

A Message from the President - A Plan for Tomorrow

June 12, 2020 12:45 PM President Michael A. Fitts
mike@tulane.edu

Dear Tulane Community:

Earlier this year, I listened to an interview with John Lewis, U.S. congressman and Tulane honorary degree recipient, about his life as a legendary civil rights leader. He said something that has echoed in my mind: “My philosophy is very simple: When you see something that is not right, not fair, not just, you have to stand up, you have to say something, you have to do something.”

This statement goes directly to the heart of my message to you today. The deaths of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor and others in the Black community have inspired hundreds of thousands of people from all walks of life to speak out. We must recognize the pain and difficulties faced by members of the Black community, including recent incidents of brutality and violence that have been captured on video, as well as the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on communities of color.

I join our Black students, faculty and staff in affirming that racism has no place at our university or in our community. In recent years, we have made progress together toward a more diverse, equitable and inclusive Tulane. But, as recent events have illuminated, we must do more. We cannot simply state that we are against racism; we must endeavor to be actively anti-racist. We must commit to making Tulane a more inclusive and supportive home for all.

The historical significance of this moment must be underscored. Each of us is challenged to address our behaviors, practices and systems. Over the past two weeks, I have been talking with leaders across campus and the country to explore what more we can do as a university. We all have a responsibility and an important role to play.

To that end, I am announcing the plan below. These initiatives are by no means comprehensive or complete. However, these are important first steps to promote a

more diverse, equitable and inclusive community that is supportive of all of its members.

Racial Equity Education

All too often, we have relied on the victims of racist actions to address and fix the problem of systemic racism. But each of us must work, collectively and individually, to build an anti-racist culture at Tulane. In 2018, we began requiring all first-year undergraduate students to complete a Race and Inclusion course. This past year, university cabinet members completed a similar course and search committee chairs have taken classes on unconscious bias. These classes have been met with positive results. In the coming year, we will build on these programs to develop a broad-based racial equity education program. It will be the expectation that all faculty and staff will participate.

Increased Support for Students

Much has been done under my administration to increase funding for departments and programs that serve marginalized groups on campus. But we must do more. Last October, *Les Griots Violets*, a coalition of students organizing around issues concerning Black students at Tulane, authored a resolution to establish an equity fee. The resolution, which was passed by the Undergraduate Student Government, will need to be reviewed and approved by several committees of the University Senate and ultimately the Board of Administrators. Imposing a new student-paid fee is a lengthy and complicated process. Therefore, I am immediately committing \$2.5 million – an amount equal to the proposed fee – to further the goals of the resolution. A committee comprised of students, faculty and staff will oversee how these funds are distributed. The committee will be co-chaired by Anneliese Singh, who will join Tulane on July 20 as our new chief diversity officer, and Will Ferbos, associate vice president for institutional affairs and deputy chief of staff.

My wife, Renée J. Sobel, Esq., and I will donate \$100,000 to create a special scholarship to support students who demonstrate leadership in racial equity and justice or diversity initiatives at Tulane or their high school. The university will prioritize this scholarship fund as a top fundraising priority of Tulane.

Community Discussion

I believe the most successful efforts in creating positive change begin by listening. This is why I am convening the community discussion *Race & Tulane – A Look at Today, a Plan for Tomorrow*. This discussion will include students, faculty and staff who are committed to moving our university forward on the path toward racial equity and justice. Meaningful change will require the engagement and contributions of the entire community – we need to hear your thoughts and insights to build a more just Tulane. More information about panelists and event registration will be shared soon.

Health Equity Institute

In 2018, Thomas LaVeist, a national expert on issues related to equity and health, was named dean of Tulane University's School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine and the Weatherhead Presidential Chair in Health Equity – making him the first to hold one of Tulane's newly endowed presidential chairs. LaVeist is also the executive producer of *The Skin You're In*, a documentary series that explores the disparities between Black and White health in America. He and other key researchers are currently working to launch a new Health Equity Institute, which is a top priority of my administration.

Increasing Staff Diversity

The Office of Human Resources and Institutional Equity, in partnership with ALAAMEA and the Staff Advisory Council, will be charged with creating a robust talent management strategy that focuses on the recruitment and retention of Black employees and other people of color. This initiative will also include a leadership academy to proactively increase the diversity of the university's management and leadership ranks.

Presidential Commission on Race and Tulane Values

The main focus of the commission, formed in 2015, has been increasing and supporting diversity through student recruitment, hiring practices and curriculum requirements, as well as improving the overall campus climate and resources for underserved communities. Going forward, the commission will be renamed and expanded to provide more substantive and visible support across our campuses. The reimagined commission will be led by Shantay Bolton, vice president and deputy chief operating officer; Michael Cunningham, associate provost, graduate and postdoctoral studies; Kelly Grant, senior associate dean for retention and strategic

initiatives for Newcomb-Tulane College; and Anneliese Singh, associate provost for diversity and faculty development.

Last year, based on input from the commission, we launched the Tulane Trailblazers program to honor the contributions of the many important people from diverse backgrounds who have made substantial and lasting impact on our campuses. This program has featured recognitions by every school, including the naming of the Décou-Labat Residences (named after the first African-American undergraduates to earn degrees from Newcomb and Tulane Colleges) and the Carolyn Barber-Pierre Center for Intercultural Life, honoring this pioneer for her three decades of dedication to the university. In the coming year, we will identify a task force to review our policies on building and space naming on campus.

Again, these initiatives do not provide all the answers to the issues of injustice and inequities so prevalent in our society, but they do offer a strong start that will allow Tulane to move faster as we embrace meaningful and lasting change. Through these and other endeavors, we can begin to work systemically to reduce anti-Black racism and racism that impacts the lives of all people of color in our community. Institutions of higher education have the power to transform lives and communities across our country. We know that we can only become the best version of ourselves, both institutionally and individually, if our community and leadership truly reflects and uplifts all segments of our society. That is what makes a great university.

We pledge to move forward with humble and open hearts, willing to learn from the mistakes and indifference of the past to build a better tomorrow. Regardless of the color of our skin, our socio-economic background or other perceived differences, we have a shared destiny, a common humanity and a better future that we can only reach by working together as one people and one Tulane.