

Our Community. Our Shared Values.

Nov. 13, 2015

Dear Campus Community:

Last night I was privileged to be a part of a conversation with two dozen Black and African American undergraduate, graduate, and professional students in my home. Although this gathering had been on the calendar for several weeks, the timing was ideal for the three hour dialogue that occurred.

It was an essential moment for me and other members of our leadership team to hear from our students, in their own words, what they experience on our campus. They shared their hopes for themselves, their friends, and their futures; and they laid bare the uncertainty, anxiety, and – in many cases – fear that comes day-after-day with being a member of an underrepresented part of our UK family. I am grateful for their willingness to be honest, open, and straight-forward as they shared their lived experiences with us.

Their voices, and so many more like them, need to be heard across our campus through every constructive platform. We must encourage student activism because what you learn in college translates to what you do in life, and we want our students to be activists for social change outside of these walls as well as inside them.

I know I cannot fully understand what life is like for our students, but our ongoing dialogue gives me a greater appreciation for what many in our campus community must confront daily. In addition to the shared struggle all students must navigate while balancing attending class, working, engaging in community, and being friends and family to those they love, underrepresented students face explicit statements and acts rooted in hate and ignorance and micro-aggression motivated by a lack of compassion or understanding. Every one of these moments in time is demeaning to our students and corrosive to our collective humanity.

We owe to every student in our community our best effort to create a welcoming and safe environment in which they can learn and build a foundation of success for themselves and for their families. In order to do this we must address these issues systemically through including cultural awareness in our curriculum; having more open conversation about uncomfortable topics; and ensuring diversity in our search committees and our hiring. We need more inclusive and reassuring language in our discourse, more training to identify our own biases and learn appropriate mechanisms to overcome them, and more determined acts of inclusion in our residence halls, organizations, classrooms, laboratories, and offices. We need to cultivate more willingness to accept responsibility for the safety and well-being of one another, and to foster more compassion for one another. We need to consciously act together knowing that we only move forward as a community when the well-being of all members of our UK family can be ensured.

Three weeks ago, our Board of Trustees embraced our new Strategic Plan. Threaded throughout our Plan is our loud and clear ambition for a fully diverse and inclusive community. It sets aggressive goals across the spectrum of our infrastructure and our populace, and we are busy building the steps necessary to success. The Plan holds every single one of us accountable for achieving over the next five years what we have agreed we must do.

Last night, our students shared their hopes for what together we can achieve in the short- and long-term to the benefit of our entire community. We talked about the need to:

- continue to be attentive to issues of affordability and access;
- further strengthen our programming and administrative infrastructure;
- be vigilant in holding ourselves accountable for achieving the goals we establish;
- aggressively recruit and retain a more diverse faculty; and
- ensure the cultural competence of every student who earns a University of Kentucky degree.

We must pursue these aims with an abundance of communication, transparency of effort, and commonness of purpose.

But we also must aim well beyond the achievement of numeric and infrastructure goals. We must join together in a conscious effort to eliminate the vestiges of intolerance. After last night's conversation – filled as it was with so much honesty, humility, and hope – I assured our students then as I assure you now that we will work harder to ensure that our campus is a safe space for encouraging the success of every student, teacher, staff employee, alumni, donor, patient, visitor, and friend. Last night we listened and found a deeper understanding of how our campus family experiences this place.

Now we must – and we will – act. Together, let us recommit ourselves to building an even stronger, more diverse, more inclusive, more enlightened community. To do so, each of us must be willing to admit that we are an imperfect work in progress, but assert that we are dedicated to seeking and giving full voice to the better part of who we are and realizing our potential for positive, effective change.

Eli Capilouto  
President