

Nov. 15th, 2016

Dear Chancellor Zeppos,

We, the 203 undersigned, write as faculty, parents, and concerned citizens, some of us representatives of minorities. Over the last several days, we have been dealing with scared, hurt, and angry students in our classrooms, young people who struggle with understanding what just happened with the presidential election.

After decades of efforts to increase diversity on our campus, the presidential campaign laid bare a huge divide in our country. It became clear that a post-racial era, so widely proclaimed during the Obama administration, was wishful thinking. We saw hate, racism, misogyny, xenophobia, and ridicule of people with disabilities peddled on an almost daily basis, and we fear that it might now become naturalized.

We ask that you and other university leaders take a more proactive stance against the climate of fear and hatred and protect free speech on campus and beyond. Free speech refers not only to the right to speak up, but also to the right to an environment where one feels safe to speak. Students are worried about their safety, and they feel insulted, judged, discriminated, and voiceless.

Even Vanderbilt's international office felt the need to warn students to avoid political discussions with unknown people and to abstain from political conversations late at night and in pubs or restaurants where one is unfamiliar with the surroundings. Such advice is good, but it must be followed by a public reaffirmation of freedom of speech and a clear denunciation of the forces of bigotry washing over our country.

As educators, we cannot rally behind a president who has shown nothing but disrespect for women, immigrants, people with disabilities, and ethnic / racial minorities. When diversity, scientific inquiry, and the truth are under attack, humanity is under attack, both in terms of its dignity and physical survival.

The present moment is an opportunity to teach our students about the importance of debate and dissent and the need for spaces to protect both. If we only say "let's move on" and ignore their fear and their speechlessness, we are complicit in the demise of higher education. Fighting for the truth and free speech is a non-partisan issue and universities are places to defend both.

We strongly encourage you to make a forceful public statement that 1) reaffirms Vanderbilt's commitment to free speech, 2) denounces discriminatory remarks against immigrants, women, minorities, the people with disabilities and LGBT people, 3) asserts that climate change and global warming are threats to the entire planet, and 4) demands that president-elect Trump safeguard the rights of all citizens and refrain from supporting legislation that targets and demeans vulnerable groups. We hope that Vanderbilt University will live up to its reputation of excellence and protect its students, staff, and faculty in the knowledge that diversity makes us better and stronger as individuals and a people.

Sincerely,

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