



OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT

In the Face of the Pandemic, Protests, and Possibilities – Remember B.R.E.D.S. Matter

The statement below was issued by Kentucky State University President M. Christopher Brown II to the Kentucky State campus community

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History is riddled with swaths of lived experiences that are redacted into just a few words. The “Watergate Scandal” encompasses a break-in, grand jury testimony, and a presidential resignation. The litigation “Brown v. Education” includes a catalog of court cases, a landmark psychological doll-baby study, and the so-called integration of America’s public schools. The tropical weather named “Hurricane Katrina” connotes complex narratives of governmental neglect, racialized imagery of abandonment, and the near-collapse of a public city.

Today, we find ourselves in the crosshairs of such a moment. The global intersections of COVID-19 and the police-abuse protests are primed for historical importance. The “COVID-19” pandemic has introduced self-quarantine, PPE, vaccines, and governmental unreadiness into the public discourse. At the dawn of emergence from more than 100-days of telework and sheltering in place, the national viewership was blindsided by the ghoulish and inhumane death of George Floyd. The resulting days have been a complicated collection of local and global protests about the “police-state” in American society.

The thread that weaves these two seemingly disparate “moments” together is the unspeakable topic of race – racial bias, racial prejudice, racial discrimination, and racial bigotry. Although no one speaks aloud the whispered questions of the day, they hang above our nation like swords of Damocles. Why are the rates of COVID-19 deaths higher in racialized populations? What is the proportionality of COVID-19 testing and healthcare services in racially disparate communities? Why are the vast majority of national death-by-police cases involving white male officers and suspected black male criminals? SHHHHH, let us not speak aloud the tapestry of pandemic, protests, and race.

This is a curious and uncertain time marked by more questions than answers. However, I implore each of you as members of the Kentucky State University Thorobred Family not to let the current crisis go to waste. As spring transitions to summer, we must harness all of our might and focus on finding new possibilities for our campus and our communities. We must rapidly engage every opportunity to transform rather than reform our institutional positionality.

The history of American higher education has been marked by a continuing debate over who should have access to college and why. Our founding as a normal school for the training of black educators to teach in the segregated black schools of Kentucky, Kentucky State University has been the cornerstone of educational access, the catalyst for civil rights progress, and the convener of conversations about the public good and social change. This was the stake that I endeavored to drive in the ground with the founding of the Atwood Institute for Race, Education,

and the Democratic Ideal. Kentucky State University has a vital role to play in advancing the Commonwealth's workforce and enlightening the citizenry.

Sixty-three years ago this week, the late Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. visited our campus to deliver the Spring Commencement address to the Class of 1957. He spoke from the theme – “Facing the Challenge of a New Age.” I took the weekend to re-read his address in light of the current pandemic and protests. What he said on that day still holds true – the world does not need a new normal. The world needs a new different. It is increasingly clear to me that in this era of new possibilities, Kentucky State University needs to shout from “The Hill” that B.R.E.D.S. matter. We must emphasize in this moment of the pandemic and protests the importance of belonging, race, education, direct-engagement, and self-determination.

BELONGING MATTERS

As an elementary educator, I was taught the importance of Maslow's hierarchy of needs – human nutrition, physical safety, belonging, self-esteem, and actualization. Belonging is a cornerstone of the human experience after food, water, and human life. Belonging is the need to feel a part of a collective – a family, a school, a neighborhood, or a faith community.

I must confess that even today, I struggle with my sense of belonging. Patricia Williams in her 1991 book-length essay, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, declares that “subject position is everything.” Every day and everywhere, I am perennially conscious of myself. I am always trying to ascertain “my fit.” As I listen to the words of our students on social media and the hundreds of posts by protesters, it is clear that they are in search of belonging. Far too many of our students verbalize a disconnect between their identities and how they experience Frankfort and their own classrooms.

I encourage all of us to embrace the historic culture of Kentucky State University and actively ensure that each and every student feels a sense of belonging. The absence of belonging is a suffocating experience that leads far too many to metaphorically assert – “I can't breathe.” The breath of identity is snuffed out because of a lack of care, a lack of concern, a lack of compassion, and/or a lack of commitment. No one should feel disrespected or disregarded. I have even received dozens of emails this semester from faculty and staff questioning our workplace values and campus intentions.

