

**BSA Zoom Listening Session for Alumni**  
**Tuesday, July 21, 2020 at 7:30PM**

**Faculty/Staff:** Iris Andersen, Beatriz Bufrahi, Samantha Christianse, Linda Denise Fisher-Herrell, Mellasenah Edwards, Mary Evans, Chris Ford, Laura Halm, Paula LaVere, Becky Mossing, Grace Ogburn, Carter Polakoff, Caroline Senatore, Imbie Tamba, Archie Veale, Brigid Zuknick

**Board Members:** Tim Chng, Ellen Dame, Jesse Grant-Skinner, Lee Ogburn, Julie Rothman

**Moderators:** Josh A. Campbell (Alum), Li-Wen Kang (Board Chair)

**Introduction**

***Li-Wen Kang:***

As the chair of the board of trustees, I have committed to work with Chris and his team to hear what among the alumni community have to say about their experiences and what they see is happening now in the world and BSA. And then to take all that data and come back all with the plan. And our role as the board is to help Chris implement that plan in the coming year.

Quick intro about the board: the board of trustees consists of about 35 volunteers that have the responsibility to advise Chris and his team in support of the school. BSA is a public school -- the Baltimore City system funds about 65% of students. And the rest of it, about \$2.3 millions fall on the shoulders of Chris, Carter and the board. So our job is to help BSA leadership raise the funds to pay for everything that goes on in the building.

***Josh A. Campbell '10:***

My work focuses on social justice pedagogy. I work with about 25 K-12 schools in a year, facilitating these conversations not only with teachers, principals, administrators and city leaders, but also with my own teaching practice as a teaching artist working within the community.

**Working Agreement**

- We are going to respect everyone's experiences because we have 80s, 90s, 2000 2010s in the house and one's going to have a different experience.
- This meeting is being recorded -- will be turned off if anybody prefers to be off the record
- To handle the meeting with as much grace as possible.
- Feel free to use the chat function as a way to talk, names won't be mentioned when Josh reads the message.
- Expect and accept non-closure.

**Remarks from Dr. Ford on what he has learned so far, how investigations are handled, and his scope / limitations with how things are handled in conjunction with Baltimore City Public Schools.**

Answer:

The black IBSA page illuminated a lot of problems that I was aware of. And I'm glad that those problems have been brought to light and uplifted. There are some particularly egregious acts more than two years ago that led us to engage an equity consultant. We involve the consultant in doing an equity audit of how actions to the school affect different parts of our community. And then after that equity audit last year, we engaged in equity training that began before the school's year started, but unfortunately concluded when schools were closed on March 12, 2020. So that's just the short answer to this question.

**And the next question is because there were some things about how trauma was handled, what things were brought to your attention? Can you tell us a little bit more about your limitations to talk about in the parent meeting? How when things are reported, there is a process? Can you illuminate everyone what that process is?**

Answer:

If it's a full time person, it's a standard Baltimore City Schools; employee correction process and the labor relations folks get involved right away to determine how egregious this is by their scale and if this rises the level of a termination or if it's something they feel some training can address.

On the part time side, they receive letters of reprimand. In the past, we removed people from the classroom for a period of time on a first offense.

**What were some of your takeaways as you looked at the @blackatbsa page after the listening sessions with both the students and parents that have risen to the surface for you?**

Answer:

These are difficult things to talk about, and creating space for four these issues to rise up requires a real intentionality and something like we're experiencing tonight where there's a third party, this facility is facilitating the conversation.

Another thing is clear to me is that there are more of these instances than I would have thought. They're more pervasive and because they're more pervasive, they're also more troubling.

One of the things that I believe is true in this issue is that the offending person's intention is really unimportant. What's important is the perception of the individuals that are offended and how do we understand that as a faculty and how do we avoid offending people in the way that we have.

Another takeaway is that we obviously need to embark upon an active anti-racism training, principally for the staff, but also for students.

And we're working with the School Systems Office of Equity to determine exactly what that will look like and who will be engaged to do that. There are a number of possibilities of people that we could work with and we need to decide that in the coming weeks.

#### Comments/Questions:

- Are the equity audit results available to access? - Yes, we have the audit itself and then a summary of the work that was done over the past year. We'll make it available for everyone.
- Is there any onsite site psychologist/conflict and equity staff - Yes, we have a full-time social worker who works in this field and a part time half-time school psychologist. There's also a person who has the role of educational associate who's largely tasked with this kind of work. So in recent years, we've been able to increase the staffing in those areas. And while I think two of the three people are doing superb work, I'm working to see if we can get somebody better for one of those positions All right. And does the follow up question that came.
- Is this support also available for staff? - No, but there are employee support services through North Avenue, but not in the school building.
- How do folks plan to create a safe space for employees as well as students to come forward to have these conversations? - Unanswered
- Can we ask Chris to give an overview of the equity & access training that was in progress when school ended? - Unanswered

***Question #1: What were your first thoughts about the @blackatbsa page? What have you unpacked and uncovered about your time at BSA and the culture you were trained in?***

#### Answers/Comments:

- I love BSA but I saw it and even at times encouraged to not support our fellow students who were experiencing racism.
- I was initially proud that the current students seemed to create a platform for themselves. However I am unlearning some of the things I adopted to be successful in the program as they are some of the harmful tendencies and ideologies that are present in the current dance world are working to eradicate.
- One of the greatest gifts that bsfa has given me is the opportunity to train extensively in classical disciplines. While studying classical ballet enriched my life in my studies in finding that racism or white supremacy as well its elitism seems to be inalienable from western/ classical art forms. How do we as a community stop those ideals from seeping into our school community.
- Shocked, but not surprised.
- Decolonize the curriculum.

