



University of Pittsburgh

Division of Student Affairs

738 William Pitt Union
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 15260
412-648-1006

March 14, 2016

Dear Pitt Community:

Two weeks ago, a student organization hosted a speaker whom some members of our campus community found offensive. This is not the first time the University has faced this issue. However, this event provided us with another opportunity to reflect on our University's core values and the importance of free speech in order to forge a positive path forward as a united community.

Our values at the University of Pittsburgh are clear. Our Pitt Promise unequivocally reflects our commitment to civility. We are committed to cultivating an environment of mutual respect, concern for others, diversity, inclusion, and academic integrity. These core values are the bedrock of our community.

As one of the nation's oldest academic institutions, our mission is to transmit knowledge across generations to make our world a better place for those who follow. As a university, one of our roles is to foster conversations on difficult topics that may be polarizing or divisive, and to encourage discussion of viewpoints that are unpopular. These conversations can be and indeed sometimes are impassioned, uncomfortable and objectionable for those involved. We do this because we are an academic institution whose purpose is to advance learning through the extension of the frontiers of knowledge and creative endeavor. We cannot learn—and we certainly cannot grow—if we listen only to people whose viewpoints reflect our own. To do so would also thwart our efforts to help students learn how to engage with controversial subject matter as part of the training to be contributing citizens.

Beyond this, our University affirms the First Amendment rights of students, faculty, and staff to engage in discussion, make inquiries, exchange thoughts and opinions, and sponsor speakers of their choice, in accordance with the guarantees of the law and our University policies. Indeed, active engagement and freedom of expression on college campuses has resulted in some of the most profound social and political change in our country.

From time to time, people are invited to our campus to express their point of view which may or may not align with all of Pitt's core values. Consistent with the University's mission, and with the law, the University permits such speech. However, this should not be construed as an implicit or explicit endorsement of any viewpoint expressed. It also shall not negate our core institutional values.

As our community continues to evolve, I believe that we all have a responsibility to engage with each other in ways that help us grow as we strive to see each other and the world from a more reasoned perspective. The reconciliation of disparate viewpoints is inherently challenging, and intellectual conflict is to be expected. In response to unpopular or offensive viewpoints, I encourage members of our campus community to exercise their own rights, including the right to voice dissent through vigorous debate, intellectual scrutiny, and lawful protest. The University will take appropriate steps, up to and including discipline and/or legal action, to address any member of our University community or visitor who violates University policy or the law.

Although society has made great strides, daily events remind us that there is much work to be done to make our world a more tolerant, respectful, empathetic, and inclusive place. When our University's core values are challenged, I encourage students, faculty, and staff to stand together in solidarity, defend our rights, and work to enlighten hearts and minds in ways that are distinctive to our University.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Kenyon R. Bonner".

Kenyon R. Bonner
Vice Provost and Dean of Students