

#ShutDownSTEM and #WhiteCoatsForBlackLives Voices from Around the Blogosphere and Twitterverse

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Shut Down STEM and White Coats for Black Lives: Activism in Science and Medicine

In the last few weeks in the United States, outrage over the deaths of George Floyd and other African Americans spilled out into the streets. This time, significantly more people showed their support: “Fifty-seven percent of American adults said they have a favorable opinion of Black Lives Matter, according to the Yahoo News-YouGov survey, compared to 27 percent who said the same in a similar poll four years ago,” reports Rebecca Klar, writing for The Hill (<https://thehill.com/homenews/news/502267-support-for-black-lives-matter-doubles-since-2016-poll>). This is echoed by Grace Sparks, writing for CNN. “A Kaiser Family Foundation poll out Thursday found 64% of Americans supported the recent protests against police violence, including 86% of Democrats, 67% of independents and 36% of Republicans. Support for the protests is seen across racial lines, with 84% of blacks, 64% of Hispanics and 61% of whites in support.” (<https://www.cnn.com/2020/06/18/politics/protests-polling-support-movement-policies-kaiser-quinnipiac/index.html>).

Scientists and clinicians across several institutions expressed their solidarity, through movements captured on social media by the hash tags “Shut Down Stem,” and “White Coats for Black Lives.”

Shut Down Stem, “an initiative from a multi-identity, intersectional coalition of STEM professionals and academics taking action for Black lives” (<https://www.shutdownstem.com/about>), organized a strike last June, encouraging members of the sciences to be active in the fight for equality. They write on their webpage, “In the wake of the most recent murders of Black people in the US, it is clear that white and other non-Black people have to step up and do the work to eradicate anti-Black racism. As members of the global academic and STEM communities, we have an enormous ethical obligation to stop doing “business as usual.” No matter where we physically live, we impact and are impacted by this moment in history.”

Ryan Mandelbaum, for Gizmodo, writes, “Two groups of scientists, technologists, and diversity and inclusion specialists have come together to organize a shutdown and strike on June 10, with the hashtags #ShutDownAcademia, #ShutDownSTEM, and #Strike4BlackLives. They’re asking science professionals and academics to stop doing business as usual and to instead focus on long-term action: protesting, educating themselves on the issues that Black academics face, and drafting plans based on existing work done by Black leaders on how they’ll dismantle the racism entrenched in their respective fields. Hundreds of scientists, including Nobel Prize winners and high-profile groups, have signed a pledge to take part.” (<https://gizmodo.com/scientists-call-for-academic-shutdown-in-support-of-bla-1843944068>). Justine Calma, writing for The Verge, adds, “A reckoning has come this week for systemic

racism in the sciences. Black scientists and students are sharing their experiences on Twitter of being dismissed and discriminated against in academia using the hashtag #BlackintheIvory. Many also participated in a June 10th strike meant to shut down STEM industries in support of the Black Lives Matter movement.” (<https://www.theverge.com/21286924/science-racism-strike-stem-black-lives-matter-protests>).

Meanwhile, Sudip Parikh, CEO of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), released a statement on #ShutDownSTEM: “AAAS acknowledges and supports #ShutDownSTEM, a grassroots movement that aims to ‘transition to a lifelong commitment of actions to eradicate anti-Black racism in academia and STEM.’ We are committed to education, action, and healing at AAAS, and we hope to encourage other institutions and individuals to get involved. This is not a moment that our community can let pass. It is time to stop what we’re doing, take time to listen to our friends and colleagues, and commit ourselves to taking the actions needed to bring about real and lasting change.”

All over the United States, scientists and institutions paused from their academic work to be one with the African American community.

Nature @nature shares, “Today we join #ShutDownSTEM #ShutDownAcademia #Strike4BlackLives. We will not publish Nature today and will instead take time to focus on what we can do better, and plan how we can play our part in eradicating anti-Black racism in academia and STEM.” @NatureNews adds, “We recognize that Nature is one of the white institutions that is responsible for bias in research and scholarship. We commit to working to end anti-Black practices in research. #ShutdownStem.”

CNBC reporter Emma Newburger tweets, “Thousands of scientists are on strike today to protest systemic racism in STEM. People are spreading word about the strike w/ hashtags #ShutDownAcademia, #ShutDownSTEM and #Strike4BlackLives.” Meanwhile, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology writes, “We all have a responsibility to listen to and to support members of the Black community within MIT and beyond, to acknowledge and to reflect on our own accountability, and to continue to work together to improve equity in academia and STEM.” (<https://science.mit.edu/shutdownstem/>).

Another instance of activism in Science and Medicine, White Coats for Black Lives,, was derived from an organization of medical students that itself was born out of demonstrations in 2014 (<https://whitecoats4blacklives.org/about/>). Writes Garvey et al,¹ in the American Journal of Public Health: “White Coats for Black Lives (WC4BL) was born in response to apathy. While people were mourning the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner and were enraged by the nonindictments of the officers who killed them, the medical institution—which has historically had racism built into its foundation—largely remained silent.”

