

June 11, 2020

Dear Southern Students, Faculty and Staff:

In recent days, the senseless, brutal killing of George Floyd and its ripple effects have placed the issues of racial inequality and injustice under an intense spotlight across the state, the nation, and around the world.

This has been a difficult, painful period for Southern and our off-campus community, coming as it does in the midst of a pandemic that has generated much stress and heightened anxiety. This is why we must take extraordinary steps to reach out and support those who have been deeply wounded by recent events, in particular our colleagues, friends and neighbors of color.

It is also incumbent on us to take action that will effect lasting change. Too often in the past, acts of racial injustice have spawned outrage and heated debate, yet the roots of the problem clearly, horribly still remain.

As a public institution of higher learning, committed to the values of social justice, we must take steps to self-evaluate, promote positive dialogue and build a stronger, fully welcoming campus community. And we must use our knowledge and talents to educate and transform society-at-large so that equality, inclusion and respect are not mere lip service, but real, and meaningful terms.

I have been heartened already to learn that various campus organizations, from Student Government to our multicultural student groups have been engaging in discussion about this critical issue, despite our lack of campus presence. And, as you'll read on our home page: www.southernct.edu Southern students are walking the talk, organizing and participating in protest marches statewide.

Individual academic departments are also working with the wider community. For example, through its Center for Health Equity and Eliminating Racism, our Public Health Department has been focusing on the root causes of racism as they have played out during the COVID-19 pandemic.

To promote campus-wide discussion, we will host a panel discussion with Southern faculty, students and community members titled: "Racial Injustice: Let's Talk about What's Next," on Wednesday, June 16, from noon to 1:30 p.m. More information and a link where you may sign up to engage in this Facebook Live event will be available in the next couple of days.

We continue to progress with efforts to deconstruct structural racism in our own community. We have engaged in extensive social justice programming and training; established a commission on social justice; and fostered the development of collaborative campus organizations such as our Race and Intersectionality working group.

We have introduced a collaborative program in which inclusion partners work directly with each Vice President and their division. And we have hired Southern's first Vice President for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, Diane Ariza, currently Vice President for Community and Belonging at Nazareth College in Rochester, N.Y. When she begins her new role next month, Diane will work to enhance our social justice mission and advance our ongoing efforts to diversify our workforce.

While we acknowledge that we have much to do, and are a work in progress, we at Southern are committed to doing what is right.

In closing, I wanted to share a short reflection that I received and adapted from a friend of mine. I believe it speaks to the issues that confront us and provides motivation for the essential tasks that lie ahead:

“Wake me up, so that the evil of
racism finds no home within me.
Remove from me any thoughts and actions
that may oppress and
offend my brothers and sisters.
Fill my spirit, so that I may give services of
justice and peace.
Clear my mind, that I may use it for the greater good.
And remind us all that to make the world better,
To be a peacemaker,
We must each be better.”

Be safe and well.

Sincerely,

Joe Bertolino
President