



Dear faculty, staff and students,

Our community continues to grapple with the pain and fear that comes from public displays of hate and violence, which is a vivid reminder of the unfortunate, private, and often unrelenting hate and violence many African-Americans fear and experience. In this moment, we have a responsibility to take seriously our commitment to look inward and evaluate the processes, aspects, and responses of our institution to ensure that they convey the importance of the need for every person to feel welcome and included on our campus

Like many higher education institutions across the country, we have received reports of racist behavior in videos and social media posts from prospective students seeking to join this university community. We find these offensive and disturbing.

To be frank, we were prepared to write a statement that leaned into our public education mission, because we both strongly believe and have witnessed the power of education in breaking the cycle of hate. In fact, during the Stronger Together Dialogue Wednesday evening, we heard students discuss their experiences confronting the insensitivity and prejudice that fuels the racialized violence we are again witnessing in this moment. We were prepared to restate our unequivocal defense of free speech while recognizing the fear, trauma, and anger some speech can cause, because we both know that the First Amendment is a cornerstone in the struggle for human and civil rights and the pursuit of truth.

We quickly realized how inadequate that message would have been given the evidence and our recognition that the old strategies and solutions are not working. We found ourselves trying to reinforce our shared values of diversity

and inclusiveness. Instead, we are re-evaluating and redesigning our policies and practices to ensure they clearly communicate that it is not acceptable to express yourself in ways that marginalize others and make them feel unsafe, especially when people expressing those views clearly do not share the values that are fundamental to a civil, equitable, and safe society.

These abhorrent, ignorant and offensive acts have real costs and cause real harm to the creative environment necessary for learning, working and living on our campus. These acts threaten our inclusive climate, set back our efforts to make progress, lead people to associate these expressions with our entire university community, and cause targeted groups to bear the weight of the fear and anger that follows these occurrences.

We have worked and will continue to work to create a welcoming and inclusive environment at the University of Mississippi. To be clear, people who say these horrible things are not going to find shelter or comfort on this campus, which is committed to progress and inclusivity. To echo the words of our Chancellor, “We all recognize that this University has a difficult history with these issues that oftentimes places us at the forefront of complex and emotional discussions. We will not let our past stop us from working to make a better present and future for everyone on this campus.”

Instead of leaning into our previously used strategies, we are taking this moment to send this message to our class of incoming students to emphasize that the University of Mississippi is committed to its educational responsibility to foster a civil, welcoming, inclusive environment for all. We will share with them our expectations of their responsibilities as a member of this university community to uphold the belief that people can live, work, and learn effectively with others different than them, and they can do so in light of the rights afforded by free speech. We will also share with them that hate, prejudice, and racism do not have a place on our campus or in our society. We will remind them of what this community expects of each and every one of us, to create a place where all feel safe to learn from our shared experiences and improve the world around us through that knowledge. It is from that unwavering position that we will welcome new members into our university community.

We know that this also is not enough. We will pursue more robust tools to address these offensive remarks. In addition to investigating and taking appropriate actions with these posts,

1. We have reached out to other SEC institutions that are experiencing similar incidents to work collectively to consider alternative responses to prospective students' hateful and offensive speech and behavior.
2. We will review our admissions and judicial review policies and protocols to determine if there are more direct actions that we can take with prospective students.
3. We will work with outside consultants to ensure that we are using all available tools to combat these issues.
4. We will reconsider our education-only approach to disruptive, hateful behavior; and
5. We will continue to listen to the members of our community to understand their experiences and adjust our strategies with the goal of interrupting the cycles of hate.

Acts of violence against others because of their identity do not happen by accident. They are fueled by perspectives and hatred that festers within our society. When hate shows up, we need to act; when violence shows up, it is too late.

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