

April 2nd, 2026

Dr. Darryll J. Pines
President, University of Maryland, College Park

Dr. Jennifer King Rice
Senior Vice President and Provost

Dr. Patty Perillo
Vice President for Student Affairs

Dr. Georgina Dodge
Vice President for Belonging & Community at UMD

Dr. Stephanie Chang
Assistant Vice President for Belonging & Community at UMD

RE: Formal Objection to the Termination of Dr. Psyche Williams-Forson as Interim Director of Nyumburu Cultural Center

Dear President Pines, Vice President Dodge, Assistant Vice President Chang, and Vice President Perillo,

We, the Student Ambassadors of the Nyumburu Cultural Center, write to formally express our profound objection and disappointment regarding the decision to prematurely terminate Dr. Psyche Williams-Forson's position as Interim Director of Nyumburu Cultural Center.

This decision was made without consulting the students, staff, or community members who work alongside her daily, and without affording Dr. Williams-Forson the right of first refusal, a basic professional courtesy she and anyone else is owed. We have both witnessed, directly and indirectly, the unfair treatment Dr. Williams-Forson has endured at the hands of the Office of Belonging & Community, and we refuse to remain silent.

Who Is Dr. Psyche Williams-Forson?

Before we address the substance of our objection, it is essential that this administration fully understands the caliber of the leader it is discarding. Dr. Psyche Williams-Forson is not just an administrator who happened to wander into Nyumburu. She is a towering figure in her field and a pillar of this university.

Dr. Williams-Forson is an award-winning scholar and nationally recognized thought leader in Black food studies. She is the author of *Eating While Black: Food Shaming and Race in*

America, which won the prestigious 2023 James Beard Media Award for Food Issues and Advocacy. She is also the author of the prizewinning *Building Houses out of Chicken Legs: Black Women, Food, and Power*, honored by the American Folklore Society, and co-editor of *Taking Food Public: Redefining Food in a Changing World*.

She served as Chair of the Department of American Studies at UMD from 2015 to 2025. She made history as the first Black woman to hold this position in the department's history. She is the Principal Investigator for "Breaking the M.O.L.D." (Mellon/Maryland Opportunities for Leadership Development), a transformative initiative funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. She holds affiliate appointments in Theatre, Dance, and Performing Studies; African American Studies; Anthropology; The Harriet Tubman Department of Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies; and the Consortium on Race, Gender, and Ethnicity.

Her scholarship and voice have reached mainstream audiences through appearances on Al Roker's *Family Style* (NBC Today) and Netflix's *Ugly Delicious*, as well as in the documentary *The Invisible Vegan*. She holds a Ph.D. in American Studies from UMD, an M.A. in American Studies from UMD, and a B.A. in English/African American Studies and Women's Studies from the University of Virginia.

Dr. Williams-Forson is not an outsider here but rather a UMD institution.

She gave a decade of leadership to American Studies and chose to step into Nyumburu during a critical transition. She agreed to help the center through a difficult period as the director, who had been in the role for over 20 years, was stepping down to retire. She was in it because she truly cares about this community.

What Dr. Williams-Forson Has Accomplished in Six Months

In a remarkably short time, Dr. Williams-Forson has achieved what many would consider years of progress. Under her leadership, the Nyumburu Cultural Center has experienced a transformation that is both measurable and deeply felt:

- Significantly increased Nyumburu's visibility across campus, drawing attention and engagement from communities that had never previously interacted with our center.
- Built new connections with the Office of Sustainability and other divisions and departments across the university
- Created concrete schedules and defined student positions and expectations. These foundational structures, the center was missing for years, despite existing since 1971

- Held multiple open meetings with staff, ambassadors, and programs that use the center to understand their needs and priorities
- Implemented new programs and introduced innovative approaches to cultural programming
- Partnered with art and design students on campus to give Nyumburu a full marketing and visual identity upgrade. Giving the students real-world professional experience while creating a cohesive and creative design plan for the center
- Advocated for updating the building's outdated AV systems and deteriorating physical infrastructure
- Brought people from different departments and programs across campus who had never previously engaged with Nyumburu
- Served as a fierce advocate for the fair treatment of everyone. From our staff to student ambassadors

Dr. Williams-Forson stepped into her role with humility and grace. She came in asking, *“What can I do to help?”* and made sure to listen first. She approached everything with cultural sensitivity and consciousness. That kind of leadership is rare, and this university is making a grave error in letting it go.

