

The recent turmoil set off by the horrific killing of George Floyd has created a value crisis for our nation and a clear-eyed reckoning with the long history of systemic racism in our country, including right here, in our own communities.

Like never before, a plurality of Americans are recognizing that the death of George Floyd, and so many Black people before him, are not isolated events attributable to racist individuals, but the predictable result of structural injustice embedded in many of our society's institutions, and not just law enforcement, but healthcare, housing, employment and education. Inequality is all around us, and each of us needs to take personal responsibility for acknowledging and rectifying the unjust distribution of benefits and burdens in our society.

As presidents in public higher education, we have a responsibility to confront the truth about our own institutions and address the structures of inequality within them. We acknowledge the personal histories and experiences of struggle, frustration, and sadness of Black, Indigenous, Latinx and other marginalized students at our institutions. We also recognize that this environment is taking a deep psychological and physical toll on our Black community members, including our students, staff and faculty and their families. Added to this is the fact that the recent incidences have unfolded against the backdrop of the coronavirus pandemic, which is also having a disproportionate impact on communities of color.

Higher education is one of the most powerful levers our society has to address inequality, empowering diverse individuals and communities to seize opportunities for economic and political equity that have been closed to them for most of our country's history. Now, more than ever, as we grapple with the financial emergencies created by COVID-19, our institutions must double down on delivering meaningful results instead of feel-good symbolism.

We must increase access for students of color and ensure they graduate at the same high rates as the students traditionally served by higher education. We need to listen more intentionally to our communities of color and make greater efforts to understand historical and currently lived experiences, and remove institutional barriers to their success. And, we must increase all students' understanding of the historical, political and structural contexts that have led to systemic racism in our country, a service we can provide to the public as well.

We have faith that scientists will discover a vaccine for COVID-19 and that financial markets and economies will recover. We have less faith, however, that the value crisis, and the "virus of racism" that has plagued this country for four centuries, will be so easily addressed. We cannot rely on a team of researchers with

special knowledge or power to save us. Instead, it will require all of us – especially those with the privilege of being able to look away – to persistently recognize racial injustice and refuse to accept it. If there is one message we should take away from the demonstrations condemning the death of George Floyd and the systemic injustice that pervades our society it is this: don't look away from the truth. Our discomfort, at what we have repeatedly failed to resolve as a country and within our higher education institutions, is the voice of conscience calling us to action.

Much of our community's ethnic diversity comes from the students, faculty, and staff of our higher education institutions. As a statement of solidarity, and also acknowledging that all of our institutions reside on the ancestral homelands of the Coastal Salish Peoples, we urge the citizens of Whatcom County to join us in creating and sustaining a community that empowers the success of our students of color. One of the most important ways to do that is by bringing awareness to our everyday interactions with people and businesses in our communities, and by reflecting on how we can proactively make a home that is inviting and welcoming for all.

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