

The Community We Aspire to Be

Dec. 11, 2014

Dear Campus Community,

Whatever your perspective regarding the events in recent days in Ferguson, Missouri and New York City, we should all be able to agree on one thing: they are tragedies — tragedies for the families involved, the communities impacted and all of us who have watched the painful conversations necessarily provoked across our country. It should be no surprise, moreover, that a university is where many of those difficult conversations are being held.

That is as it should be. That is who we are — a place safe for ideas, however challenging, to be given free voice. I am proud of the leadership of our students who have organized silent protests to express their outrage. These efforts are a demonstration, too, of the unyielding and unbreakable hope that we can finally muster the will and conceive the way to break down the unnecessary barriers that separate us.

However, the ability to challenge ourselves to promote peace and reconciliation is threatened by the anonymous reaction of a small number who choose to make incendiary and hate-filled comments behind the anonymity that social media sometimes affords. Everyone is entitled to their views, and college campuses are vibrant as places for robust debate about the issues of the day, safely ensconced in the mantle of free speech. It's expected – and welcomed – that we will disagree as we participate in the spirited arena of ideas. But hate-filled slurs hurled for no reason other than to demean another person have no place here. Such language is indicative of narrow mindedness and mean spirit; and what I have read sickens me. It is not who we are or wish to be.

The reality of independent social media is we cannot control those conversations. But what we can and will continue to do is work hard to ensure the safety and dignity of our community and refuse to allow a hostile environment to take root on our campus.

We will not let the voices of a few define us. We will remain resolute in welcoming every member of the human family to join us here – to live, to learn, and to work; and to assert their views with the knowledge that they are full share-holders in this community of students and scholars. In that spirit of community, I stand firmly in support of those willing to protest, defend their views, and raise uncomfortable questions openly and honestly and with respect for others.

Words, of course, can dishearten and denigrate. But they also can – and should – galvanize and enlighten. For example, I was honored Wednesday to participate in a conversation at our Martin Luther King Center about the damage that is caused by bias and stereotype. Those who spoke reminded me, in vivid terms, of the harm that comes from words and actions; and they described their frustration and sadness at the unnecessary barriers that still divide us. That is the dialogue we must have – and continue to have – if we are going to continue the search for truth, peace, and justice.

It is against that backdrop of hopeful, but challenging dialogue that I want to express my deep appreciation to the members of our faculty and staff and to our students. Even with recent days of

difficulty and painful reminders that we sometimes fall short of what we aspire to be in our country, we also are in a season of hope, a season of renewal. I see that spirit every day at this special place. Your talent, creativity, and hard work are the foundation for our success; and your love for and commitment to our campus community and the Commonwealth we serve reveals the giving heart and gentle soul of this special place. It is a gift to work alongside you in our common cause to improve the lives of others.

Our ultimate goal should forever be to create and sustain a community where everyone feels welcome, empowered, and safe. That is the community we are at the University of Kentucky.

Eli Capilouto

President