Dear Students:

We feel that a response from us on the conversations that have been circulating in the School community is overdue. We want to make clear that School has a lengthy and rigorous admission process. The policies and procedures for vetting students for admission have and continue to be proposed and developed by the resident faculty and undergo continuous review and modification. We have some of the lowest admission rates in social work. Our admission processes, in other words, are more competitive than most. Students who are admitted have been chosen to be here by vote from members of the resident and adjunct faculty and field affiliates.

Our processes of admission are indeed flawed—like all institutional endeavors. But our worries about those flaws are not that we are admitting students unfit to be part of our institution. To the contrary, the School exists within a society and a world in which racism, classism, sexism, ableism, homophobia, ageism, heteronormativity, xenophobia, discrimination based on gender identity, to name a few, are deeply—and often seemingly intractably—embedded facts of life that shape individuals, institutions and structures. It only make sense, thus to understand that these and other forces of structural bias are also enacted in our admissions processes. What we worry about, therefore, is not whether we are admitting students who should not be here, but what promising, passionate, talented future leaders of clinical social work we may have excluded. What students of color do not even think to apply to us because of our reputation as an elite white school or because our structure and tuition are unreachable? What students with limited economic and social capital are missed and dismissed because their life trajectories do not easily fit the normative markers of success, markers which we know are always and already tainted by those forces of structural injustices?

Like all institutions of professional education (such as medicine, psychology, law, etc.) the School has a gatekeeping function. Not everyone is suited for clinical social work, a profession which requires not only intellectual prowess and intestinal fortitude, but a particular desire to be of service to those made most vulnerable by our flawed society and a skillset that allows that desire for service to be realized. Clinical social work is a difficult profession and these are high bars for any human being to meet. To be clear, not every student admitted to the program is able to meet these bars and not every student finds that those bars are what they wish to pursue in education or in their careers. Academic reviews—professional gatekeeping to uphold those bars—in other words, are a necessity.

What we hear loud and clear from you, however, is not that we should lower those bars but that we must scrutinize and address the institutional and structural biases and inequities that inevitably—again, given what we know about the forces of embedded injustices—operate within our gatekeeping processes. Gatekeeping is an ugly term that conjures up specters of segregation and exclusion. The underlying kernel we hear in your demands for change is that we must understand that the simple fact that explicit policies of Jim Crow, segregation, and exclusion are no longer in existence—that we admit students of color and other students with identities marginalized by our society—does not mean that the forces of white supremacy and other pernicious forms of oppression have been eradicated from
our institutional processes. Countless scholars in recent years have reminded us that such injustices have not been eliminated but have just become more wily—less starkly visible and thus less easy to call out.

The daily processes of living, working, and being in any part of a segregated society means that those deemed non-normative by society face constant indignities, misrecognitions, silencing, and marginalization. That continued exposure to such acts of symbolic, psychological, economic, and physical violence takes an unconscionable toll is also well established. We say this in order to acknowledge that our own gatekeeping processes begin well before academic reviews are initiated. They are enacted in classes, curricula, hallways, field placements, and in your relationships with all members of the institution. It is unreasonable for us to act on the naïve belief that somehow we, as a School, because we have adopted an antiracism commitment, have managed to root out oppressive institutional practices

What we hear from you is that we must do far, far better to realize our goals for creating and maintaining an educational program that is not something students of color and other students with marginalized identities must endure. Your thoughtful actions tell us that you are not making naïve demands for simplistic solutions, a utopic institution totally free of the forces of oppression. What you are asking for is an educational program that you do not have to constantly battle in order to secure a bit of breathing room in which you can simply be students. What we hear you asking for consistently, is not less education but more; not an institution that lowers the bars for students of color and other students of marginalized identities, but one that strives to ensure that those bars are not continued enactments of segregation, exclusion, and expulsion. You want a transformative clinical social work education that happens not despite the institution but because of it.

It makes us profoundly sad that you have to work so hard to have us acknowledge this. Once again, it cannot be too strongly stated that students who have been admitted have been deliberately chosen to be here. You have thoughtfully and articulately called attention to our need to enliven our anti-racism commitment. We understand that this means an ongoing evaluation and recalibrating of our institutional practices, establishing support and monitoring structures, and engaging in courageous and ethically responsible clinical social work education training responsive to the socio-political and economic realities of the 21st century.

We are taking this opportunity to say that we hear you. We are committed to doing our utmost to make institutional change happen.

Yoosun Park, Associate Professor

(In alphabetical order)
Kathryn Basham, Professor
Rory Crath, Assistant Professor
Joanne Corbin, Professor
Carolyn DuBois, Director of Field
Joyce Everett, Professor
Annemarie Gockel, Associate Professor
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Irene Rodriguez Martin, Associate Dean of Graduate Enrollment and Student Services
Dennis Miehls, Professor
Josh Miller, Professor
Peggy O'Neill, Assistant Professor and Associate Dean of Academic Affairs
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Phebe Sessions, Professor
Maria Torres, Assistant Professor