

Dear President Mun Choi, University of Missouri Curators, and Mizzou Community,

In 2015, students from ConcernedStudent1950 began a petition to remove the Thomas Jefferson statue—which was erected in 2001 by the MU Jefferson Club—from the quad on Columbia’s campus. Four years later, the university has refused to align itself with the right side of history, as Brown and Black MU Students are forced to pass this statue every day on their way to class. More recently, following local, nation-wide and global protests against state-sanctioned violence toward Brown and Black communities, MU student Roman Leapheart created another online petition to remove the statue. On June 12, 2020, MU President and Interim Chancellor Mun Choi, along with several curators and other university administrators, released a public statement announcing that they would not remove the Jefferson statue.

This statement, made by the Mizzou Black Faculty and Staff Organization, is in support of the MU students’ petition and calls for the removal of the Jefferson statue from campus. In his statement President and Chancellor Choi indicates that “we learn from history” and “contextualize historical figures with complex legacies.” Choi states that to remove the statue means to “remove history.” MU faculty, experts of various disciplines and fields of study, however, challenge the notion that removing the Jefferson statue “removes history.” Instead, we re-frame this conversation in a different way: to continue to glorify the presence of Jefferson on campus actually does the work of “removing history.”

Yes, the University of Missouri was the first public university to emerge in the territory acquired by Jefferson’s Louisiana Purchase, but what else is connected to this history? The massive acquisition of land that Jefferson oversaw facilitated the expansion of the domestic slave trade and the removal of Indigenous people to seize land for white colonization. As the students’ petition has already indicated, Jefferson “owned more than 600” enslaved people. Sally Hemings was a Black enslaved woman who bore children fathered by Jefferson who claimed her as property. It is important to note here that enslaved women could not legally refuse sexual advances from their owners. They had no legal right to consent. Thus, in maintaining the statue of Jefferson among many other relics designed to memorialize him, this university continues to lionize this history of brutal violence. Furthermore, this statue was erected in 2001, only 19 years ago. How does the presence of Jefferson on campus help us “learn from history”? Primarily, it serves as a reminder to those who have always been excluded from this university and higher education more broadly. Brown and Black students, faculty, and staff are reminded on a daily basis that we do not belong here, that the university would rather romanticize the brutal past of slavery rather than work toward establishing reparative justice for those whose ancestors were forced to cross the Atlantic Ocean for the purposes of tilling stolen land (from Indigenous people) under the most horrendous conditions.

The Jefferson statue must go. Already cities, universities, and public spaces have either voluntarily removed such statues and markers, or protesters have taken them down themselves. In 2017, our Columbia school district completed the name change of the Robert E. Lee Elementary School for the same reasons we are articulating for the Jefferson Statue. The MU BFSO wants MU leaders to move the statue from campus and work with the university and surrounding community to atone for our painful past.

Sincerely,

Mizzou Black Faculty and Staff Organization (BFSO)