



Confronting the U.S. racism plague during a pandemic

Students, faculty, and staff,

For four long months, the news was dominated by the COVID-19 pandemic. After three murders of African Americans in Louisville, Georgia, and Minneapolis, all that has changed. What it is like to be black in America has once again reared its ugly head and we must confront the very graphic reality of how bad things remain. These events have led to peaceful protests across the country and in cities around the world, but we have also witnessed violent confrontations between police and protesters. Dr. King once explicitly noted in a 1967 speech at Stanford, “A riot is the language of the unheard.”

While communities seek to quell the violence and hopefully respond to the questions and demands of our citizenry, we in academia may participate in many different ways both professionally and as community residents. We are all profoundly impacted by the plight of our communities and we recognize the need for significant changes in policies and behaviors.

We now find ourselves in a situation where three major crises have converged upon us at once: (1) the COVID-19 pandemic, (2) the subsequent economic crash, and (3) the social unrest, which is driven by 400 years of racist institutional policies and aggregate individual behavior—each differentially impact people of color. In every one of these events, there have been critical mistakes made; different decisions could have eased the stress and improved outcomes. Ultimately, we as individuals are responsible for holding our leaders accountable and doing what we can to change systems, structures, policies, and mindsets. The impact of our collective failure to adequately do so is now described daily in our newspapers and constantly on television and in social media.

Never in my lifetime have the significance of key elections loomed so large in the future of our community and country. While we must continue to take advantage of the new investment in our public health infrastructure in response to coronavirus, we also must engage in the political processes playing out, as this too will directly affect population health, equity, and social justice issues. I encourage each of you to take up that gauntlet and advance a common good agenda.

At SPHIS, our vision as a school of public health is to be a leader in advancing health equity and social justice to ensure optimal health and well-being for all. We are advocates. Our faculty, staff, students, alumni and partners support changes to structural factors to improve opportunities, especially for marginalized populations. We value equity and inclusion. Recognizing that advantages and barriers exist and that we do not all start from the same place, we seek to cultivate a community where everyone is safe, welcome, valued, and has access to the same opportunities.

We have developed several new courses that directly address the COVID-19 pandemic, its disparate economic impacts, and the social justice issues that plague our communities. In other courses, we will be infusing new material to ensure that we are engaged in discussions about these critical issues. We are also receptive to providing new forums for those interested in establishing a dialogue. Please share any ideas where we can be helpful to melissa.schreck@louisville.edu. The Dean’s Office is also

investigating how we can best create a space (maybe Teams) for sharing links or clips or quotes—additional information on this tool will follow soon. My hope is that this might be of use or interest as we struggle with how best to process all this in our own way while contemplating our individual strategies to contribute to a better tomorrow.

Be healthy, be safe, be engaged—for if we are not engaged in our own ways, we are complicit in the systemic support of our country's racist ways and lack of preparedness.

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