November 14, 2016

To the John Jay College Community:

Days have passed since the results of our presidential election rocked the nation. I admit that, perhaps like many of you, I am still trying to come to an understanding of the outcome of the election. Let me share some of my thoughts. Because most political pundits and pollsters had not predicted that Donald Trump would be successful in his outsider quest to be elected president, his victory was unexpected and stunning. Because the campaign had been marked by such vitriol and anger directed at both candidates, it is hard to imagine how this deeply divided country can move forward. Bottom line: this is a very challenging time for our country.

My reactions to Tuesday’s results have also been shaped by the gracious remarks of President Obama and Secretary Clinton in the face of her defeat, and the commitment by President-elect Trump in his election night speech to bring our country together. All of them reminded us that our nation is committed to a smooth transfer of power and that this is a time for Americans to unite for the common cause of our democracy.

But I also recognize that underlying these sentiments is the bitter and troubling reality that many members of the John Jay community are deeply troubled by these election results. In my discussions with students, faculty and staff, I have been struck by the level of fear, anger, shock and depression experienced by our many in our community. The shock waves following the election ripple across our campus and touch many sectors – including undocumented students worried about their future and the risk of deportation; immigrants troubled by the campaign’s anti-immigrant rhetoric; Jews, Muslims, Latinos, African-Americans and members of the LGBT community who feel they have been targeted by hateful speech; and women and men concerned about the misogynistic tenor of the discourse. Many in our community are worried about the impact of the election on the direction of the Supreme Court, our foreign policy, the federal government’s support for improved police-community relations, the nation’s long-standing struggle for racial equality and America’s standing in the world.

I hasten to point out that these fears and concerns are not universally shared within the John Jay community. Many of our students, faculty, staff and alumni supported the candidacy of Donald Trump and are celebrating his victory. For them, the election results represent an important change in our country’s politics and a chance for implementation of new
policies. This observation underscores two very important obligations we must embrace. First, we must remember that our diversity as a community is also a political diversity. It is incumbent on all of us to provide respectful opportunities to bring all voices into our discussions. Stated differently, it would be inconsistent with our values as an academic institution to stifle dissenting views. Members of the John Jay community who supported President-elect Trump also need to feel that their college provides an environment where their voices can be heard and they can celebrate their victory. As an academic institution, John Jay should be committed to a sustained discourse that creates a deeper understanding of the dynamics that led to this electoral result and the implications for the future. In particular, we owe this to our students.

The second obligation stems from our commitment to our Constitution: we must respect the outcome of this election, support and celebrate the peaceful transfer of power, and work through our democratic institutions to advance the well-being of our nation. This obligation does not preclude opposition to the policies of the new Administration. Indeed, our history illustrates that the forces of opposition, inside and outside government, have been necessary to advancing the ideals of our country. Again, we owe it to our students to help them learn from history and understand the political forces that determined this historic election result so they are better equipped to shape their future.

Yet, notwithstanding these overarching obligations, we still must recognize the level of pain, disorientation and anger in our community. I was pleased to see that we opened our Counseling Center to provide support for individuals having difficulty coming to terms with this new reality. I applaud those leaders of our community who have created opportunities for students, faculty and staff to come together to process those emotions. I encourage you to continue to find ways to reach out to those you care about. These discussions can occur at the level of academic departments, student clubs, staff meetings, and academic programs. These discussions are sometime best carried out at an informal level, over lunch, in the hallway, during community hour and on the subway ride home. This is a time to ask a friend or colleague, “How are you doing?” This is what a strong community does. Just as we celebrate together during times of joy, we hold each other closer during times of pain.

I also think it would be good for our community to come together at the college level for an open discussion about this moment in our nation’s history and how the election has affected our college. I am inviting you to come to a forum for this purpose tomorrow, Tuesday November 15, during community hour (1:40-2:55) in Room L.61NB. I have asked Vice President Cook-Francis to facilitate a dialogue in which community members of all perspectives can share in a safe and judgment-free environment how the election has affected them personally. If there is anything that recent months reveal it is that we need more understanding and empathy between ourselves. I would like us at John Jay to model that effort.

As I noted, like many of you I have been wrestling with my personal reactions to the election results. In the days since Tuesday, I have been reflecting on the importance of reaffirming the mission of our college during these unprecedented times. We should, of course, underscore the fact that our academic mission has special meaning now – to respect differing points of view, to develop deeper understandings of these dynamics in our country, and especially to prepare our students for their role as citizens of the world. But John Jay is different from other academic institutions. We are committed to the cause of justice. This mission carries weighty obligations now. We must find ways to reaffirm our commitment to all the dimensions of justice that are found on the walls of our college and play out in our classrooms, research centers, student activities, curricular offerings, research projects, art exhibitions and public statements – racial
justice, gender justice, environmental justice, international justice, criminal justice, social justice, economic justice, and others. No other institution can claim this commitment to justice, broadly defined. For that reason, John Jay has a special obligation to dig deep, reaffirm our core values, and find ways to advance the common good.

Sincerely,

Jeremy Travis
President