

An Open Letter to Leadership @ UNC

I write with no small concern over the proposed plan to return to campus/work in the fall. I have been at Carolina since the spring of 2014, though I am no stranger to this place, as my mother received her MSLS in '61. I have been listening and watching for some attention to be paid to what a return to campus in the fall might mean for people of color, indigenous and intersectionally identified persons in our community. The roadmap urges us to “promote diversity, equity and inclusion,” and I believe that I participate in this practice each and every day. What is missing here is that we do not have a consistent *partner* in our collective endeavors to make Carolina a truly special place.

This roadmap does not come to us in a vacuum. Instead, it comes on the heels of serious ethical struggles on this campus in the last five years: HB2, a call to re-segregate our public bathrooms in this state and a prolonged struggle to speak to and contextualize our confederate past – one my grandmother, mother and step children participated in as witnesses every time they stepped through the gates. A tradition is that which endures and one of our Carolina traditions is also a public health crisis: racism.

Given the number of deaths in this state, let alone the nation, and the predictions from respected epidemiologists and the CDC, the virus will revisit us in the fall and it is predicted to be devastating. At this moment the plan moving forward is, at best, utilitarian. It proposes a return that makes several assumptions. It assumes that students returning to campus are a blank slate, not a population equally devastated and traumatized by a disease whose consequences that they can barely wrap their heads around. I have a hard time with that too, and I was at University during the onset of HIV. It misunderstands by omission the meaning of “health disparities.” When our students, faculty and staff start going to the hospital, they do not carry their biographies with them. Health disparities are predominately structural, but they are also about bias and simple research – some of it conducted on this campus – finds that when black women in particular go to the doctor, healthcare personnel do not listen to us. These issues deserve concrete answers, not platitudes. How will you sustain and grow the intellects of our most vulnerable undergraduate students, while not putting the health of our facilities personnel, office staff, graduate students or faculty at risk?

It is clear to me as a member of the Academic Council, that the faculty “own” the curriculum at Carolina. If this is the case, then we are also tasked with how best to bring this curriculum to our students. The four-pronged plan reduces faculty input through a mechanism for course delivery that actually hasn't been voted on by the full Council. Perhaps it is time for that meeting so that we can get concrete answers and truly interface this prong of the roadmap with serious mental and physical health concerns.

Every member of the faculty has either had implicit bias training, or access to it. One of the cornerstones of that training has been that we should always go into a departmental search with our eyes wide open and a plan on the table. Nothing increases the likelihood of discrimination more than the roadmap's plan for department chairs and business managers to access COVID related factors on a case-by-case basis. While we are being told that no one will be compelled to come back to campus (during a pandemic!), we are also being told that all requests for “accommodation” will not be met. Surely this is no way to “promote diversity, equity and inclusion.”

The roadmap is also written into a profound moment in our nation. The continued militarization of police on campus and off has led to black death. Period. We cannot ignore the fact that this roadmap puts the burden of “community standards” practices on our staff, graduate students and faculty. In the last five years we have attempted to use 5.2 million dollars to further militarize our University police and when that didn’t work, we out-sourced 2.5 million to a confederate group with paramilitary connections. Excuse me if I have no real faith in our ability to adequately adopt and practice “community standards.” There is a serious disregard for the importance of embodiment as we go about our day at work. Some people in our nation get the police called on them more often than others; some people react really badly – like Amy in Central Park – when an African-descended subject tells them what the “law” is; some of us don’t embody the law – only its transgression. How are we going to account for this as we move around trying to avoid *something that we cannot see*?

Give me a plan I can wrap my *intellect* around – I know how you feel about how I feel. Thank you. Now, I need a credible and ethical way forward.

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