

To the SUNY Community:

As so many of you have, I viewed the killing of George Floyd by the police—without reason, without due process, and without a shred of humanity—with a sense of both outrage and helplessness.

While we mourn this senseless cruelty to one man, protestors around the country are reminding us that what we just have witnessed is, in fact, an example of systemic racism in the United States. Despite the beauty of our Constitution and the Bill of Rights, the force of law is still regularly applied unequally and with malicious and disproportionate impact on people that are black, brown and LGBTQ.

The injustice is intolerable, and it is compounding the anguish being caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic crisis that has followed. It is easy to feel that our nation is experiencing an existential crisis.

What, can we, as an academic community, do in this moment of horror? Let me assure you that together and with a little focus on an unyielding moral compass, we are neither hopeless nor helpless.

We can't instantly remake our divided society or divisive politics.

But we can demonstrate some of the same resolve and sheer focus on what's right that this community has demonstrated in such abundance during the pandemic.

In fact, the compassion, bravery, and ingenuity SUNY people have recently shown in battling COVID-19 gives me hope that there might be answers to our societal miseries.

At SUNY, we were founded in 1948 in part to eliminate discrimination in higher ed, and our mission requires us to be “fully representative of all segments of the population.” When we see something that disadvantages students on the basis of race, ethnicity, economic hardship or gender, we fix it—including a huge gap between the demographics of our students and the faculty who teach and mentor them. With PRODiG—Promoting Recruitment Opportunities for Diversity and Inclusive Growth—we set a goal last year of hiring 1000 underrepresented minority faculty and women in STEM by 2030, and we are off to a great start.

We are a community that does its best to welcome all, to offer opportunity to all, and to understand that there is power in embracing our differences and joining forces to do great things. At its best, the United States, too, stands for equality of opportunity. At its worst, it refuses to recognize and repair the history of slavery and the mistreatment of minorities of all kinds.

As an academic community that educates hundreds of thousands of young people every year, we have an opportunity to explore and communicate both the worst and the best of history, and to shape new generations of citizens whose impulses to solve problems, to use their knowledge to help others, and to serve the greater good no matter the personal costs, can help us to build a more just and caring world and ensure that George Floyd will not have died in vain.

Sincerely yours,

Kristina M. Johnson