

Subject: Addressing Racism at Lawrence

Date: Monday, November 16, 2015 at 9:12:34 AM Central Standard Time

From: Mark Burstein

To: STUDENT-L, FACULTY-L, STAFF-L

Dear Lawrentians,

During the past few weeks student activism, Expressions of Acceptance micro-operas, the Convocation, and other activities have encouraged us to consider racism on our campus and in the surrounding community. Themes raised here have echoed recently at other universities around the country.

-

For example, a number of Lawrentians took to the streets of Appleton to raise awareness about acts of racism that they have encountered downtown and in other parts of the local community. Their protest was met with support, but also with skepticism from some Lawrentians as well as some Fox Cities residents. We need to understand that when we deny or ignore the existence of painful and dehumanizing encounters, great and small, which members of this community have experienced and continue to experience, we undermine the core values of Lawrence. We must awaken to the reality that confronts members of our community every day.

Convocation speaker Ta-Nehisi Coates reinforced themes raised by our own students and alumni. He made it clear that systemic injustice is real, and that it predates the formation of the United States. His charge to us was also clear:

One of the things I really, really want to urge you, as young people here today, is to understand that all of us — black, white, whatever — we live underneath of our history. And so when you see these people, you know, shouting “black lives matter,” which seems like the most obvious thing in the world, they're not just shouting at something that happened on tape. They are shouting at a long, lengthy history that begins in 1619, and has effectively proceeded unbroken.

Lawrentians have tried for many years to make their community more inclusive, a place in which all students, faculty and staff can truly feel at home. But we need to keep working at it. Every one of us needs to face the truth directly. We need more change on campus and in Appleton if we are to live up to our aspirations to create a welcoming and supportive community for all. We cannot refuse to take notice of the routine acts of aggression and malice that make members of our community, the Lawrence community, feel like outsiders.

As we enter the 10th week of the term I realize it would be difficult to deepen our discussion of these issues before winter break. But when we return in January, we must pick up this conversation; we must work together to fashion a community that will feel like home for all of us. In the meantime please contact me or other members of the administration if you would like to suggest ways to help us with this crucial task. I am confident we can continue to make progress.

-

I hope each of you has a successful end of the term. I look forward to seeing you after the New Year — if not sooner.

Yours,

Mark

Mark Burstein
President, Lawrence University