Dear KU Community,

Earlier this month, over a thousand students, faculty members, staff persons, and administrators toured the Tunnel of Oppression. Presented by the Office of Multicultural Affairs, the Tunnel is an annual immersive experience of interactive exhibits. Participants engage with different forms of oppression associated with disabilities, economic class, body image, gender, gender expression, sexuality, immigration, race and ethnicity. This year, in what is believed to be the first time, the Office of the Provost invited KU’s leadership team to participate in the tour as a group.

We left the tour with decisions to make as individuals and as KU leaders – do we stand idle and tolerate people being treated in a discriminatory manner? Or do we assert our leadership and purposefully act to create greater justice in our part of the world and beyond? We choose the latter and we need you to join us.

We can start by understanding the meaning of oppression for us, our neighbors, and communities. What the Tunnel makes clear is that oppression is violence…and violence takes many forms. In this tour, for example, we experienced brutality visited upon children by police officers; CEOs and government officials choosing to poison the water in low-income neighborhoods; unprovoked viciousness toward queer, trans and gender non-conforming communities; families lying dead together in the aftermath of war; inadequate governmental responses to natural disasters in places such as Florida, Texas, and Puerto Rico. While these multiple visual scenes of cruelty and subjugation were disturbing, equally difficult was the collective debriefing discussion that followed. You see, even University administrators struggle with how to understand and do justice work. But we will not shy away from the challenge.

Let’s choose to pay attention. It’s true that hostility and disregard are part of our everyday fabric. As a global nation, we have been besieged
A new accountability

with news reports of sexual predators, substance abuse, mass shootings, police killings, and other gun-related deaths of adults, youth, and children. These are real. As evidence, we see killings in a Walmart parking lot, a Texas church, Las Vegas concert, New York bikeway, Topeka, downtown Lawrence, and even at sea. In the past year, the U.S. has witnessed elevated incidents of hate speech and related activities. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, 917 hate groups exist in the U.S. and, at this writing, nine are active in the State of Kansas. Like universities everywhere, KU is not immune. We have seen languages of terror scribbled on classroom walls, heard menacing words left on office voicemails, anonymous signage meant to incite our campus climate, and encountered unacceptable campus conduct. Acts of harm are pervasive and strain our ability to respond to every report and emerging news item and know all that is occurring. We must all seek to stay informed and learn. Learning includes developing an awareness of how our own backgrounds bias our perception of others. Decide to read and watch alternative news sources; ask questions of local, state, and national political leaders; and respectfully listen and reflect upon words shared by others in classrooms and professional workplaces.

What you can do today:
Use the newly created Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Calendar to find workshops, speakers, and other ways of becoming informed and engaged on campus. You can also enroll in courses that broaden your knowledge such as the many classes offered through the departments of African and African American Studies, American Studies, Indigenous Studies, and Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies.

Let’s hold ourselves accountable for what we do and what we tolerate. The annual Tunnel tour reminds us that oppression is not accidental. Even when it is not intentional and targeted, its impact is damaging nonetheless. Oppression’s harmful words and cruelty occur and persist because political leaders, executives, board members, administrators and managers, supervisors, school superintendents, directors, teachers, students and others make everyday decisions to stay silent, maintain ignorance, disbelieve, foster it and/or leave it to others to address. Oppression is part of the US system of higher education. It is embedded in the unfairness of financial need, disparities in campus housing, food insecurity, and rates of academic retention. You can choose to be a part of change.

What you can do today:
Join or create a student, faculty, or staff organization that values and works toward our common equity goals. Or engage with any of our offices, such as the Office of Multicultural Affairs, Center for Sexuality and Gender Diversity, and the Emily Taylor Center for Women and Gender Equity.
We can, and will, be better

Challenge your peers when divisive and hateful language is used and report biased behavior. Join the monthly Community Table, which offers free lunch and easy conversation with others from around the campus to support a network of care and belonging. Students can become peer educators, and faculty and staff can join the ranks of Social Justice Fellows.

Let’s acknowledge what we can do better. Hiding from our reality minimizes real concerns in our classroom experiences, living spaces, social interactions, and our overall KU learning, living, and work environments. It also negates the lived KU experiences for those minoritized and marginalized student, faculty, and staff populations that are persistently and disproportionately subject to varied forms of oppression and its harmful effects. Oppression hurts us all, some more than others.

What you can do today:
Read the recent KU Climate Survey results and allow what you learn to inform how you participate in the Jayhawk community.

Sometimes the weight of hardship makes it hard for us to get past the obstacles, but that is not a reason to stall progress. We can, and will, be better.

The Office of Diversity and Equity and other offices are working collaboratively to take significant steps forward. For example, we are busy building a more purposeful KU community of care that includes a Student One Stop, a resource to help students navigate our admittedly complex bureaucracy. In this past year, we began hosting graduate student socials to create a cross-campus professional and social network. We are enhancing resources for KU’s queer, trans and non-conforming gender community; undocumented students; students with disabilities; and those who are confronting food insecurity. We have elevated our Faculty and Staff Identity Councils; enriched professional development and advancement support for faculty and staff; and we are developing guidelines to hire a more diverse and inclusive faculty and staff.

I can tell you that as Vice Provost of Diversity and Equity, I am excited to work with you to think through past and current practices; revise and implement new ways of supporting students, faculty members, and staff persons to success; and become the model campus community of care that each of us expects and deserves. Transformation is difficult. It requires determination and patience. We will make mistakes along the way, but I’m willing to take the risk. I hope that you are, too.

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KU is an EO/AA institution.