
A Demonstration Update from the President

October 18, 2014

To the Saint Louis University Community:

This afternoon, the small encampment at the clock tower was voluntarily and permanently removed by a group of SLU students and the other demonstrators.

This peaceful outcome was the result of many intense hours of outreach and conversation with clock tower demonstrators, community organizers, clergy, city leaders and members of the University campus.

Now, the University must come together.

We will move to more formal and institutionalized conversations about race on our campus. We also will begin to devise short- and long-term initiatives that retain and attract more students and faculty of color, promote equal opportunity, and advance focused economic development in disadvantaged neighborhoods.

These efforts are completely consistent with the mission of this University. They are just the start of what I had announced in my inaugural address: That this extraordinary University bring to bear its creative, intellectual and economic energy and help lead St. Louis to a better place.

This week has been a challenge for many of us, including me.

Unlike some with whom I spoke, I have never been followed by security throughout a department store, had taxicab drivers refuse to pick me up, or been seated by the bathrooms of a half-empty restaurant. But those indignities — and far worse — are not uncommon to people of color, including our students, faculty and staff.

Many of their life experiences, described to me in stark and painful terms, have weighed on me as peaceful demonstrations and teach-ins have played out this week.

Also weighing on me has been the concern expressed by some students and parents who were worried about a non-peaceful outcome to this demonstration. Many of you who wrote or called felt that this demonstration was inappropriate for our campus.

In addition, I was disheartened by some of the harsh and ugly words hurled via social media, phone calls and emails that only fueled anxiety, misunderstandings and divisions on all sides at a time when what we needed most was to listen and learn and find common ground.

While there have been setbacks and sudden tensions along the way, we acted quickly to ease them. And spurring us on toward the peaceful outcome we have achieved this afternoon have been the many thoughtful and inspiring voices I have heard this week, especially from our students. Their commitment to our mission and values continues to inspire me each day. I also appreciate the voices of our faculty and staff, community organizers, ministers and young voices in the African-American community throughout the region.

This has been a difficult week. I know it has consumed my every waking hour trying to find a point of common ground and mutual understanding. I believe we are there.

I also wish to apologize to you that my total attention to secure a resolution meant that I could not personally respond to your calls and emails. I want you to know I heard you. In the coming days and weeks, there will be opportunities for us to communicate more directly.

I want to thank everyone who displayed the best of what our Jesuit University stands for this past week.

Fred P. Pestello, Ph.D.
President