

November 13, 2017

To the University Community,

In response to a letter from the Jewish Student Union, concerns raised by other student, faculty, and staff groups and organizations, and the general atmosphere surrounding the campus, the membership of CEOOD believes that it must speak clearly to the current controversy concerning white supremacy at Virginia Tech. It is not appropriate to address specifics regarding the actual case to which the Virginia Tech administration is currently responding due to federal education and labor laws. Those who seek to know particulars of that case may consult public media sources for details.

Concerns about white supremacy have arisen not only in relation to a particular instance here at Virginia Tech, but in the broader context of American higher education. Incidents at the University of Virginia, the University of Florida, the University of California - Berkeley, and other institutions have heightened scrutiny of the ways in which universities respond to manifestations of hate speech and ideology. The membership of CEOOD sees it as crucial that we, as the arm of university governance charged with considering issues of diversity and inclusion, speak to the broader issues raised in response to this case, and, indeed, by the current climate of emboldened bigotry, hatred, and violence in the U.S. and beyond.

In so doing, we reaffirm the university's commitment to the Principles of Community. Introduced at another time when the university sought to reflect upon the importance of diversity, the Principles are a statement of values reflecting the institutional commitment to rejecting discrimination and bias, and encouraging all members of the university community to educate themselves about issues of diversity. While these same principles also affirm the right of freedom of thought and expression, it is implicit and crucial that such freedom be enacted in the spirit of the overall effort to build an inclusive community.

White supremacy is an ideology that has no place in such a university. While the university does not have the capacity to reject someone from enrollment or employment on the basis of personal belief, worldviews that deny the humanity and dignity of others have no place in our classrooms or our community. It is also crucial that the university undertake steps to ensure faculty, staff, and students that they will be safe from harassment and the prospect of violence which have been hallmarks of supremacist ideologies. That history cannot be ignored, and must be recognized in the face of efforts to establish false equivalencies - between white supremacy and other perspectives that are regarded by some as controversial - in order to invoke and hide behind freedom of speech and inquiry. Even as the university has embarked upon landmark efforts to increase compositional diversity, it is even more crucial that the university undertake clear and intentional efforts to reassure current and potential students and employees that we are the university that we have claimed to be, and that they will be safe, welcome, and affirmed as members of the Virginia Tech community. All of us should feel that way, but we must be

focused especially on communicating to members of groups targeted by such ideologies that Virginia Tech will not allow them to be made vulnerable here and now.

CEOD recognizes that there is a need to address broader issues raised by the current climate. The first of these is how to achieve greater clarity with regard to university policies related to hate speech and the promotion of bigotry. Given the delicate balance between academic freedom and constitutional rights, on the one hand, and the building blocks of truly inclusive community on the other, this issue is one that will require sustained engagement across many segments of the university community.

To that end, CEOD will pursue two key strategies. We hope to convene a series of speakers, workshops, and other learning opportunities addressing the challenges of building a diverse community in concert with concerns about issues of free speech and academic freedom. Helping students, faculty, and staff appreciate the complexities of the issues will be key to facilitating the development of greater agreement about how we may proceed. These learning opportunities should include a discussion of the history of the Principles of Community so that members of the university community will understand the origins of these values in the dialogue between student activism and administrative response. The speaker series and workshops will be followed by a campus-wide forum on ideologies of hate, focused on providing opportunities for concerned members of the university community to offer input into how best the university may proceed with efforts to develop concrete policy that will reflect our aspirations to be committed to both the free exploration of ideas and the full embrace of inclusive community.

In parallel to the learning opportunities, there should be a convening of university governance bodies to discuss the needs and concerns of undergraduate and graduate students, faculty, and staff. Allowing an ongoing conversation among those segments of the university and the appropriate governance bodies is likely to provide greater transparency and engagement than the traditional governance process, hopefully resulting in policy resolutions that clarify university procedures in future instances of similar concern.

The second issue to be addressed is how best to communicate that Virginia Tech is not only committed, but emboldened to live up to its aspirations of becoming a truly inclusive and more diverse university. CEOD will work with the Office for Inclusion and Diversity to determine how to enhance efforts to recruit, retain, and support underrepresented students, faculty, and staff. The members of CEOD also believe that it is crucial to identify ways to equip our students to live, work, and lead in an increasingly diverse society. CEOD continues to support the development of curricular offerings such as the Pathways Revision proposal approved last year, requiring all undergraduate students entering in 2018 and after to complete a course on Critical Analysis of Identity and Equity in the United States. We believe that it is crucial to make strategic and productive commitments to increase the number of faculty with expertise appropriate to meet student demand for the new Pathways requirement. In addition, the university also should invest more broadly in academic areas in which diverse students will find affirmation, and in which all students will find opportunities to grow in their capacities to obliterate bigotry and discrimination.



The Commission on Equal
Opportunity and Diversity

Yours in solidarity,

Ellington T. Graves
Chair, Diversity in Academic Mission Workgroup in CEOD

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ellington T. Graves', written over a horizontal line.

Deyu Hu
Chair, The Commission on Equal Opportunity and Diversity

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Deyu Hu', written over a horizontal line.