



DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN - MADISON

MADISON, WISCONSIN 53706-1393 U.S.A.

23 February 2016

President Ray Cross
Office of the President
1720 Van Hise Hall
1220 Linden Drive
Madison, WI 53706

Dear President Cross,

Acting on the recommendation of UW-Madison Chancellor Rebecca Blank, who encouraged us at the 6 February 2017 Faculty Senate Meeting (~minute 15 recording) to contact you, we write to urge that the UW System **retain the current system-wide policy prohibiting university-led criminal background investigations of student applicants**. Racial and class bias in arrests, prosecutions and convictions mean that a reversal of this policy would unfairly restrict educational opportunities for students of color and students from poor families.

We as a faculty and as state employees are proud of our system-wide university commitment to providing educational opportunities to first-generation students and to students of color and of working-class backgrounds, all of whom are reviewed and admitted equally on the basis of academic merit and possibility. The public record suggests that, at the aggregate level, these students face disproportionate rates of confrontation with the law; receive inadequate legal advice often due to shortage of funds; and are convicted of crimes more severe than the incident warrants, when compared with more socially and economically advantaged counterparts. Our existing policy, currently and laudably engrained in our state-wide system of higher education, publicly and honourably ensures that matters of policing, policy-making, and law enforcement are appropriately left to the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government; and that matters of social opportunity and economic advancement through education are properly and duly provided by the publicly funded and publicly accessible state-wide system of higher education. Any university-led review of criminal backgrounds would overstep the authority and domain of expertise that is entrusted to the University.

We are also proud that the University of Wisconsin System is legally bound to its commitments to support the widest range of applicants and enrollees possible. That commitment to diversity is central to building our state and national economy. It benefits our students, our communities, and our state. It is critical to democratic inclusion.

For all these reasons, we fear that collecting criminal background information from our applicants would disproportionately discourage working-class and underrepresented minority students from applying to our programs, and would thus undermine our university's effort to strengthen the diversity of its student population. We urge you not to reverse the existing UW System policy.

Sincerely,
Anthropology Faculty*

**While this document does not reflect a consensus among our faculty, it was endorsed by a majority vote of the Department of Anthropology Faculty on February 21, 2017.*