- Disturbed that anyone would put their hands on a child.
- Disturbed by the stories of the dance faculty that are constantly making remarks about young black women's hair.
- Not one black playwright is being studied in the entire curriculum.
- The only time we talk about black composers or musicians is when we have jazz literature.
- Is there a plan to terminate these people? Have you figured out who they are? And what is the plan to do a full termination? I don't think anyone should still have a job if they're assaulting children.
- Some of the same things that were happening in the 90s are still happening to these kids today, but I was absolutely not surprised by any of the posts that were on there.
- Dance department taught me well, but I can't say that the dance department was not filled with undertones.
- White ballerinas were the ones that were featured and that, all of the black ballerinas had to fight our way.
- There are some harmful tendencies and ideologies that are present in the current dance world. How do we as a community stop these ideas from seeping into our school community?
- How do we recover from trauma? A lot of folks block their experiences out so they don't have to think about it.
- The elitiness of BSA. When we go to BSA, we assume that this is an elitist school, that we were somehow invited to a table that we were not worthy of, so I have to perform and act a certain way.
- Come clean about the history of BSA. Margaret Armstrong and a lot of other African-American and White people in these communities were creating this school specifically for the students of Baltimore City and which has been 85% Black for the last 40 years.
- I was anorexic during my time at BSA. I was in music, not dance. And it turns out because I was physically abused at home. Trauma shows up in children in different ways, even the quiet children that do pretty well in academics. I have body damage that severely affects my breathing as well as my neck. And I'm interested as to why it was never addressed at BSA. Rather than trying to address the issue, I almost got kicked out of the school but the academic teachers fought for me. And then I was written off by the music teachers for the rest of my time there. I carried this mentally with me my whole life, the feeling that like I would never amount to anything. As a White child that grew up in a racist family in racially charged Baltimore, I remember witnessing racism every day.

***Question #2: What experiences positive or negative from BSA have shaped your choices as an artist or person?***

Answers/Comments:

- Body image.

- Representation in the dance department.
- No knowledge about career paths other than the arts discipline studied at BSA.
- I'm interracial, therefore I may be perceived differently than maybe somebody who has darker skin or different hair type or different body type than I do. Having that intersectionality and being told by the teachers that potentially could be the pathway to getting a career beyond BSA is traumatizing.
- A theater department head encouraged the activist's attitude among artists which influenced me after I got out from BSA. He encouraged us to incorporate our awareness of systemic racism into our artistic expression.
- Dance faculty welcomed my suggestions to help me manage my identity as a black dancer.
- A positive: BSA prepared me to have a career as a professional dancer. A negative: body image issue. Grading and casting decisions were made based on body types. The teachers made me feel like I was invalid because of just the way that I am as a person. And that's something I've carried with me.
- If we're going to look at the wellness of the artists, we have to train the mind, the body and the spirit.
- We need to look at breaking down the notion that racism is something that all artists have to deal with in the real world and that teachers are using it as an excuse to teach instead of preparing students for life after high school.
- As a White person, my Black and Brown friends were important to me embracing of all the cultures and all gay relationships have influenced me to embrace other people's sexuality.
- Culture shock -- as White person, I had Black biracial friend and Black teacher for the first time.
- As a White person, the empathy ability to receive critique and recognition of privilege that I learned as a student and staff member at BSA has equipped me with the skills to begin to recognize and disrupt insidious cycles of White supremacy within me and those around me.
- Decolonizing is simply not about representation, it requires a complete paradigm shift, starting with leadership and the faculty.
- Why Black students are not encouraged to apply to top-tier colleges?
- The school should tap into the alumni community for mentorship.
- Flesh-toned tights and shoes are now an option as part of the dance department uniform.
- How do we embed a health curriculum across the arts for folks struggling with eating disorders.
- It made me fight for black ballerinas to have the same platform as white ones .
- In the dance department, I felt as though my personal identity was stifled. They wanted everyone to fit their mold.
- I think dance is so based in racism - and individualism is stifled, especially in ballet.
- I didn't realize I had an eating disorder until years after I graduated

***Question #3: Given what you know about the experiences at BSA currently, what you've experienced, and the career path you've chosen, how can BSA better equip young artists for the industries they seek to go into?***

Answers/Comments:

