

Presidential Address, November 19, 2018

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The last three weeks have crystalized for me the world-making and world-destroying power of words. No matter how hard any one of us tries, our words will fall short of addressing the fears, the pain, and the outrage of our colleagues and students in the wake of Nazi hate speech and threats of murder on The Rock. Certainly, 10 minutes in class will not be enough. But we have to start somewhere. So let me be clear: WE stand against Nazis and reject their thin veil of pluralism; any group that says “kill Jews,” reveres the swastika, celebrates racism, and dehumanizes members of our community is [not welcome here](#). We denounce them, again and again.

I will call on you shortly to vote to suspend the 5-day rule for agenda materials so that we can vote on two resolutions: one supporting a call for a chief diversity officer on this campus and another supporting the SGA’s resolution for a Rock spotlight, camera, and paint. While we will debate the issue of the camera, their sensible, first amendment-friendly ideas come out of community discussions, and I applaud their leadership.

The Rock is a symptom of a greater disease. The rise in hate crimes on college campuses, recently documented by the [Chronicle of Higher education](#), includes something between a 77% and a staggering 257% increase in white supremacist propaganda. The terrorist tactics of fascist, white supremacist groups are fueled by conspiracy theories of “white genocide” and built on an anti-Semitic, deeply racist world view. I recommend the SPLC’s latest report “[Hate and Extremism in 2018](#)” as a current overview of these activities. They use the tools of identity politics to rally disaffected whites as victims and abuse the concepts of tolerance, free speech, and the marketplace of ideas to dehumanize Jews, African-Americans, LGBTQ people, women, and non-Christians, as the “shadowy, powerful ‘them’” against which they must struggle. Note how they exploit the language of identity, of revolution, of disenfranchised outsiders, and discourses of race, sex, and gender to fuel their base. I’ve received word from colleagues at other universities, including Yale, Maryland, Duke, and Tennessee Tech, that they too have been recently been targeted with swastikas, printer hacks, and fliers designed to provoke outrage and goad universities into restrictions and reactions to which these groups can then point, say “the liberal university,” and so claim

that we are the problem. I implore you to follow the advice of [Lecia Brooks of the SPLC](#), who [spoke here this past spring](#): do not play their game.

Also, understand that these events come at a moment of a larger cultural attack on higher education from broader sectors of the public, which include assaults on tenure, bids to control the curriculum, shuttering faculty senates, strategically devaluing expertise, and privatizing knowledge. We are the bulwark against a future where facts don't matter and truth, whether about the Civil War or chemical waste, falls victim to a "both sides" nihilism.

Today, I'm asking you to help define this academic community as a new interim president and soon a new chancellor step up. We need to be clear on who we are and what we can do. In the words of our [Critical Race Theory Collective](#), "education is a forward looking and transformative exercise." As the stewards of that exercise, how do we define the university? How can we talk about ourselves, not just as an engine of the economy but as the seed bed of democracy and just society? And what are the practices that will speak into being a future of welcome, access, excellence, respect, and dignity for all? Help us gather the kinds of conversations we need to be having, and make sure that faculty voices are strong, present, and not just as a constituency but as the living, breathing heart of the university. This Senate is only a reflection of those who have been willing to come together. We are not the administration. We have no authority to hire, plan, or decide, but as the advocates of the faculty, we must be present, vocal and honest. And we can only lift up the voices that voice their concerns and hopes. To a faculty that feels beleaguered and disempowered, I ask all senators to reach out, listen, bring their concerns here, and seize this moment to re-center the university on forward-looking and transformative education, broadly defined in teaching, research, and service.

Please, ask your colleagues to participate in this project in any of the following ways:

- Come to the [town hall with Randy Boyd on Nov. 29](#) at 3:30. RSVP by Nov. 23
- Participate in the [survey of next steps](#), included in my last message to the faculty and to be reiterated in a follow-up message with a report of this meeting.

- Sign a letter generated by our [Law colleague Robert Blitt condemning](#) the “hateful symbols and violent threats” on The Rock.
- Share ideas with senator and caucus chairs, and senators, make sure those ideas get to committees and the executive council.
- Senators, please accept Randy Boyd’s invitation to lunch on November 29 (rsvp if you have not already via your emailed invitation) and start a new conversation about our future.
- Read and respond to the links in a message from me that will go to all faculty tomorrow.
- Nominate colleagues for the [Chancellor’s teaching award](#) by November 30 and honor the transformative work that happens in the classroom.

Us and them thinking, precisely what these forces of darkness preach, can infect us internally. I’m here in large part because of Tim Snyder’s 2016 *On Tyranny*, which [listed 20 things we can do](#) to fight tyranny: #2 reads: “Defend an institution...Do not speak of ‘our institutions’ unless you are making them yours by acting on their behalf. Institutions don’t protect themselves. They go down like dominoes unless each is defended from the beginning.” Folks, it’s us, our colleagues, the administration, and staff. There are no other grown-ups coming to save us. It’s time, for our students’ sake, our students who represent a changing demographic and bold, beautiful expectations about their right to their place in the world.

A chief diversity officer will help tremendously, but it will also take collective conversations and concrete acts. Last spring, when white supremacists came to campus, this Senate co-sponsored United at the Rock with the SGA and CMC. We’re expanding this project as a basis for sustained engagement and teaching. This year, it will be held on February 20, entitled “United at the Rock: Remember, Serve, and Celebrate.” The event will be grounded in remembering what has happened to us, remembering who we are, and using our collective expertise to teach around the issues: racism, violence, free speech, fascism, hate, and misogyny. A seminar and dialogue series, in formation, will underscore the reasons for the event. The event will also be tied to a service fair for undergraduates and interested faculty and staff, organized by Leadership Studies, with community-facing partners who work to make Knoxville more welcoming and just. Then, in the fall, the CMC with community partners and hopefully involvement from departments will sponsor “United at the Table” a community

long-table dinner down Ped Walkway, with chances to report out about student service engagement, talk about how we work for justice here, and feed ongoing initiatives, hopefully by then under the coordination of a chief diversity officer.

Now, let me leave you with a preview of our first video PSA, produced with the generous time of your colleagues and with Grey Mangan, student in Cinema Studies and regular Beacon contributor, behind the camera and in the editing. This is who we are. I give you, "[Tennessee: Home.](#)"