What We Have Witnessed

Change is coming to Nyumburu on many different levels, and it's a good change. But we have also seen that, oftentimes, decisions that should be simple are made more difficult by bureaucracy.

Though her original contract was for a one-year interim, we were excited about the prospect of her staying longer. We believe the decision to terminate her by the end of April 2026 infringes on any sense of sustained change that we had hoped for and does not reflect the values and mission of this University or Belonging & Community.

As seen in several other departments across the university, performance review and evaluation play a key role in every position. As students, we are asked to evaluate our professors, undergraduate and graduate teaching assistants, student supervisors, dining halls, and even our Resident Assistants. Belonging & Community has never asked the Nyumburu ambassadors or students for their evaluation or feedback on Dr. Williams-Forson or any staff member. How can such a critical decision be justified with no input from the very students she works with?

Given Dr. William Forson's immense benefit to the Center, she should be given the first right of refusal. After building meaningful relationships and nurturing projects from the ground up, she has been deemed expendable. We strongly disagree with this notion.

What This Means for Us

Dr. Williams-Forson is a Black woman, and her presence as a Black woman leading Nyumburu matters profoundly. Under her leadership, our center has become a space that truly reflects the fullness of the ‘Black’ experience. She has championed greater visibility and inclusion for all members of our community, including actively advocating for the representation of LGBTQ+ and other marginalized communities within the center. We feel safer and more included because of her presence, her identity as a Black woman in leadership, and her culturally sensitive approach.

Her unique perspective, identity, and leadership style will be extremely difficult to replace. And it is imperative that you understand that this cannot be replicated within the rushed timeline—end of April search—this administration has imposed.

We are not just a photo-op cultural center that exists so the university can claim it serves people of color. We are a real community made up of unique individuals and perspectives, and we stand united behind our interim director.

It is not lost on us that an interim director, already becoming known for fiercely advocating for staff and students, is being quickly ushered out. We are only left to conclude that the Office of Belonging & Community would rather have a director who will not advocate as strongly or take the time to try and understand the hard work, the knowledge of our culture, and the sensitivity this job requires. We will not let that stand.

Nyumburu is our history, our present, and most importantly, our future. We refuse to sit in fear that our university is regressing in how it represents and serves its Black students and cultural center.

The vision, mission, and values outlined in the UMD Strategic Plan emphasize investing in people and communities, making an impact for the public good, and investing in staff, among other priorities. Nyumburu staff and ambassadors are in full accord with our University’s goals and beliefs. Especially, the belief that “We are strongest when embracing voices, ideas, perspectives, identities, and experiences across our campus. Together, we work toward justice.” So, we ask you: **How does this decision align with the aforementioned beliefs and initiatives of our University?**

Our Demands

We present the following demands. They are the appropriate steps necessary to demonstrate that this university takes the Nyumburu Cultural Center and its students seriously.