- If you're going to use or utilize this network of alumni to help students and prepare students, how are we compensating folks for that labor? It can be volunteer based. It shouldn't be just on the backs of alumni of color, but can also go into any intersectional avenue; queer alumni, indigenous alumni, etc.
- Anti-racist training for faculty.
- Training is JUST the beginning. So many changes are needed; hiring, promotion, curriculum design, etc.
- How are you as faculty working on yourself to break down and to unlearn the systemic issues that are so ingrained within us?
- How are you disseminating that information onto staff that can further help these students?
- Remind students, especially our students of color, that just merely existing in these artistic fields is a radical act. You're existing in a space that inherently was not meant for you.
- For students to be exposed to more career avenues.
- Exposure to the current environment that I work in now at a younger age would have given me a leg up in an industry where I wouldn't have necessarily already had a leg up.
- Business classes.
- I might have received favoritism because I did have the body and the facility. They wanted me to be the ballerina and to be the lead, but you can't treat people bad because they're not going to be ballerinas
- Career fields are limited within the curriculum; what are the options and how can they all be encouraged?
- Feel we need to encourage not just only performance but the creation of new works. There is no better way to create a platform for your talent (and evolve the canon) than to play a role in shaping the new works themselves. Very empowering for young artists and we should plant those seeds at BSA.
- It was wonderful to see the dance department send a message to the school community. Can we anticipate statements from other departments?
- The dance department needs to teach dance styles other than ballet and modern. There needs to be hip hop and African and jazz dance classes. The origins and history of these dance forms also needs to be taught.
- BSA dance faculty should teach a curriculum that reflects the world today : both classical, contemporary and commercial styles should be embraced and taught because the dance world is more than just classical ballet.
- I was fortunate enough that my sculpture teacher encouraged me to apply to university as well as art schools.

- It would be helpful to organize these meetings based on issue areas, intersections of identity, and experience. Racism is so deeply entrenched in our society (by extension the arts) it will take multiple avenues of approach at BSA.
- Affirmations would be great. Sometimes kids don't hear it at home. It would be great to at least hear it from a teacher who is preparing you for the future
- More opportunities for everyone in each department.
- We need more time to interface with the students. Peer mentoring between students and alums of similar backgrounds. I've heard a lot of students say that they're tired of seeing BSA promote Black alums to support a narrative, but not actually make introductions to said alums.
- Having a day where there is exposure to other body/healing work exposure is important (i.e. pilates, yoga, massage, meditation, healing arts, nutritionist, physical therapist), other ways to use their bodies.
- BSA has the opportunity to shape and teach students to push the boundaries, not just follow in the same old path with racism .
- Has the search begun for Dr. Ford's replacement? The students are asking for a person of color.
  - Yes. A search firm has been hired to lead the search for new leadership upon Dr. Ford's retirement. The firm is called Edgilbilty. They have been chosen because they have a particular focus on DEI hiring practices, training and identifying POC as leaders in arts schools.
- There should be a full dance dept/dance alumni meeting.
- BSA website still says "Every student gets a level playing field and a fresh start at the BSA" because the school doesn't consider academics in admissions. That "level playing field" lens is false and color blind and reveals how BSA perpetuates white supremacy. It ignores the racial and class privilege involved before the audition even happens in access to the arts, and it encourages this myth of meritocracy where students feel like negative experiences at BSA are reflections on their own self-worth. We need an explicitly antiracist paradigm at the basis of the school's philosophy which can inform the changed curriculum and program design.
- Normal curriculum was overwhelmingly White and European. It doesn't seem right to me to neglect Black artistry until there is a funding opportunity.
- Using positive and affirming affirmations, because some folks don't get that at home.
- We need to encourage not only just performance, but the creation of new works.
- For students to learn about how boards and nonprofits in arts administration work.
- What can we learn from other arts schools around the country that work, and apply them at BSA? What can we add that they don't have?
- Question for Dr. Ford: What is the demographic of the board?
  - We currently have 33 board members (and 2 open spots): 8 are Black, 2 Asians, 4 Alumni, 4 Alumni who work in non-artistic fields.
- Question for Dr. Ford: Has anything been done to the teacher that put their hands on the students?
  - The person is no longer at the school.

- Question for Dr. Ford: What did equity training look like last year?
  - We had a general faculty meeting before the school started last year, that was completely devoted to equity work. We had Dr. Lawrence Brown come in to talk and he made a fantastic presentation on the history of apartheid in Baltimore.
  - Monthly training sessions were clearly not enough, they need to be more intensive and we need to take a higher priority in terms of our scheduling. It's going to be several hours a month, but we've got to devote much more time for this to do a decent job.
- What are your takeaways from tonight's meeting?
  - *Dr. Ford*: The impact teachers can have on young people on their physical health, mental health, and on their sense of well-being. And when we as adults don't see them as they are and see them have some way in which we think they should be, we can do such damage. We need to do a better job with our curriculum and our program design.
  - *Josh Campbell*: Activism and social justice looks completely different for everyone. Some people do their best work calling people out and in the streets, some people do their best work studying the curriculum and figuring out how we implement increased sustainability. Some activism is just all of us taking time to listen, so the folks who didn't speak, thank you for listening and responding with us in real time. And some activism looks like what I'm doing now, which is facilitating. My goal was for this to be a safe space for everyone.
- If you have any comments you didn't get to address, please email Li-Wen Kang at [lkang@bsfa.org](mailto:lkang@bsfa.org).