Beginning today, each of us should take on the responsibility to ensure that our campus is culturally congenial and emotionally healthy for students, faculty, staff, and stakeholders. First, we should challenge our core beliefs about inclusive excellence and make certain that our actions align with our intentions. Second, we must practice unconditional acceptance of people, principles, and practices different from our own – we are not the center of the universe. Third, we must make room for the “and” rather than the “or” – there are multiple ways to function and operate in this life. Finally, we must prioritize internal reflection and healing of our own biases and limited ways of knowing – there is more than one way to swing a baseball bat.

In the face of the pandemic and protests, Kentucky State University can be a place where belonging matters..

RACE MATTERS

Every time I enter the state capitol, I mentally try to reconcile the histories of the two adjacent statues of Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis. Every time I travel to Louisville, I am consciously aware that just on the other side is Dawson Springs, where the international headquarters of the Ku Klux Klan is incorporated. A casual drive outside the town center reveals a parade of confederate flags in manicured lawns. And as the only African American president among the state's eight public universities, I am brutally aware that race matters.

The events that led to the current national display of protests against police brutality, racial inequities, and a deviation of theories of egalitarian democracy have placed race as leitmotif du jour. Despite all of the euphemisms about people of color, ethnic groups, and social class, the construct of race is on full display, in black and white, for every eye to see.

As a federally designated historically black college, Kentucky State University is a governmental manifestation of the racial history of our nation and state. The Statue of Liberty's call to "give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free. The homeless tempest-tossed, send them to me," was an invitation to the immigrants to Ellis Island. However, our campus founded as an invitation to the Ibo, Ashanti, Nubian, Masai, and Zulu – travelers without passports or visas to this country. Travelers by forced migration rather than voluntary immigration.

In *Blackness Visible*, Charles Mills (1998), suggests that the notion "that race should be irrelevant is certainly an attractive ideal, but when [race] has not been irrelevant, it is absurd to proceed as if it had been." Race mattered then and it still matters now.

When I arrived on the campus in May 2017, Kentucky State University was still choking from the thick smoke of racial crisis. Even today, though rarely uttered, the issue of race still permeates core questions of enrollment, hiring, management, and culture. This unacknowledged "construct" (rather than context) colors how community members perceive and understand policy actions, grading decisions, and opportunities to belong. A critical examination of race on campus illuminates every person, place, or thing. Although never honestly discussed, race is the most observable characteristic on our campus.

A race-conscious paradigm requires that all of us approach our work with a critical eye that sees invisible colors, especially black. There is something both philosophically and ideologically malicious and genocidal about attempts to erase whole races, groups, and colors out of public life, history, and discourse. In the book, *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison says: "I am invisible; understand, simply because people refuse to see me . . . because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their inner eyes."

Beginning today, each of us should take on the responsibility to have courageous conversations about race. Race cannot be concealed or disregarded simply because of its controversial implications. Race cannot be masked because it brings forth feelings of discomfort, confusion, and fear. Until now, we have been able to silence discussions of race on campus and in society. This diplomatic effort was premised on the belief that the campus should embrace the disease of colorblindness. Colorblindness is a race-conscious ideology – one that simply chooses not to acknowledge race. As a result, too many of our students, faculty, staff, and stakeholders are unseen. The failure to see race enables uncontrolled privilege and the abuse of power.

In the face of the pandemic and protests, Kentucky State University can speak up and speak out on the issue of race. Lest we forget, it was the very reason for which we were founded as a historically black college in 1886.

EDUCATION MATTERS

Education really is the great equalizer. Talent does not repose singularly in any one group of people. Our Commonwealth and nation need an educated citizenry and workforce prepared to meet contemporary demands. As we emerge from shelter-in-place orders and respond to the national outcry in the aftermath of several unarmed citizen deaths, Kentucky State University must reify the importance of education at the K-12 and the collegiate levels. Dr. King said in 1959, "If America is to remain a first-class nation, it cannot have second-class citizenship."

