



May 31, 2020

Dear SMBHC Family:

The time to engage the public sphere is now...more than ever. Though the pandemic and the summer break socially and physically distance us, national events unite us in a common search for answers to the challenges before the ideals of our Republic. This letter demands you to engage these fundamental questions at the heart of the lived debate in our land.

We will never forget the searing scene of the Black man, George Floyd, pleading for his life while a White policeman kned him in the neck until Floyd died. The public filmed and begged for Floyd's life while three other policemen ignored his and their pleas. George Floyd is one of many Black men and women who have lost their lives as a result of racist brutality. From Oxford MS to Los Angeles to New York to Chicago to Atlanta to Minneapolis, American citizens have taken to the streets to protest the police murder of George Floyd. We watched in similar horror, in March 1991, as several white policemen senselessly beat Rodney King in Los Angeles. Though many of us have collectively acknowledged these wrongs, though we have witnessed Black Americans occupy the highest political offices in the nation since the King incident, we still endure tragedy after tragedy in the streets of the USA.

What questions do we need to ask to get to the core of these conflicts and to live new answers to address these wrongs? We implore you to become citizen scholars as part of our SMBHC mission, to align your values with the highest of our Republic's foundational ideals. We must think critically, reflect profoundly, and engage our community with these ideals, assess the merits of our actions constantly, and try again. Let me throw four questions before you, and then let's engage our University community to reflect on the writings of leading scholars and thinkers in the public square to guide our possible actions.

1. How do we engage, reform and transform our criminal justice system (CJS) (police, courts and corrections) to mirror the highest ideals of our country? How do we build a system of trust and respect for this system that transcends ethnicity and social class? The evidence before us demonstrates we have failed miserably and the CJS favors Whites over all non-Whites--particularly Black men and women--and the wealthy and monied over the poor across the board. The colonial and national vestiges of slavery kindled in contemporary white supremacy haunt us and we must change the CJS. We can and must do better.
2. How do we engage, reform and transform our health care system to mirror the highest ideals of our Republic? The coronavirus (CV-19) has revealed stark inequities in our health care system. That Black Americans suffer death at a greater rate in Mississippi (per capita and in absolute terms) due to CV-19 infection sheds light on the disparities to access and benefit from health care. We can and must do better.

3. How do we engage, reform and transform an economy that rewards a few at the expense of the many? One quarter of the American workforce is unemployed, and more than 40% of those who make less than \$40,000 per year are unemployed. The CV-19 pandemic has stripped bare the inequities in our nation, and an incandescent anger demands answers to rethink and renew our commitment to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness for all its citizens. How do we engage public and private interests to create more opportunity for our children and grandchildren to enjoy equal or greater lifestyle, and that opportunity transcends both ethnicity and socio-economic standing at birth? We can and must do better.
4. How do we build a University community that reflects the highest ideals of the Union? Our academic community carries a heavy burden given our particular history, and the statue in memory to the Lost Cause that blocks one's view of the American flag from University Avenue must be relocated now. That it remains despite wide support in the community from student, faculty, staff and administration to remove it gives credence to the narrative that we do not intend to hold ourselves accountable to the highest ideals of the Republic. We can and must do better.

These questions are alive and demand that we live answers. How? With answers that create life and opportunity for all people. Journal your thoughts; post your answers; confront racist actions and words; read how scholars and public philosophers have and are addressing these interrogatives now; and most importantly, commit yourself to live out in daily form these ideals while we hold each other accountable for failed responses.

We will see you in August, and we can discuss in person (via Zoom or under the shade of a tree with PPE!) how we might take on the challenges put before us in this historic moment.

Engage, Reform, Transform!



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