

Howard University students protest abysmal housing conditions, lack of student representation

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Students at Howard University in Washington D.C. have staged protests demanding the administration take action to address deplorable living conditions, inadequate representation, lack of student housing and other grievances. Protests began October 12 when student activists occupied the Blackburn University Center after students had invited university officials to a town hall meeting to air their grievances.

The response of the university administration was to send the police to attempt to remove the activists. “Not a single administrator showed up even though they were invited multiple times by the [Howard University Student Association] and other student groups. ... Instead of meeting our demands, they instead met us with police,” student protester Tia-Andrea Scott told WAMU.

The next day, hundreds of protesters gathered outside the student center, demanding an open town hall meeting with university president Wayne A.I. Frederick. Many of their demands focused on housing. Students spoke of mold growing in their dorms, as well as rat and cockroach infestations. Others say that their buildings are poorly maintained, with leaky plumbing and poor ventilation.

One student posted on Twitter that students have been hospitalized after coming into contact with mold, with one reportedly having coughed up blood. Another student put it succinctly: “I paid 40 grand for Howard to make me sick.” Students have also expressed concern over the lack of COVID-19 testing on campus.

Aside from the abysmal conditions, another concern is the lack of housing on campus, with dozens of older students reporting that they have been pushed out of the dorms and forced to find expensive off-campus housing

due to the administration prioritizing housing for incoming freshmen. Many have expressed anger over the rising tuition costs, which are at more than \$28,000 this year, compared to \$26,000 in 2020.

Protesters have also demanded that the governing Board of Trustees restore representation to students, faculty and alumni. Last June, the Board voted unanimously to eliminate the student, faculty and alumni positions. To give these proceedings a pretense of democracy, a virtual town hall meeting was held that month.

Associate Professor Marcus Alfred, chair of the faculty senate, gave a sense of the nature of this meeting when he told WAMU, “It was a complete surprise to us. ... It was a town hall in name... Questions had to be submitted in advance to the board.” He went on, “Students took over the administrative building decades ago to establish these positions [on the board]. ... It’s hard for us to understand how they would get rid of these affiliate positions when it’s clear the board needs to dialogue with students and faculty a lot more.”

In 2018, students at Howard also occupied several campus structures, protesting against shortages of affordable housing, armed police presence on campus and the administration’s policy of providing large grants and tuition waivers to campus employees, in some cases exceeding the cost of tuition.

A private historically black research university (HBCU) which is open to students regardless of race, Howard University bills itself as an academic environment that is oriented toward the needs of African American students in particular. It has been promoted recently in the Democratic Party-aligned

press due to several high-profile faculty it has acquired.

The university drew media applause over the summer when it awarded professorships to Nikole Hannah-Jones, the creator and lead author of the *New York Times* ' 1619 Project and author Ta-Nehisi Coates—whose works include *We Were Eight Years in Power*, a tribute to the Obama administration, and an extensive 2014 essay, *The Case for Reparations* .

In Hannah-Jones' case, her position included tenure, which she accepted after very publicly declining an offer of tenure from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Hannah-Jones and Coates announced the founding of the Center for Journalism and Democracy at Howard, financed with \$20 million from the Knight Foundation, Ford Foundation and other wealthy donors.

“I think this is a renaissance for Black colleges,” stated Michael L. Lomax, president and CEO of the United Negro College Fund, to the *Washington Post* in response to the university's hiring of Hannah-Jones in July. “Some on campus say Howard has transformed into the type of school that can attract large donations and, now, famous faculty,” says the *Post* .

But the inhumane on-campus living conditions, lack of any effective student-faculty representation and exploitive working conditions reveal that, despite its racial makeup and high-profile faculty, Howard is not exempt from the class divide that permeates the rest of society.

The lavish treatment of Hannah-Jones and Coates—both of whom are multi-millionaires—by the Howard University administration stands in stark contrast to that given to the rank-and-file faculty.

The majority of Howard's 920 teaching faculty are not on track for tenure. Their positions are in a state of precariousness, with seven-year term limits imposed on lecturers. Cyrus Hampton, a Howard English instructor, spoke about this state of affairs to the *Washington Post* in July: “Every year, we really aren't told we've been rehired until basically, we start teaching. ... The last couple of years, people don't get reappointment letters until the beginning of the semester... I just wish that the administration of the university would listen to the people doing a big chunk of the teaching.”

According to the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, the average Howard University lecturer earned \$49,879 in 2018-2019. This is well below the median wage for the D.C. metropolitan region. The university administration

has cited a lack of funds for the low pay of faculty and the shabby state of affairs on campus. Earlier this year, the administration used the same rationale to justify the liquidation of the Classical Studies Department, despite an outcry of protest from students and faculty.

The alleged lack of funds turns out to be a bald-faced lie when it came to Hannah-Jones, whose primary “qualification” for a tenured position was authorship of the 1619 Project—a racist falsification of US history that has been thoroughly debunked by leading American historians.

The same goes for university administrators. Howard University received \$240 million from Congress in 2020, with \$8.72 million in additional CARES Act funding. Thirteen administrators at Howard make more than \$200,000 annually. Frederick, Howard's president, is the highest-paid university president in the D.C. region, pocketing more than \$1 million annually.

The conflict at Howard is a case study in the fundamentally reactionary nature of identity politics: a majority black university, with a black president and mostly black administration, which conceals a highly exploited faculty and impoverished student body. As is the case with the rest of society under capitalism, the resources exist to provide students with decent housing and a quality education, and faculty with decent pay and job security. The problem is not the lack of funds, but rather that those funds are going into the pockets of a narrow, self-serving capitalist elite.



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