



SAINT LOUIS  
UNIVERSITY™

— EST. 1818 —

SCHOOL OF LAW

100 North Tucker Boulevard  
St. Louis, MO 63101-1930

[law.slu.edu](http://law.slu.edu)

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June 8, 2020

Dear students,

It is two weeks since George Floyd was violently killed by a Minneapolis police officer with the participation of three additional MPD officers. The grieving continues. The rage continues. Nonviolent protests, demanding justice, continue across the country. The demands are quite simple, though heart-wrenching: among others, “Justice for George Floyd,” “Black Lives Matter,” and “STOP KILLING US.” Yet, we have seen horrifying responses to those protests, and we have only seen those that have been captured on video.

It’s also true that there have been troubling events that have occurred after dark, including property damage and conflict. One night last week in St. Louis was particularly violent. I certainly don’t condone or encourage that. The death of Capt. David Dorn is tragic; it should never have happened. My heart breaks for his family. As I mentioned a week ago, we must remain focused on the flashpoint that brought us to this moment: the violent killing of another man simply for having been born Black at the hands of a man given a badge and a gun by the state. It is also critically important to recognize that the vast majority of the protesters are nonviolent. I hear their voices saying they want justice; they want equity; they just want to live. They are not engaging in the violent activity taking place after dark. Conflating the two is, at best, lazy and irresponsible. But at its ugliest, it is an intentional effort to sabotage the important work of seeking racial equity, justice and an end to violence against Black lives.

While institutionalized racism, systemic oppression, and acts of violence against Black bodies are nothing new, the blatant, intentional nature of the violence captured on video in recent weeks, including the responses to many protests and protesters, and the impunity with which the Minneapolis police officers and other law enforcement officials have acted, has understandably brought forth heightened anger, anxiety, and exhaustion. It should be clear to all of us by now that this isn’t about a few bad apples; this is a crisis of injustice 400 years in the making.

It was important for me to begin this message to you by acknowledging that. It is important that society – and especially white folks in positions of power – be more honest about racism in America.

But I write today with a different set of purposes: first, to acknowledge that I have heard you, and second, to outline some actions we will take.

Higher purpose. Greater good.



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Over the past week, I have heard from many of you who have shared statements like the following: “These last couple days have almost been unbearable.” “I’m exhausted.” “I’m sad, scared, stressed, and angry.”

I have heard from many of you who were willing to share your fears, your frustration and your rage. I have heard from some of you who wished to offer ideas and suggestions. I have also heard from those of you who are not satisfied with the work that SLU LAW as an institution has done in pursuit of diversity, equity and inclusion – and those of you who are also not satisfied with the work I have done in my role as dean.

It is important to me to share with you that I am also not satisfied. I have not done enough. I pledge to you to try harder to do more. And I want you to know that I am grateful for your honesty, your courage, and your willingness to stand up and be heard.

As we continue to call for an end to police brutality, institutionalized racism and the oppression that ripples throughout society, we must also mind our own house. One student wrote the following to me: “If the system is flawed, and this institution is a part of it, what can be done? What should be done? In any successful institution, there will always be those who do not want change, for their benefit is too great for themselves to willingly give it up.”

The legal profession is overwhelmingly white. The legal academy is overwhelmingly white. SLU LAW, a Jesuit law school located within the city of St. Louis, is overwhelmingly white, and that is not acceptable. We should have significantly more Black faculty members than we do. Period. I will offer no explanations, justifications, or excuses. To date, we have failed in that regard. We must admit it, we must own it, and we must do better.

Similarly, positions of influence within the legal profession – judgeships, law firm managing partner roles, bar leadership, law school leadership – continue to be dominated by white folks. There are four law school deans in the State of Missouri; each of us is white. In fact, every dean in the history of this law school has been white. Is this because only white people can lead law schools? We all know that that is not the case. We therefore must wrestle with the actual causes for it. The causes that make it impossible for BIPOC folks to have the same opportunities that I have had are the same set of underlying causes that have led to violence against Black lives. In our setting, the result is that the legal academy and the legal profession are not accessible to and simply do not represent the people whose rights and liberties we have a duty to defend and protect. That is a serious problem.

So, what can we do? I confess to you that I have felt helpless at times. I can only imagine how many of you must feel. And I do not pretend to have the answers. For that reason and others, I have attempted to focus on listening



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to, learning from, and amplifying Black voices, especially over the past two weeks, and I'm going to continue to do that. But I also know that there are things each of us can do, and I feel the urgency of this moment. There are things white folks ought to do to understand better what our BIPOC colleagues, friends, neighbors and classmates experience every day. There are things all of us can do to fight institutionalized racism. And there are things that the institution simply must do.

Last week, when I recirculated my message of last Sunday, I said that words are not enough. I suggested that thoughts and prayers, while important and valuable, are also not nearly enough. Today, I therefore also write to offer some concrete actions that we will undertake.

Some of the following actions reflect specific suggestions that have been shared with me by some of you, for which I am grateful. This is not an exhaustive list, but it offers some sense for some of the actions we plan to pursue.

- We will soon share anti-racism resources that every member of this community who would like to deepen their understanding of racial injustice can use. This will include films, books, and social media platforms. It is important for all of us – students, faculty, and staff – to take the time to educate ourselves and stay informed.
- We will finalize a more comprehensive diversity hiring plan, which we will implement.
- We will more aggressively pursue opportunities to hire adjunct faculty members who will enhance the diversity of the law school, and we will then work to make sure they feel supported and included.
- We will implement diversity pipeline programs, including programs that reach younger audiences – in high school and even earlier.
- We will prioritize fundraising for scholarships that will support diversity in the student body.
- We will strengthen the School of Law's connections with the African American Studies Program and with the Office of Diversity and Community Engagement on the main campus to identify additional opportunities, events and resources likely to be of interest to our community.
- We will establish this summer a Diversity and Equity Council, made up primarily of BIPOC alumni, but also including students and members of the faculty and staff. I will consult the Council regularly, will listen to the Council, and will heed the advice of the Council.
- We will work to establish and support a better-connected network of Black alumni, and we will create opportunities for students to engage with that network.
- We will review our curriculum and find ways that we can enhance the diversity and equity aspects of the curriculum we offer.



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- We will offer an educational speaker series that includes but is not limited to lawyers, including speakers who are likely to be of interest to the non-legal community, to bring the community into Scott Hall.
- And this is not all that we will do.

I make this pledge to you today, and I will work hard to fulfill it. My requests to you are twofold: that we work together, and that you hold me accountable.

No justice; no peace.

Know justice; know peace.

I pray for justice.

Bill Johnson  
Dean, SLU LAW