

Dear South Texas Community,

I struggle with how even to begin this message. Since last Monday, I have felt a range of emotions, including anger, shock, horror, powerlessness, frustration, and concern.

Ours is a school of mission, of diversity, of opportunity, of service. I chose to come to South Texas because of that mission, that commitment to justice. In addition, and more personally, I believe each of us inherently has worth and value; each of us should be treated with respect and dignity; each of us shares a foundational, human relationship.

And that is why I cannot stop reflecting on last Monday's events in Minneapolis. For close to nine excruciating minutes, we watch as a man literally has the life pressed out of him. There was, in the arresting officer, no consideration for the humanity of Mr. Floyd; on the contrary, Mr. Floyd's pleas for mercy and assistance were instead scorned and ignored. There was no respect or dignity afforded Mr. Floyd; on the contrary, he was dehumanized and disregarded. We watch in vain and in horror as Mr. Floyd's protestations and pleas grow silent. We watch in shock and anger as his body becomes still. We watch in real time as Mr. Floyd is deprived of that which all of us are taught to be the first self-evident truth in America: his life.

I recognize that I will never fully appreciate personally the effects of racism — or the fears, the stigmas, the deprivations, and the oppressions that it creates. I cannot stand in the shoes of those who have suffered so much over so long a period because of their skin color, ethnicity, or heritage. And, some might suggest that the “safe” course would be for our school and for me to do nothing, to allow the conversation to take place outside our walls, as if it doesn't affect our school, our students, our faculty, and our staff.

But racism does affect our school. It affects our students, our faculty, and our staff. Our community is diminished by its presence, and we ourselves are diminished if we sit idly, refusing to acknowledge it and its impact. To be silent is to tolerate. To refrain from speaking is implicitly to condone.

South Texas is a school of opportunity. We celebrate our diversity. We prioritize instilling the values of justice and service in our education. We train the leaders of future generations, those who will have the responsibility to confront these challenges head on if we are to make progress. Our duty as educators is to foster in our students and our community the values and skills necessary — the character, if you will — to help our society progress on its slow, but inexorable, arc towards justice.

Mr. Floyd's death was truly senseless. It has left me in a continued state of reflection about our obligations to each other and about how we can support one another as we move forward. Of course, there are no easy solutions to this age-old disease, and there is no simple formula. And the conversations are difficult and may be uncomfortable – but also are absolutely necessary.

Quite frankly, we all — as a community — must stand together and play our part. To honor the memory and legacy of Mr. Floyd, and of all who have had their lives and livelihoods taken from them during such hate-filled acts, we must offer more than platitudes; there must be action, as well.

To that end, I am actively seeking guidance from Professor Shelby Moore, head of South Texas' new Office of Diversity, and from our entire leadership team as we re-examine our programming and curriculum. Our mission demands that we, as an institution, educate our ourselves and our students, the future's advocates, on the responsibility we all have to appreciate and to uphold the values we so celebrate; to recognize and to respond to the call to service; and to speak out against acts of racism and oppression.

I also ask for your input as to how we can move forward and hold this conversation in our community in a manner that is productive, valuable, and timely. Please send your thoughts and suggestions to president@stcl.edu.

Racism has plagued our nation and communities for more than 400 years, and all of us understand that we will not be able to alleviate its effects overnight. However, that shouldn't stop us from trying.

Michael F. Barry, J.D.
President and Dean
June 1, 2020