Being Black and Brown in Harvard Physics

The experiences below are anonymous experiences that Black and Indigenous (Latino/a/x identifying and non-Latino/a/x identifying) students @ Harvard.

Experience/Observation 1:
A graduate student in physics was stopped by a Harvard Police Officer within the Department. The Police officer put his hand on his gun and questioned why he was in the department. The student presumed the officer assumed he was a robber. When this experience was brought to administration within Harvard Physics, nothing significantly impactful was done.

Experience/Observation 2:
A postdoctoral fellow was questioned by a new student about their presence within the department. The postdoctoral fellow was met with a very hostile “WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING FOR?” and implied that that postdoctoral fellow had no reason to be within that space. The postdoctoral fellow felt like they were being treated like a criminal at the time.

Experience/Observation 3:
Many staff and students have observed the lack of acknowledgement and respect that the janitorial staff receive from members of the Harvard Physics community. In many cases janitorial staff, as part of their job, are required to wipe chalk boards (a practice not used at most institutions) after each course and their presence is rarely acknowledged by students or professors.

Experience/Observation 4:
A graduate student overheard their white peers talking about fellowship applications. During the conversation, their white peers spoke about their intentions to say in their applications that they intended to assist underrepresented minorities in STEM fields as a part of their broader impacts statements with no intention to actually participate and help underrepresented minorities in STEM fields.

Experience/Observation 5:
During colloquium tea, a student was a part of a very disturbing discussion with a another member of the department about the removal of holidays such as Black History month and the removal of terms such as “Afro” and “African” from self-identifying terms such as “African American” as a means to achieve colorblindness.

Experience/Observation 6:
A graduate student within the department was having a conversation with an administrator within the department. The administrator proceeded to say to the graduate student, “You know how you got here”, inferring that the graduate student’s acceptance within the department was solely due to their identity. This is in conjunction with another report of a graduate student overhearing fellow graduate students speak about the admission results for the department and inferring that that particular graduate students were accepted because of parts of their identity.

Please note that these are only a few of the experiences that Black and Brown Students have reported within the Physics Department at Harvard.