



October 5, 2020

An open letter to the people of Newark, Ohio:

Dismantling Racism in Our Community

When students of color report that they have been subjected to overt racism, what is a dean to do? Rafael Walker recently argued in the Chronicle of Higher Education that university leaders need to do more than offer “empathetic gestures and rote affirmations” in responding to tragic injustices such as the murder of George Floyd by a police officer. Walker argued that leaders should instead demonstrate their commitment to ensuring that such injustices never happen again. An administrator could allocate money or personnel to revise policies or provide training, or spend time assessing their own role in preventing and abetting injustices. I offer this letter as such a self-assessment and as a call for partners to join the campus in pursuing racial justice and equity in our community.

My self-assessment is straightforward. If one member of our campus community experiences any form of racism, then I have not done enough in my role as dean to promote racial justice and equity. In one week this September, I received reports of three separate incidents of overt, racial discrimination or harassment against students enrolled at this campus. All three occurred in our community. Considering that evidence, I would have to be an ostrich to think that I am doing enough to prevent and eliminate racism. Clearly, I have more to do.

Listening is an important action for any leader. And it is extremely important for a white male leader like me—who has never been a victim of racism—to listen to the victims of racism because it is impossible for me to know it as they know it. I also recognize that the ideas that move the campus forward in big ways come from those around me rather than from me. My contribution is to help the campus think through, refine, prioritize and implement those ideas, which often become strategic initiatives. So, I listen with the intent to act.

If I do not act, then I am complicit in perpetuating racism. Fortunately, I am surrounded by amazing people who have brilliant ideas and who help me act. Our Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee recently recommended a set of anti-racism initiatives, and various campus groups are now vetting them. I pledge to integrate the refined initiatives into the campus’s strategic plan and to fund them. A few initiatives are already underway, and in some cases, we are already partnering with community organizations. For instance, the Licking County Foundation recently sponsored a Racial Equity Institute (REI) workshop on understanding structural racism, and several campus representatives participated. Additionally, several of our faculty and staff are partnering with Newark City Schools and the NAACP in seeking funding to address the effects of racism in our community.

I ask all area organizations, including government agencies and businesses, to join us. As the campus and its benefactors have opened the door ever wider to all Ohioans, the racial and ethnic

diversity of our students has increased spectacularly. Approximately 34% are racial or ethnic minorities, up from 4% when I came to the campus in 1992. Our students add tremendously to the diversity of our community, and though many of them commute from outside Licking County, they contribute to the community through internships, jobs, volunteer service, philanthropy, and through their purchases of goods and services.

Our students are part of our community, and they need us to do more than acknowledge that racism exists here. They need us to listen better than we have. They need us to act more than we have. They need us to take racism apart. I am dedicating myself to that goal. Will you join me?

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "William L. MacDonald". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, prominent initial "W".

William L. MacDonald
Dean/Director of The Ohio State University at Newark