

Dear President Crawford and the Miami University community:

At last week's protest march, Douglas Brooks - former professor in the Education Department, now emeritus - referred to protestors as "monkeys." Although the professor denied the claim, multiple people heard Brooks, challenged his verbal harassment and filmed the subsequent encounter. Once protestors began filming Brooks, he fled to avoid public exposure.

Miami University President Gregory Crawford and Provost Jason Osborne crafted missives deploring the professor's behavior, claiming that Brooks did not reflect Miami University or its value system. However, because the episode took place off-campus, President Crawford decided the incident was a matter of free speech. Thus, university policy precluded any further action beyond allowing students to drop the course.

This is a straw-man argument.

First, the university incorrectly insinuates that this is a circumstance external to the institution. Second, it disconnects Brooks' public display of racism from his professional activities on behalf of the university. In other words, Miami University exemplifies the problem of institutional racism because it simply "deploras" such behavior and concludes that the professor's actions were not connected to how he would likely treat students or colleagues. Instead, we are left to imagine how this man's thinking and world view determined promotion/tenure or impacted student grading and mentorship.

The argument also allowed the university to simultaneously appear appalled by the behavior, while absolving itself of having to initiate a proactive response. The irony is not lost on me, as a faculty member of 10+ years, who has spent much of my time mentoring unsupported students of color, responding to myriad racial incidents, and providing emotional encouragement to those affected by these realities. Given two choices, either support racist "freedom of speech" or take a stand on behalf of justice, the best the university can offer is to articulate "surprise" and emotive assertions of "feeling bad."

Well, I am not surprised. No person of color victimized by racism here is surprised either, nor any white person engaged in social justice on this campus. I was even less pleased to read almost three paragraphs + about how administrators felt bad, as if how one felt was the outcome we should accept in this situation. Worse, I found it quite ironic that the administrators insisted that this was not who "we are," while effectively distracting from how its own policies were culpable in allowing such a person to spend

many years at the university. Are we to believe he retired, and then his world view suddenly revealed itself?

The irony should not be lost on the university either. Your letter is the inevitable outcome of the absence of a credible and sustained response, over time, to these issues. The institution has devoted multiple years and faculty time to “committees” dedicated to enhancing diversity at the university. And yet, despite the many policy ideas and reports received by successive administrations, the university steadfastly maintains a position of inertia surpassed only by a rock.

Meanwhile, it has been consistently aggressive in suppressing both internal EEOC cases and public lawsuits to avoid the well-known and many embarrassing accusations of racism and discrimination.

The difference between verbiage and action tells the true tale. Indeed, the letter itself reveals the university’s insulting tendencies to distort and obscure inaction. While President Crawford gave one line to how the university would act (allowing students not take his course), the three+ paragraphs droned on about Miami University “values.” The Provost’s letter to the community followed with similar banalities. In both cases, the incident translated into conversations about “feelings” and “values,” diverting focus from Miami University’s own culpability and denying how its own institutionalized racism allowed this person to live and thrive at this university.

A colleague once approached me to affirm that he recognized that issues such as differential treatment, microaggression, and inequality were realities that plagued my experience at Miami University. I view your proclamations denouncing this professor’s harassment in much the same way as I viewed my colleague’s utterances, and I will restate to you what I told him.

“I don’t care what you think. I care what you do.”

I do not need a reaffirmation of Miami University’s values, à la President Crawford's letter, in the same way I don’t need a lesson on the founding fathers' philosophy of freedom and democracy. If either of the latter had truly applied to all peoples, neither the university nor the nation would be in the throes of the current protests. Social justice movements exist because the disconnect between belief and practice is so palpable as to make both person and principle untrustworthy.

To gain trust, administrative leadership of this university must make an effort to embody and promote the ideals of justice beyond fallaciously laying claim to the legacy of Freedom Summer. As reflected by the righteous anger of Western College for Women alumnae, Miami University simultaneously promotes a false connection to Freedom Summer, while using that venerable activism to camouflage the many ways the university has not and does not uphold movement ideals. President Crawford has claimed that, “it is time for transformative change.” What is change if it’s not substantive? How will it happen if no definitive steps are taken?

The recent University-wide Diversity and Inclusion Committee (hereto known as D & I) presented multiple concrete proposals, based on previous reports and new findings garnered during its term of work, that Miami could adopt to move forward. The Committee, of which I was a part, advocated for these transformative efforts:

The creation of an independent oversight committee, responsible for all matters relating to diversity. This suggestion emerged from D & I committee members who knew the inner workings of EEOO and other apparatuses created to respond to discriminatory incidents and harassment within Miami University. The recommendation for a separate entity came about specifically because existing offices were anemic, defanged, under-resourced, often-times defunct, and operated counter to their actual mission. The D & I Committee recognized the need for an entity that would be pro-active throughout the university on matters of equity.

The Diversity proposal constructed a committee designed to not only monitor these entities but also ensure that every atom of the university actually puts forth and maintains a policy of equity in treatment and hiring—from administrative offices to academic departments. This committee was not proposed as a mechanism to absolve Miami University of discomfiting charges. It was designed to ensure the university did its job.

This is why the Committee also outlined a series of suggestions which required Miami University to be responsible for its own rehabilitation. No more “silent,” unacknowledged service by women, Indigenous, LGBTQ, and faculty of color.

For example, D & I insisted that Miami University no longer hide statistical data on EEOO complaints or investigations, protect professors who had multiple allegations, or bury reports of student harassment cases. One colleague referred to it as “radical openness” – being honest about where it was and through this process holding itself accountable.

This new committee reported to one person only-- you, the President. It did so to give it the necessary visibility, prestige, power and resources to accomplish its purpose. It also pulled from multiple persons unconnected to the entities it monitored to avoid replicating decisions and outcomes that served the President but not the community and justice.

If Miami University truly wants transformation, none of it requires posturing emails about thoughts, prayers, and values. It simply requires you do the job and do it in the fullness of spirit, equity, and change. However, I have many years to doubt sincerity or intent for change.

To that extent, I will "reaffirm" for you my belief that the university will remain inert. It has no will or commitment to undergo the cleansing it needs. And, I unequivocally state "loud and clear," to borrow from the President's terminology, that the distance is so great from purported value to actual reality that I'd rather not see my email clogged with platitudes. Both the President and Provost's emails added insult to injury by redirecting attention from pained/painful experiences of protestors to false ideals and inaction designed to hide Miami University's own problems with racism.

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