Sadly, the socio-historic nature of education in America is rooted in privilege and exclusion. At the primary, secondary, and collegiate levels, educational settings have been designed to promulgate the values, cultures, and

ambitions of particular groups. What was defined as knowledge has been warped and mangled – European baroque era music is considered classical, but not original or indigenous music forms for other groups. The students we serve must be educated and not schooled. A robust college education should train students how to think and not what to think.

There are smoldering embers in the minds of many adolescents across the nation. When they arrive on campus this fall, there will be an expectation that they will “get what they paid for.” A review of the academic desires of students enrolling in the tail of the COVID-19 pandemic reveals narratives of liberation, entrepreneurship, justice, and opportunity. It will not be sufficient to offer them a curriculum designed to replicate the social order. They want to disrupt the social order. It is a fair assertion that they are tired of waiting, when for centuries they have been the head waiters in line. It is logical that they want to dismantle the institutional arrangement, particularly if they do not see themselves reflected at all in the content or among the deliverers. What worked before will not work going forward.

The national collegiate educational model has been upended – courses are online, students are graded pass-fail, and there is no linearity to degrees and employment options for most fields. This is a watershed moment for higher education and Kentucky State University. We must rise to the challenge as we have done repeatedly throughout our history. It is our imperative to enroll, educate, retain, and graduate a new class of lawyers, artists, doctors, educators, politicians, healthcare workers, behaviorists, business leaders, social workers, government agents, agriculturalists, and community activists.

Our students deserve more than credentials, they deserve content. Our students merit more than recitation; they warrant reflection. Our students want more than job placement; they require career development. Our campus should be the epigenesis of trickle-down education – an information and enrichment model that extends beyond our classrooms into the community. Our campus must be more than a teaching institution; it must be an institution of higher learning. If we teach and no one learns, we are not being effective. Our students need more than access to education. They need an education that enables them to think critically and take control of their lives.

In the face of the pandemic and protests, Kentucky State University can serve as a beacon of educational innovation for the Commonwealth, region, and nation.

DIRECT-ENGAGEMENT MATTERS

One of my favorite quotes is from the book, *The Fire Next Time*, by James Baldwin. Baldwin writes: “This is the crime of which I accuse my country and my countrymen, and for which neither I nor time nor history will ever forgive them, that they have destroyed and are destroying hundreds of thousands of lives and do not know it and do not want to know it... It is the innocence which constitutes the crime.”

Each of us must now move beyond empathetic mourning the latest victim of police brutality, public crucifixion, and lynching by proxy. We must go beyond institutional press releases, organizational initiatives, and corporate statements declaring platitudes about harmony and peace. I have now read dozens of statements from colleges promising to fight social injustice. Corporations now even have television commercials asserting they are opposed to racial discrimination. Politicians and activists have taken to their bully-pulpits to assert their commitments to “liberty and justice for all.” Sadly, the oppressed and marginalized need more than words on paper. The real work of change requires deliberate action. As we say in South Carolina, “actions speak louder than words.”

If you want to march, then march. If you want to discuss, then discuss. If you want to bail out protesters, then do that. Just be certain to do something. I encourage you to register to vote, pass out pamphlets, or help a recent high school graduate enroll in college. You may elect to read a book on civic engagement or even start a social movement. Just do something to help improve the communities in which we live.

Every so often, I reread a book by Wilkinson and Kopp, titled *The Dreamgiver*. The book is about a man named Ordinary who lives in the Land of Familiar. Well Ordinary has a dream and decides to leave the Comfort Zones and ventures across the BorderLands and ultimately achieves great things. The book helps me to remember that “I Am” the somebody that the world has been looking for to make a difference. The book reminds all of us that anybody can have the solution to a problem. Each of us has a responsibility to do something.

There is an entire campus of students and a community surrounding our landmass that are depending on each of us to do something. Kentucky State University is the best hope for many people. It is an oasis of retreat from urban blight. It is an opportunity for development and social uplift. It is an agent of public reform, agricultural invention, and social services. But for our campus, some of our students would be unemployed, imprisoned, or dead. But for our campus, many faculty, staff, and students would be devoid of an entry point for meaningful engagement in assorted areas of industry.

