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6-8-2020

A Call for Collective Action in the Face of Racial Injustice

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WMU ScholarWorks Citation

Montgomery, Edward, "A Call for Collective Action in the Face of Racial Injustice" (2020). *WMU President Edward Montgomery*. 26.

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**WESTERN
MICHIGAN
UNIVERSITY**



Dear campus community,

For the past two weeks, people across our nation and our world have been ceaselessly raising their voices in protest to demonstrate outrage at the senseless killing of George Floyd and to demand change in the forces and broken systems that led to his death.

I'm writing today to express my pride in the WMU community members who have participated in the peaceful protests. And I'm also writing to call for action.

Mr. Floyd's killing has once again thrust the ugly legacy of racism into our national news. I was horrified, shocked and angry watching the video of a defenseless fellow human pleading for air as a police officer knelt upon his neck. Other officers stood by and did nothing. It is simply an outrage that he died at the hands of those sworn to protect him.

That this incident, following upon the heels of the shooting of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor and too many others, is a reminder that the scourge of racism still exists and that its impact is all too real and pernicious. But make no mistake: Its reach extends beyond law enforcement or the criminal justice system. The COVID-19 crisis laid bare the racial dimension of health disparities across the country and right here in Michigan, where blacks account for 39% of the COVID-19 deaths but only 14% of the population. From health care to housing segregation to poverty to school quality to interactions with the criminal justice system, institutional racism persists and continues to hurt and even kill people of color. Enough is enough.

Growing up, I felt the sting of racism and the impact of discrimination. Like too many others, I have been profiled and harassed by the police. As WMU's president, I have received racist emails. My mom was at Dr. King's March on Washington and my earliest babysitter was a Freedom Rider. This doesn't make me or my family unique, but one of millions for whom the Civil Rights Movement was a formative time. It called on ordinary people—be they preachers, cooks, maids or butchers—to sacrifice for a better world for their children. For demanding that our nation honor its pledge to all its citizens, dogs were set on them, they were beaten and they were black-listed by their employers. As a nation, we have made progress since then, but we have not arrived.

As a young man, my parents gave me “the talk” about dealing with police. My personal experience with law enforcement defies the conventions of the broad-brush stereotypes we see in the media. In addition to unjust treatment, I have also been cut breaks and received a helping hand from police officers. I have a

cousin in the Chicago PD. I have several good friends who work or worked in law enforcement agencies, ranging from local police departments to state troopers to the FBI. But my personal experiences do not take away from the fact that for far too many, that is not their experience. There are good police officers we must support, even as we root out the bad actors. We will not have arrived until justice is truly blind.

So, we must press forward. We cannot rest or let this moment pass without trying to make genuine lasting progress. To do so we must shine a light on the ugly vestiges of hate. We have an individual and collective responsibility to demand justice for Mr. Floyd, to stand against hatred and discrimination in any form, and work to end institutionalized racism so that everyone feels safe in their homes and on our streets and can enjoy the full benefits of being a member of our society.

Certainly, part of the solution is eliminating explicit and implicit bias in law enforcement and the judicial system. That will require a systematic look at nearly everything from officer selection and training, to new use-of-force protocols, improved community policing, and sentencing and judicial reform. Fortunately, there is evidence of what works and what doesn't. We don't have a knowledge problem; we have lacked the will.

As we shine the light on others, we also need to shine the light on ourselves and ask the questions: Have I done enough? Am I truly a part of the solution or the problem? What can WMU do better? We must be willing to listen to some hard truths from those who have experienced our University in very different ways. We must be open to reexamining everything from admissions to our educational programs to graduation and ask if there are systems, practices

and norms at WMU that we have in place that tacitly allow bias and unfair treatment for students, faculty or staff.

When that bias comes in the form of alleged hate speech, we investigate. Last Wednesday night, we received an allegation that an incoming first-year student had made racist remarks in a private chat. By the end of the next day, an investigation team had formed and immediately began gathering information. The team has worked quickly to get to the bottom of the charge and is **sharing its findings today**. In that case, the allegation is not substantiated. Regrettably, we do have cases where students have been found responsible for saying or doing things that are racist. We take charges seriously, investigate and take corrective action when it is needed.

This is just one dimension of addressing racism in our University. We must do more. Here are the actions I'll be taking next: This week I will meet with our Western Student Association leaders, at their request. Several President's Cabinet members will also be in attendance. Among other things, we will explore how we can do a better job with our teaching and research to bring an end to racism. We will examine how we can learn about our own implicit biases and ways to confront or overcome them.

I will be listening for specific steps or areas we need to examine to eradicate institutional racism in our midst. What steps should WMU take to address disparities in educational outcomes? What additional training can we offer to reduce implicit bias in our student selection, hiring and in our classrooms? Should we continue to implement test-optional admissions and review how we recruit students? How do we create a culture and norms on our campus where racist behavior is fully rejected, and how can we address it when it does not?

This is not just a challenge for black or brown members of our community, but for us all.

Staff in student affairs and diversity and inclusion are working with students on events designed to bring us together and open discussion around these and other questions. In the meantime, please send your thoughts and ideas to me at president@wmich.edu. I am committing to shifting thinking to specific actions that we can take as a community. I am asking the same of you.

Sincerely,

Edward Montgomery

President

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