

Jan. 9, 2021

Dear Colleagues:

Watching the events at our nation's capital the past few days have shaken me to my core. Personally, I have been struggling to process what has happened and suspect that others are feeling the same way.

This is the United States. Events like this are not supposed to be happening here. The events of this week show us how fragile our republic is and how maintaining it takes constant vigilance and effort by each of us. It also reminds us that our nation's promise continues to be a work in progress. In historical and global terms, we forget that our democracy, at 224 years, is still young.

What we witnessed Wednesday was a savage attack on our democratic principles. Because of that, it is easy to condemn the previously unimaginable assault on the Capitol; and as the center of our free society, we absolutely should do so. However, it cannot stop there.

What will be difficult is addressing the issues that caused this horrible event. I have spent much of the past few days considering the role that universities like ours can play in understanding and addressing what has happened.

I remain convinced that a contributing factor to our current situation is that national discourse has been reduced to oversimplified sound bites that lack nuance and intellectual rigor. Complex truths are often replaced by clever phraseology and attractive oversimplifications. Misinformation has poisoned notions of objective truth, as well as subjective argument, based on rigorous analysis of evidence. Additionally, partisan "news" channels have created echo chambers where thoughtful dissenting opinions are rare.

What can we as individuals and as a university community do? In the spirit of thinking globally but acting locally, I believe that we need to combat this phenomenon on our campus. As a university community, we must redouble our efforts to raise the level and variety of discourse on our campus and to hold ourselves, our colleagues, and our students, professionally but assertively, to the highest standards of intellectual engagement. As role models, we also must practice civil discourse in all our interactions. These skills do not come naturally. They must be reinforced both inside and outside of the classroom.

Before the pandemic, the University had begun a concerted effort to bring a variety of voices to campus in order to spark rigorous discussion. With the pandemic, we lost some momentum in this endeavor. Our current context demands that we make up for that lost momentum.

The ignorance that underscores disinformation campaigns can only be addressed through education. Therefore, in the coming weeks and months, I urge you to thoughtfully engage in

efforts to build meaningful dialogue on our campus. In addition, we will be re-engaging our speaker series, albeit virtually, to help underscore our commitment in this regard.

I welcome any suggestions that you might have and ask that should you feel so inclined, to forward those to my office via email at president@sru.edu.

Best,

Bill