Not only must we be individually committed to direct-engagement, but Kentucky State University must support, encourage, and enable our students to find positive ways to express their leadership abilities. Each employee should consider leadership opportunities that we can encourage our students to pursue. Our student engagement units must provide students with meaningful connections within and across the communal. Our student success units must create an annual on-campus leadership summit. And our faculty must prepare students to lead from below and within, not just above. While we can never control what happens around us, we can control what happens within us.

In the face of the pandemic and protests, Kentucky State University can be a leader in the area of direct-engagement by being out-front and outspoken on issues that matter.

SELF-DETERMINATION MATTERS

One of the seven Kwanzaa principles is called Kujichagulia and is translated “self-determination.” The principle asserts that we should define ourselves, name ourselves, create for ourselves, and speak for ourselves. Self-determination is the heart of an internal locus of control. Each of us should accept and acknowledge the role of our individual actions in creating success and attainment.

As we envision the fall semester in the firm grip of COVID-19, we must develop an institutional definition that is not just a mission statement, but a series of actionable practices. Kentucky State University must regain the memories of the interests and images upon which the campus was established. We must express to our students, faculty, staff, alumni, and surrounding community that we know where we stand in the Commonwealth, among HBCUs, and on the higher education landscape. We must be self-determined.

Central to our future are three fundamental questions. Who is Kentucky State University? Are we really who we say we are? Is our campus all that it ought to be?

These are questions of history and culture, not merely queries or questions of institutional identity. More profoundly, they are questions of institutional direction and focus. These questions capture our collective identity, based on and borne out of historical and cultural practice.

Kentucky State University, like all historically Black colleges and universities, have played a significant role in expanding educational opportunity in the United States. Created for the primary purpose of educating African Americans, these institutions were founded at a time when postsecondary options for Blacks were limited either by practice or by law. Our campus has created pools of qualified individuals who have traditionally been underutilized in academia and corporate America. While we know our value, we have yet to convince some in society of our importance.

Studies have consistently shown that HBCUs promote nurturing and supportive learning environments that enhance students' academic and intellectual knowledge, foster a positive sense of self and self-efficacy, instill a sense of social responsibility and community leadership, and expand the educational and career aspirations of their students. Kentucky State University is responsible for training generations of citizens who went on to become leaders and influential figures whose talents might otherwise have been wasted.

At a time when there is a myriad of postsecondary options, we must be clear about why students need to enroll on our campus. If our institution did not already exist, the Commonwealth would need to create a campus-like ours in the wake of the current climate.

As civic problems expand exponentially, the nation faces the threat of disconnecting the communities of concern from access to opportunities for transformation. Our nation is in a season of transition. Each of us must embrace change and be intentional about everything that we do. The answer to the questions facing our world cannot be found in the State Journal, Fox News or on CNN.

In the face of the pandemic and protests, Kentucky State University must matter.

Concluding Thoughts

After decades of research and administrative experience, I can assert that the times are changing. A vast opportunity exists for Kentucky State University to move beyond ethereal constraints and seize the tangible possibilities before us to advance access and opportunity.

Never forget that it is not what happens to us that defines us, but rather how we respond to what happens to us. I am immeasurably grateful for how our Thoroughbred family has stood strong for one another. I am humbled to be called to serve in such a time as this. My prayer is that history will judge us all by our efforts to do good work and leave "The Great Kentucky State" better than we found her.

The moment in which we live summons Kentucky State University to perform powerful and necessary work. Advancing the Commonwealth and society sometimes means that new areas of emphasis emerge in times of uncertainty. It is increasingly evident in the face of a pandemic and protests that B.R.E.D.S. matter, and because we matter, this is the time for an intentional commitment to belonging, race, education, direct-engagement, and self-determination.

The public is interested in what Kentucky State University can and will do to improve the conditions under which we live. The COVID-19 pandemic and current protests have brought to light continuing disparities between the haves and have-nots in our society. Citizens of the world are watching with wide-eyes tales of trauma and tragedy in our nation. Even in our Commonwealth, there are cries from communities that need our help, not our words.

In the face of the pandemic and protests, Kentucky State University has new possibilities. We are Thoroughbreds. We are a "Thoro" people of a pure "Bred" spirit. We are Kentucky State University.