

February 8, 2016

Reflections on a Recent Incident

Dear Campus Community,

Race relations, discrimination, and hate in the *United States* are very sensitive topics that can elicit the rawest of emotions from any of us. The irony is not lost on me that though we claim to be united, the people within our country often engage in acts that separate us.

When we witness an individual(s) engaged in a display that historically brings forth feelings of anger, pain, despair, and frustration, we cannot help but wonder why would that individual choose to do such a thing. Is he unaware of the meaning of his act? Should we say something or do something to let him know that we are offended by his act? Should we try to educate him and get him to direct whatever it is that lead him to the act to engage in a more positive and productive activity?

Can we, as a community of scholars at an institution that values diversity, respect, and equity simply ignore such acts in the name of freedom of expression or just let it slide because he "probably didn't know any better"? I don't believe we can or should.

Last week a member of our community decided to fulfill a classroom assignment designed to illustrate the power of cultural norms and the violation of a folkway by wearing the confederate flag to a basketball game. I do not know why the student chose this particular act using this specific symbol. If his display were contained within the classroom, the chances are very good that I would not know anything about it. However, that he chose to do this in a public forum took the act to a very different level and I cannot ignore it.

I am shocked, disappointed, and frustrated that this happened - especially on our campus where there are so many who work so hard on issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Somehow, we have failed this young man. I am sorry that members of our campus and our visitors were subjected to this display. It should not have happened.

Could it be that he did not understand the meaning of his act? I don't see how this is possible but if it is, the onus is *on us*, as a community united around our core values, to help educate him (and others who may be like him) about issues of racism and all the other negativisms, discrimination, prejudice, and hate.

When you see something that you know is not right, say something. Engage the offender in conversation - multiple times because once will not be enough. Listen to their perspective. Reflect on what they are saying and then correct them - gently. Yes, this will be difficult and trying. Yet, try we must.

One of the *Race Monologues* participants spoke about the swastika - a symbol of good fortune and well-being that became associated with pain and destruction. Germany eventually banned it from use in their country because of the associated negativism. We, as a country, must achieve the same level of enlightenment about the confederate flag and other symbols of oppression, discrimination, and hate. What better place to begin this process than on our campus?

Working to abolish prejudice and hate is hard and the results will be slow in coming. There will be times when we grow weary and impatient. But, as a colleague quoted to me recently, "Look at a stonecutter hammering away at his rock, perhaps a hundred times without as much as a crack showing in it. Yet at the hundred-and-first blow, it will split in two, and I know it was not the last blow that did it, but all that had gone before." (Jacob Riis). *Together* we can break this rock.

Truly,

Tuajuanda C. Jordan
President