December 11, 2020

Dear Barnard Administration,

We, as a coalition of Black, Indigenous, and other first-year students of color at Barnard College, have composed this letter to illustrate our problems with "Big Problems: Making Sense of 2020." The course intends to encourage "dialogue to help students make sense of and think critically about major issues that we face in 2020," but falls short in its message and purpose. Where this course falls short is in its insulting insinuations that these issues have solely occurred in 2020 and its commodification and foregrounding of Black trauma. The organization of "Big Problems" caters to the education of Barnard's white first-year students by forcing BIPOC students to undergo emotionally and mentally exhaustive discussions about their lived trauma and experiences, which causes irrevocable harm to already vulnerable students. BIPOC students live through the "big problems" that make up this course every day while their white peers do not and never will; the course material and lack of intentionality in the course thus relies specifically on the exploitation of Black trauma. To many BIPOC first-years, "Big Problems" is a performative endeavor intended to improve Barnard's progressive image that willfully ignores BIPOC personhood and reality. The BIPOC students participating in this boycott have felt singled out, uncomfortable, and harmed. We urge the Barnard administration to consider our grievances and to implement our demands for change. In short, we choose to submit this letter that will further explain our position instead of submitting a zine for a class that has harmed us and many of our classmates, in hopes that Barnard will do and be better

The course name, "Big Problems: Making Sense of 2020," implies these "problems," namely racism and its structural implications, began in 2020, and are the only problems relevant to Barnard students this year. This is a blatant, shortsighted, and unfounded erasure of hundreds of years of BIPOC struggle against white supremacy and state-sanctioned violence on Black and brown individuals. Furthermore, the fact that "Big Problems" is a one-semester, single credit, pass/fail course that packs centuries of history, struggle, and pain into a once-a-week, hour-long class taught by upperclassmen with minimal anti-racist training, demonstrates that Barnard ostensibly believes racism is an issue that only deserves to be discussed for one semester and without depth and intention. Where was the school-wide, anti-racist education prior to this year? Why are BIPOC students expected to share their vulnerable and distressing experiences for the sake of educating their white peers? It is obvious that the organization of "Big Problems" was rushed and did not prioritize BIPOC students' wellbeing, especially in regards to Black students. In fact, the course description reveals that the first intention for "Big Problems" is to foster "community among first-year students and connect them to the broader Barnard community," implying that the discussions, lectures, and readings, which largely focused on racism and oppression, were secondary to the course as a space for bonding. However, doing true anti-racist work should be deeply uncomfortable as it forces people to interrogate their deep biases — anti-racist work is not bonding. Finally, the course was run by appointed Writing and Speaking Fellows, who were not given adequate or extensive anti-racist training. Because non-Black

discussion leaders were not given the proper training to facilitate these conversations, Black discussion leaders were put in uncomfortable positions as well. The discussion leaders' clear lack of proper training created an unproductive and traumatizing environment, which, in part, led to the inevitable exploitation of Black trauma.

  The "Big Problems" lectures, featuring Roxane Gay, Linda Villarosa, and Roberta Schwartz, overwhelmingly focused on Black trauma. The large majority of the topics covered within "Big Problems" directly related to the lived experiences of Black people — from Roxane Gay's lecture on racism in Trump's America to Linda Villarosa discussing Black death rates during childbirth, and the readings included in her lecture about the disproportionately high rates of COVID-19 infection and death for Black people. This content relies on and emphasizes Black suffering. It is incredibly offensive that Black students were forced to live through painful experiences in this course for the sake of educating white students. Barnard also wrongly assumed Black students would be perfectly comfortable speaking about their experiences with their non-Black peers — most of whom were strangers to them. Racism is *not* a "talking point" to build a community. Having healthy and honest conversations about race requires a safe community and, most importantly, consent. It is obvious to us that Barnard assumed these conversations would "help students grow intellectually," but whose wellbeing and education were considered first? The "Big Problems" curriculum exhibits that Barnard views Black issues — and by association, Black students — as tools towards white intellectual growth. The harm produced by Barnard's lack of intersectional consideration when creating and planning the "Big Problems" course cannot be understated. Moreover, we would be remiss to disregard the course's erasure of transgender people's experiences while discussing the lack of inclusion. During the discussion of Black mortality rates during childbirth, the experiences of Black trans men and gender-nonconforming people were shamefully overlooked, despite the fact that Barnard's community consists of Black trans men and non-binary students. In summation, it is evident that Barnard views diversity from a perspective that centers statistics and white comfort, rather than ensuring that BIPOC students and other minorities feel represented and supported at Barnard, especially within courses catered to discussing racism and other injustices.

  Always pair intentions with action. As Gay stated, readings and speakers are powerful tools, but end up as flimsy excuses when not paired with tangible change. In order to truly create an anti-racist community at Barnard, we need to focus on structural and institutional change that would challenge the passive status quo. The biggest indication that Barnard has learned from how this course has failed BIPOC first-years, would be implementing real change within the Barnard curriculum. Simply discussing systemic injustices without providing specific resources to support BIPOC communities or an anti-racist agenda reinforces the idea that surface-level changes are sufficient to combat racism. Instead of creating an entirely new course to discuss racism, Barnard should have looked to BIPOC scholars who have already created comprehensive anti-racist materials and, perhaps, should focus on implementing upper-level, major-specific, anti-racist courses. While it is important to remember that it is not the job of all Black people to educate non-Black people on racism, we need to look towards the anti-racist work and education

that has already been done and is currently being done. In doing anti-racist work, we need to ask ourselves how we can translate anti-racist education into tangible actions. "Big Problems" should have provided resources to involve students in local grassroots organizations, mutual aid funds, online petitions, and other operations that are actively supporting marginalized communities, especially Harlem. Barnard must prioritize effectual anti-racist work and pedagogy that centers their BIPOC students and their well-being. We urge Barnard College to hold itself accountable for the immense damage it has caused through "Big Problems" and implement anti-racist solutions that move away from performativity, and towards accountability.

Sincerely,

Aaren Evans '24	Elise Sickinger '24	Melanie Cheung '24
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Abigail Everett '24	Anonymous '24	Menasha Thomas '24
Abigail Sanchez '24	Fatumata Hydara '24	Anonymous '24
Aditi Haiman '24	Francesca Fierro '24	Anonymous '24
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Anonymous '24	Gabriela Quintero '24	Nicole Blanco '24
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Brianna Brown '24	Kayla Ansari '24	Snigdha Hirawat '23
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Anonymous '24	Anonymous '24	Stephanie Chan '24
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Daniela Plaza '24	Mariana Estrada '24	Yeukai Zimbwa '24
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