

The Nation takes a Collective Breath

A Message from The President of Pittsburgh Technical College

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Dear PTC Community,

The right words and actions hold tremendous value and power in healing and transforming a nation. As Colleges and Universities from around the world release strong and heartfelt statements on the continued need for social justice, I stand with them on the importance and necessity of this call to action.

I join also with leaders requesting the elevation of the current level of discourse, coupled with the required actions to enact lasting change, during a moment when the world feels as if it can't breathe.

As we take a collective breath, to clear the air tainted with the haze of tear gas and confusion, as some grapple with a lack of understanding of the historic relevance of this moment, and others bemoaned by a wound in the heart as they witnessed the senseless murder in Minneapolis of George Floyd, an unarmed man, at the hands and knees of those sworn to serve and protect.

These are indeed trying times and a change is in the air. I am so very proud of the hundreds of thousands of peaceful protestors who are outraged by white supremacy, police brutality, systemic racism and violence, and the many other injustices facing the Black community, people of color more broadly, and different marginalized identities.

We must not turn away, nor should we. We must breathe in the pain of this moment. It is our obligation. We must stand and face what is before us and unite in the hope and work of a better tomorrow. A tomorrow where all men and women respect the humanity of others and the dignity of all life.

I waited and reflected on when to speak and what to say. I carefully considered each thought, each word, aware of the myriad of reactions they may generate.

As the President of Pittsburgh Technical College, where we are committed to serving all students and where we embrace accountability, excellence, diversity and inclusion, integrity, and learner centeredness as core values, this communication is an expression of my duty to the community to which we all belong.

For days, I have watched and listened and I have felt. For days, I have received notes, texts and emails, checking on me, expressing their love for both me, my husband, a retired Army and US Capital Police Officer, and my family during this unprecedented time of unrest in our country. Several people have asked, "What can I do to make change happen and to make a difference?"

These messages are from a diverse collection of caring souls, trying to understand the profound seriousness of this time, a time when questions remain about the state of Black America. My answer to what we can do to make a difference is simple. Look and listen, open your eyes and hearts and stand for humanity and social justice.

As protest continue across the nation and around the world, throughout Europe, in England, Paris, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, Brazil, China, and the Continent of Africa, resounding cries ring out for a new normal, a new way of being; this is a universal plea.

This period is a critical reflection point in our national history, and we must not look away. We must breathe in its significance for humanity, and we must seize the opportunity to seed a permanent shift and release fear for a higher standard.

For those struggling to understand the cries in the wind, imagine if you can, your child or even pet, with a knee placed firmly in the center of their necks for eight minutes and forty-six seconds, and when they became unresponsive, that very same knee, remained and applied force for another two minutes. As horrible as this is to even imagine, this is what occurred in Minneapolis.

This is the reason why America and our world cries. The cries are for an even more uncertain future, the cries are because a critical mass of humanity gasps in unison as we felt the pain of this unprecedented reflection point, where our world witnessed together, repeatedly, a moment when humanity could not breathe. In that moment, the world understood that not responding was not an option. It became clear at that moment that the response needed to be urgent and insistent.

I understand that some will continue to find this hard to understand, as this may not be your lived experience and that even the response and outcry is puzzling and confusing. These concerns are real; the fears and abuses are real; these are the lived experience for many and have been an integral component of too many communities for far too long, perpetuated by systems of bias and injustice.

Over the past several months, I have taken special care to communicate all aspects of our College's response to COVID-19 and its overall impact on our college community and, most importantly, to check on your well-being, to encourage our forward movement and to share how truly amazing our small but

mighty community is. We are poised for even greater things ahead as we reimagine our institution and community post COVID19.

As an institution of higher learning, we will continue to embrace our responsibility to foster equity and inclusion for all and to stand against intolerance and hatred in any form. The safety of our students, faculty and staff will remain the highest priority, and our campus will unequivocally strive to be an environment where individuals are valued and nurtured in their pursuits.

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This fundamental right, the “pursuit of happiness” as noted in the Declaration of Independence, supports the freedom of all men and women to freely pursue joy and to live a life of their design, not infringing on the rights of others.

I encourage our students to lead and to be a generation of hope. I believe that you see the world as it can be, with loving eyes and open hearts. We need you to work with us to correct the errors of the past, to shine light in the dimly lit places and to speak for humanity when we grow silent. If you are struggling to make sense of the chaos, I encourage you to reach out to a friend, a family member, a faculty member or our campus counseling service. And please know, I am always here for you.

While many of us are collectively experiencing levels of pain and loss, as humanity appears to hold its collective breath, I am reminded of two distinct quotes from other moments in our world’s history, when pain consumed the lives of so many, as well.

The first is Anne Frank, the adolescent who chronicled her life as a Jew in Nazi Germany, who made every effort to look for the beauty in chaos undefined, when she said, “I don’t think of all the misery, but the beauty that still remains.” The other is a powerful quote from James Baldwin, the American essayist, who reminded us that, from his point of view, “No label, no slogan, no party, no skin color, and indeed no religion is more important than the human being.”

To this end, I ask you to please join me in whispering a prayer and take a moment of silence for George Floyd, his family, and our nation; so that together we can work toward finding the beauty and strength required to make the bold and lasting changes our nation and world so desperately needs.

Many of our students, as well as many of us, may feel as if these issues are impossible to solve, I ask that we not give in to a riptide of hopelessness. I ask that we work together to improve our campus and our world.

As we cross that bridge we continue to build, let us pledge to also build as a collective, an inclusive environment that recognizes and respects people of all backgrounds and experiences. Pittsburgh Technical College is committed to being a part of the solution and will strive to ensure our college is a welcoming and supportive environment for all. I remain committed to this and encourage you to do your part to eliminate racism wherever it exists.

Our Way Forward

1. Pittsburgh Technical College will hire a Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Officer, as a component of The Office of The President, to develop and implement a college-wide, education, training and development program, aligned with performance reviews.
2. Pittsburgh Technical College will establish a new Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Taskforce to recommend key strategies for both virtual and on-the-ground training to support our ongoing awareness and understanding of systemic issues impacting the success and progression of diverse students, faculty and staff.
3. Pittsburgh Technical College will seek to better understand the divisions that may exist and communicate in a manner that enables the broader community to engage.
4. Pittsburgh Technical College will expand its outreach and commitment to disenfranchised communities and develop academic and social support systems to enable their greater success.
5. Pittsburgh Technical College will commit to expanding the diversity of its faculty, staff and students.
6. Pittsburgh Technical College will provide opportunities for increased dialogue and counseling to support our community in better understanding and processing issues. If you are experiencing heightened anxiety, fear, or other reactions to recent events, please contact Counseling Services at 1-800-647-3327.
7. Pittsburgh Technical College will seek to serve as a role model and discover new ways to address the discrimination and racism that persist in our country and on campuses across the nation.

I believe that Pittsburgh Technical College can influence the lives of our community for the better. We are committed to ensuring that PTC is a campus environment where all people — students, faculty, professional staff, and guests feel welcome and safe to be themselves.

Join me in taking our next step forward.

Academically yours,



Alicia B. Harvey-Smith, Ph.D.
President/CEO