this was as far as their solidarity extended. Universities, like many businesses, failed to make the structural changes necessary in their organization to demonstrate that Black Lives ALWAYS Matter, not solely when one is taken.

During the summer, the BAP foresaw that while protests momentarily get the attention of the news, they do not correct the long-term structural changes needed to make a real difference. As a result, during the summer of 2020, the BAP hosted a Zoom call where over 100 participants were in attendance in hopes of building peace through grief sharing and conversations. On this call, we asked participants to share their concerns with key departments on our campus and these concerns became the derivative for a 25-page document detailing the accountability proposals of BAP. Once this document was formulated, BAP launched its social media page and gained over 1000 supporters in one week. With the help of our supporters, we were able to host a phone banking campaign to get the attention of the Brandeis administration and within a week and a half, we had a 2-hour meeting with the president and subsequent members of the executive leadership team. We were soon hired by the Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion to carry out the Black Action Plan at Brandeis University with the help of the Chief Diversity Officer and the President of Student Affairs.

Since our placement, we have had ongoing meetings with university stakeholders to propel the needs of Students of Color while dismantling systems of racism through challenging but necessary conversations. We have built thriving relationships with several university partners, which has allowed us to understand and respectfully challenge the perspectives of these partners, leading us to influence meaningful change. The most recent accomplishment was assisting Public Safety and the Department of Community Living (DCL) in shifting the responsibility of student-dorm lockout procedures from Campus Police to DCL; thus, leading to reduced police presence in dorms. Based on feedback from peers, we know that students feel more comfortable and at peace in private spaces. Additionally, we are working with students and faculty to reimagine public safety without the presence of police. In total, we see that projects both completed and underway are making a meaningful impact on our campus.

After reflecting on the statistics from the turn out of the BLM protest that took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, it was abundantly clear that People of Color and co-conspirators were willing to put their lives on the line to echo Black Lives Matter and should always matter. It can be gleaned that many protesters were of college age, demonstrating that there is a high need for making a difference. After learning that nearly all universities in the top 50 around our nation failed to take part in DEI initiatives while battling Covid-19, it inspires us to want to empower and encourage more students like us to be the change they have protested to see this summer. Through the same method of implementation, empowerment, and encouragement we know that other Black and historically marginalized students will be more fervent to instill their own inclusive structural changes at their universities - bringing peace for generations of classes to come.
**Description of Project:** The National Black Action Plan will span 10 weeks from May 31- August 6, 2021. The project will be held virtually to maximize our reach while also accounting for the uncertainty of the pandemic. The program will be composed of three student representatives from nine Predominantly White Institutions from around the country sourced from the Posse Scholarship university network. We will select candidates by sending out an interest form to all 60 of the Posse schools and their scholars. We will ask these students to share the interest form with their peers who may be interested in pursuing the program. After identifying which schools have the highest interest and best support for their students to pursue this initiative, we will then send the application to the career center of these selected schools. Since our project is an unpaid opportunity to participants, we will encourage applicants to apply for university funds that supplement unpaid summer programs.

Once our interns are selected, our programming will begin on May 31. During a typical day, interns will join our National Black Action Plan Zoom meeting in the morning, where we will share weekly and daily expectations. We aim to start each morning together so that we can check in with interns and ensure that they are prepared to take on the day. After the expectations are set, interns will be broken into break out rooms with interns from their school for three hours, where they will have the opportunity to work on assigned tasks together. Tasks may include activities such as creating a logo for their university’s Black Action Plan, networking with key organizations on their college campus to gain support for their initiative, preparing for Zoom calls with their peers, or drafting the list of accountability proposals that they would like to present to their administration, among many other important tasks that will take place over the summer. During this three-hour time frame, we will check in on each intern group daily to answer any questions and brainstorm with interns.

Following this three-hour timeframe, interns will take part in program-wide activities that will help build community and enrich the program. For example, on Mondays, since the morning reflection is an hour-long, the day will close with a reflection where interns can ask questions about the expectations for the week, discuss challenges that arose during the day, or share the progress that could benefit all interns. From Tuesday to Friday, the daily closing activities will span for an hour, and based on the day, a different activity will be underway, with flexibility to accommodate speakers. On Tuesdays, we will place interns into “pods” with students from different universities to have conversations. We hope that interns will be inspired by their peers to cultivate creative solutions to systems of racism which they will be addressing in their Black Action Plans. On Wednesdays, interns will participate in “Conversation Cafes”, which are networking opportunities for all interns to get to know one another. We believe these conversations will help cultivate community among interns, and since we are hosting a virtual program, it will be extremely important for interns to have opportunities to connect with each other. On Thursdays, we will cut the individual university breakout room times from 3 hours to 2 hours to accommodate a speaker, followed by a reflection with or without the speaker based on the speaker’s availability. Speakers will discuss topics that will help interns refine their plans for making anti-racist spaces on their college campuses. We plan to have speakers who talk about topics on how to confidently make negotiations, manage teams, gather support, and self-care while working toward dismantling systems of oppression, and related topics. Finally, on Fridays, we will have a weekly reflection where interns will be able to report their progress while sharing with us the things that worked over the week and things that can be improved for weeks to come. In doing so, we want to create a community where feedback is welcomed and speaking-up to make improvements is rewarded. We will have the support and expertise of Brandeis University’s Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion which will allow us to reach our goals.

Through our guidance and carefully laid out agenda, by the end of the summer interns will have hosted their own Zoom call with other students to discuss inequity related issues at their university, collaboratively synthesized solutions to correct these issues, and established symbiotic relationships with the administration to garner their support of implementing inclusive long term structural change. In this way, through spreading encouragement and action for change - interns will bring peace for generations of classes to come.