1. **Keep Dr. Psyche Williams-Forson as Interim Director of Nyumburu Cultural Center through at least the end of 2028** to help us navigate a transition and the many changes at the Center.
2. **Grant Dr. Williams-Forson the first right of refusal for the permanent Director position** before any search is conducted. She has earned this through her demonstrated impact and the relationships she has built.
3. **Issue a formal, written explanation** to the Nyumburu student ambassadors, staff, and broader community detailing the specific reasons for the decision to terminate Dr. Williams-Forson's contract. Vague institutional language will not suffice.
4. **Establish a formal student and community evaluation process** that requires the Office of Belonging & Community to seek input from Nyumburu ambassadors, staff, and program participants at the center. That also assesses the needs of the community the center serves.
5. **Conduct an independent review of the Office of Belonging & Community's oversight practices** regarding Nyumburu Cultural Center, specifically examining whether Nyumburu is subject to disproportionate micromanagement compared to other cultural centers and programs under its purview.
6. **Commit to a concrete, funded plan with a publicly shared timeline and budget for renovations and updates to Nyumburu Cultural Center's physical infrastructure**, including but not limited to: the AV system, building interior, technology, and accessibility features. The duct tape can only hold up our stage for so long.
7. **Publicly reaffirm the university's commitment to Nyumburu Cultural Center as an essential, breathing, living institution.** We refuse to take another symbolic gesture. We respectfully but firmly ask you to outline specific, measurable steps the university will take to support its growth, programming, and visibility over the next five years.
8. **Schedule a formal meeting within 14 calendar days of the date of this letter** between university leadership (including but not limited to President Pines, VP Dodge, AVP Chang), Dr. Williams-Forson, and a delegation of Nyumburu student ambassadors to discuss these demands and chart a transparent path forward.

Conclusion

Please understand that we are writing this letter not out of disrespect, but out of deep love for Nyumburu Cultural Center and what it represents. As well as our love for the University of Maryland, and our refusal to believe our community's leaders cannot rise to the occasion.

Nyumburu has stood as a Freedom House since 1971. We will not allow it to be quietly diminished with the loud threats of performative allyship.

We hope to have a written response to each of these demands within **10 calendar days** of the date of this letter.

We stand committed in our efforts to remain Fearlessly Forward — and we intend to hold this university to the same standard.

In solidarity and service to Nyumburu,

Name: Saintania Myrtil
Title/Role: Student Ambassador, Nyumburu Cultural Center
Date: 4/1/2026

Name: Sheppard Southall
Title/Role: Student Ambassador, Nyumburu Cultural Center
Date:

Name: Anisah Caicedo-Saleh
Title/Role: Student Ambassador, Nyumburu Cultural Center
Date: 4/1/2026

Name: Brianna Robinson
Title/Role: Student Ambassador, Nyumburu Cultural Center
Date: 4/1/2026

Name: Danielle Harris
Title/Role: Student Ambassador, Nyumburu Cultural Center
Date: 4/1/2026

Name: Jesslyn Adjei
Title/Role: Student Ambassador, Nyumburu Cultural Center
Date: 4/1/2026

Name: Jayden Ervin
Title/Role: Student Ambassador, Nyumburu Cultural Center
Date: 4/1/2026

Name: Keiannah Davis
Title/Role: Student Ambassador, Nyumburu Cultural Center
Date: 4/1/2026

Name: Laura Charleston
Title/Role: Student Ambassador, Nyumburu Cultural Center
Date: 4/1/2026

Name: Mohammed Salih
Title/Role: Student Ambassador, Nyumburu Cultural Center
Date: 4/1/2026

Name: Trinity Smith
Title/Role: Student Ambassador, Nyumburu Cultural Center
Date: 4/1/2026

Name: Renee Boatend
Title/Role: Student Ambassador, Nyumburu Cultural Center
Date: 4/2/2026

Name: Jade Blackmoore
Title/Role: Student Ambassador, Nyumburu Cultural Center
Date: 4/2/2026

Name: Daja Sacarello
Title/Role: Student Ambassador, Nyumburu Cultural Center
Date: 4/2/2026

Name: Madison Diggs
Title/Role: Co-President, UMCP NAACP Unit 7714-B
Date: 4/2/2026

Name: De'Vonte Boswell
Title/Role: Co-President, UMCP NAACP Unit 7714-B
Date: 4/2/2026

Name: Solomon Comissiong

Title/Role: President, Black Faculty & Staff Association
Date: 4/2/2026