Across the country, medical institutions organized their own White Coats for Black Lives events. Bay area photographer Brooke Anderson @movementphotog shares: “Health workers caravanned across the Bay Bridge today to defend Black lives and to declare racism and police violence as public health crises. #BlackHealthMatters #BlackLivesMatter #DefundPolice #AbolishPolice #WhiteCoatsForBlackLives.” The University of Miami’s School of Medicine

@umiamimedical says, “We stand with our black students, faculty, staff, & every ally of the black community against systematic racism, racial injustice, senseless violence, & oppression. #WhiteCoatsForBlackLives #Juneteenth2020.” Everything Georgia @GAFollowers reports, “Employees at Grady Hospital knelt for 8 mins 46 secs in their “White Coats for Black Lives” demonstration today.”

These moments have drawn significant attention from the press. Reporter Valerie Schremp Hahn shares, “White Coats for Black Lives pause for 8 minutes 46 seconds of silence for #GeorgeFloyd outside @BJC_HealthCare in St. Louis.” CBS News @CBSNews tweets, “WHITE COATS FOR BLACK LIVES: Doctors and nurses at Eskenazi and Riley hospitals in Indiana took to the streets to protest against the racial inequities they see in both the criminal justice and health care systems <https://cbsn.ws/2Mvetmk>.” Reporter Bruce Gellerman @AudioBruce writes, ““White coats for black lives” @MassGeneral medical workers demonstrate in front of MA Statehouse. @WBUR.”

Coverage includes even health workers as far away as Alaska (journalist Marc Lester shares, “One sign reads ‘White coats for black lives.’ Healthcare workers walk in solidarity this morning in Anchorage.”) and Guam (reporter Anumita Kaur tweets, “about 100 people attend a White Coats for Black Lives silent sit-in on Guam. Participants, ranging from physicians to ophthalmologists to OBYGNs, said that racism is a public health issue. They’ll be standing/kneeling for 8 min and 46 seconds, in honor of George Floyd.”)

Individual Reflections

Many individuals in science and medicine have also made calls to action in support of these movements. Forest Scientist Tom Kimmerer @tomkimmerer shares, “I am going to tweet today about Black Americans in Natural Resources professions. Let’s begin by celebrating the oldest serving National Park Service Ranger, Betty Reid Soskin, a civil rights pioneer and interpreter. Listen to her: <https://themoth.org/storytellers/betty-reid-soskin> #ShutDownSTEM.” Incoming assistant professor Sarah Fletcher says in the lead up to the ShutDownSTEM June 10 event, “I’m participating in #ShutDownSTEM #Strike4BlackLives tomorrow. No research, no meetings. I’ll be spending the day developing an anti-racism action plan for my first year as a professor. Want to join me?” Geneticist Rob Colautti tweets, “Tomorrow our lab will #ShutDownSTEM to focus on improving diversity in EEB. Instead of research, we will work on defining best practices for our lab and recommendations for hiring in our department.” PhD candidate Sandra Boitumelo Phoma @Sandra_Phoma implores, “Cite black scientists. Invite us to talk about our science. Don’t make us the face of your inclusion and diversity committees. Don’t ask us to build solutions. Learn to say our names correctly. Give us credit. Support our mental health. #ShutDownSTEM #StrikeforBlackLives.” And graduate student PhD diaries @thoughtsofaphd writes, “I’m not reading papers today. I’m not analyzing data today. I’m not learning about protein-protein interactions today. I am educating myself on something much more important today that cannot wait. The science can wait. #ShutDownSTEM #ShutDownAcademia.”

Family medicine resident Roodline Jean-Baptiste @JeanRoodline writes, “Our ancestors wildest dreams... #BlackLivesMatter #whitecoatsforblacklives #NoJusticeNoPeace.” Physician Derby Doc (Sassapuss) @lightningblue shared, “Met this little guy, Aleph, and his mom at a BLM rally

today in OK, USA. She asked if we (Dr. Corey Finch, me, my daughter) could take a pic with him and our signs for the docs in their family. Of course! #FutureDoctor #BLM #WhiteCoatsForBlackLives.” Family physician Chris Stanley @StanleyMed promises, “I resolve that I must do more to address disparity in medicine. No one gets a pass at just watching change happen. #whitecoatsforblacklives.” Baylor College of Medicine Student Kristen Meyer Panthagani @kmpanthagani shared pictures of physicians at the Texas Medical Center, in their coats and masks, out in the park.

A Final Note to Our Readers

The task of communicating science includes recognizing that science and scientists do not exist outside the society they serve, the society that supports their work. This article is a compilation of the response of some of our peers and colleagues to a movement that dominated the headlines this month.

What was your response? Feel free to share your thoughts through the [Telegraft Hub](#).

More?

Did we miss a noteworthy tweet? An interesting blog post? Please send us your favorites, and we'll be sure to keep an eye on what they share.

Comments on the format of our survey? Send those to us as well at isct@isctglobal.org!

ⁱ Garvey A, Woode DR, Austin CS; White Coats for Black Lives National Working Group. Reclaiming the White Coat for Black Lives. Am J Public Health. 2016 Oct;106(10):1749-51. doi: 10.2105/AJPH.2016.303400. PMID: 27626341; PMCID: PMC5024396.