




PRAIRIE VIEW A&M UNIVERSITY

A Member of the Texas A&M University System

MEMORANDUM

To: PVAMU Campus Community

From: Ruth J. Simmons 
President

Date: June 1, 2020

Re: President Simmons' Message to the PVAMU Community Regarding the Death of George Floyd

I write to you today out of a profound sense of apprehension about what the future could hold for our students, our community and the nation. I know that, as an educational leader, I am expected to demonstrate hopefulness at all times but the events of the last days have moved and dismayed me in unexpected ways. At watershed moments such as this, I've concluded that it is better to be forthright for how else are we to advance the cause of truth and justice if we fail to be honest with ourselves? I want to offer today what my reflection about these events and my past experience tell me we should do in these circumstances.

The rarity of the confluence of factors at play today that threaten our well-being is undeniable. We are in the midst of a public health emergency that had already upended our lives in numerous ways with the interruption of the school year, the closure of businesses, an unprecedented level of unemployment, supply chain issues affecting essential and sometimes life-saving supplies, an economic outlook suggesting a slow recovery, and the potential for social instability. The stark brutality of the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis has further deepened the crisis in the country and reawakened a sense of fear and outrage across the world and especially among African Americans who recognize the crime as part and parcel of the reality that they endure every day.

As president of Prairie View, I fear for our students. Hopeful and aspiring, how will they react to the damning narrative of recent instances of African American men and women betrayed by the history of the country they love? How will their futures be affected by the events unfolding across the country? Will those who are African American, Latino, Asian, gay, bisexual and transgender be ever afraid to encounter police as they go about their lawful activities? Will our white students, faculty and staff understand their duty and opportunity in such a time as this?

These and similar questions have kept me awake through these tumultuous days. However, it has been my practice for all of my career to confront problems by asking what can be done. In that regard, I would like to take meaningful steps to protect the future of our students, to instill a hopefulness in our steps, and to move beyond merely making empathetic noises to proactive steps to reclaim our sense of direction as an historically black university. Our faith and identity as a community kept us moving forward through some of the most disheartening periods in the country's history. Now we must call upon that identity to give us guidance and succor in the coming period. In keeping with our mission and our duty to our students, we must ask ourselves what can we do to advance understanding of the impact of discrimination on the health of the country? I suggest several things.

1. **We must cease equivocation about the root causes of the current social upheaval that divides the country.**

Starting as soon as the multi-layered process of securing approval will allow, we must require that all students entering Prairie View A&M University take a course on the History of Race and Class in the United States. While one course will never be a panacea, it can serve to ground our students in the reality of their lives and help them better navigate how to cope with the often confusing treatment they may encounter in the future. It can also help them avoid personal behavior that is complicit in holding themselves back from the fullness of their abilities. Much work has been done on the long term psychological effects of racism, including its effect on academic performance. Our students, no matter their major or their race, should understand the impact of the racialized history of the United States on their personal as well as professional lives.

2. **Courageous members of our community who have advocated and worked on behalf of justice for all peoples should be acknowledged as models** for our students seeking answers for how they might shape a productive life. In this regard, we will establish

- An **Activist in Residence** position that brings individuals to campus who have made a difference in casting light on or solving systemic social problems; and
- **A Sandra Bland/Robbie Tolan Award** that is awarded annually to such activists and that acknowledges important work to increase understanding in the area of criminal justice reform. Sandra Bland died tragically in the Waller County jail following an arrest for a traffic stop. Robbie Tolan, unarmed and mistaken for a car thief, was shot by police in the driveway of his home. Both incidents and the lives of both Bland and Tolan, Prairie View graduates, have much to teach our students.

3. **On-going attention to the role the University is obligated to play to make important contributions to the advancement of solutions for the persistent issue of racism and discrimination.** The legacy of Prairie View cries out for active on-going engagement in this issue. Our students must not bear the sole burden for addressing voter suppression, police misconduct, discrimination and other persistent ills. The University must embrace its role in helping to shape policies that advance positive change in these domains. Under the Offices of Student Affairs and Community Affairs, I will ask that a standing Committee be created to recommend steps that the University can take to address persistent societal inequities.
4. **Subject to System, Board of Regents and Coordinating Board approval, we will propose the establishment of a Center for Race and Justice under the rubric of African American Studies.** Led by Professor Melanye Price, the purpose of the Center will be to encourage teaching and scholarship that contributes positively to overturning systemic biases that impede the ability of minorities and other groups to be accorded their full rights under the U.S. Constitution. A substantial gift has already been pledged to support this work.

Today's events call upon us to take action. Not one-time action but action that can have an impact on our community over time. For too long, we have been content to have others dictate the limits of our ability to act: individuals who call for a different course of action, those who are concerned about controversy, those who advocate "staying in our lane." While the proposed measures may not in the end have the desired impact, we will by instituting them affirm to our students that we are awake, that we are concerned for their future, and that we are the Prairie View of our lineage. Fighting racism and discrimination and upholding justice must always be among our highest callings.

Please reach out in solidarity to others, use your voice in the service of justice, be safe and, where possible, assure the safety of others. Most of all support the efforts of this university to be the place that it can and must aspire to be.

My thoughts are with you all during these days of trial.