Teachers in law schools and other institutions around the country now are featuring classes, symposia, and seminars on “Ferguson,” though most such teachers could not find Ferguson MO on a map. It impresses me how our local dysfunctions have become a national brand name, “Ferguson,” for a constellation of societal problems that encompass race, economic inequality, deficiencies in our educational systems, and problems of policing, prosecuting, and punishing in our criminal justice system.

In the real world of St. Louis, some SLU LAW students and faculty have been deeply engaged in issues arising from the “Ferguson” protests. Our clinical faculty and students have been representing clients in Ferguson and other North County communities long before the protests began. And we, too, have a course called “Ferguson” exploring the various legal aspects of the “Ferguson” challenges.

“Ferguson” presents engaging challenges: How to bring the world into the classroom, to offer a safe place for uncomfortable discussions, to identify solutions to long-festering problems, and to assure the rigor of the intellectual enterprise so that the next generation of leaders will know how to think critically and act effectively as advocates for their clients and healers for their society.

**REMEMBERING OUR PAST**

Some of us fondly remember SLU LAW Dean Dick Childress, who died in 1977. Childress famously had marched with Rev. Martin Luther King in Selma in 1965 and was known for his devotion to civil rights. Dean Childress’ devotion to civil rights was aligned with the historic role played by our university.

Our new SLU president, Dr. Fred Pestello, noted this historic role in his 2014 inaugural speech, reminding us that Saint Louis University was “the first historically white university in a former slave state to adopt a formal policy to admit African-American students.” Missouri law at the time forbade educating whites and Blacks together in public schools, and the private universities and colleges followed the conventions of racial apartheid until SLU led the way toward integration in the 1940s. In later years, our law school led with efforts to recruit African-Americans, many of whom have become leaders in our profession.

The efforts of the past have been necessary but have they been sufficient? Do the historical marks of progress mean much when a community’s and a country’s current conditions seem so torn and flawed, especially when it comes to race?

The leaders of the past spoke with moral clarity on issues that were, so to speak, black and white. But the contemporary issues – economic inequality, the decline of the middle class, poor schools, unfairness in the criminal justice system – seem far more complex. These issues evoke deep feelings and do not lend themselves to simple solutions.

**RECOGNIZING AN OPPORTUNITY**

Our role at SLU LAW calls us to recognize these feelings, to make our downtown school a safe place for civil discussion of discordant viewpoints and a place where we can help members of our community come together to address the critical issues of our community and nation.

We are a nation without a common ethnicity or religious belief; what binds us is a belief in the rule of law. While we as a region or nation may seem hopelessly divided at times, we need to preserve that foundational belief. Well-educated lawyers are essential.

SLU LAW continues as a place where students and faculty learn and teach the law, can become passionately engaged in the issues of their time if that is their wont, and in any event will refine the personal characteristics needed to be effective advocates and community builders. This role is aligned with the social justice mission of the university, which is reflected in President Pestello’s commitment to implementing the “Clock Tower Accords,” a set of serious moves to improve racial equity and social justice within the SLU community and the St. Louis region.

My hope is that the “Ferguson” brand name soon will come to mean an opportunity that caused us to remember the depths of our region’s and nation’s divisions and problems, and we used the opportunity to forge a stronger, more vibrant and inclusive community bound by a renewed faith in the rule of law.

This is a big order, but now does not seem to be the time for small thoughts.

Michael A. Wolff
Dean and Professor

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