

March 6, 2013

Open Letter to the Emory University Community:

We, the undersigned faculty members of the English department, are writing to express our solidarity with those in our campus community—faculty, students, staff, and alumni—who have expressed outrage, dismay, and bewilderment at President Wagner’s recent Emory Magazine column “As American as . . . Compromise.” (Many of our junior and untenured colleagues, as well as staff members, wanted to sign this letter, but out of a shared sense of caution, we have restricted endorsement only to those who enjoy the privileges – and responsibilities – of tenure or senior faculty standing.)

The intellectual and moral shortcomings of President Wagner’s argument have been well dissected by others (and even, to a degree, by President Wagner himself). Beyond such analyses, the damage done to the university has been substantive. In the short term, we anticipate adverse consequences for the recruitment of faculty members and top-tier students. Serious academics will no doubt pause to question whether Emory is a suitable environment in which to pursue liberal arts training that promotes respect based on informed critical reasoning.

During this graduate admissions season, we have had to write to our admitted students to reassure them that President Wagner’s article in no way reflects our values, nor should it affect their training. Indeed, we have heard back from many of them that the article has been on their minds as they deliberate about whether to come to Emory rather than to accept other, highly competitive offers. One prospective student wrote back, “To call [the article] distasteful would be putting it lightly. Nevertheless, I am glad to hear that the Emory faculty has overwhelmingly condemned it.” Many prospective undergraduates and their families no doubt will share similar concerns.

Over the longer term, we foresee an enduring rift between our university’s presidential administration and the students, faculty, staff, and alumni whom his office is meant to represent nationally and internationally. As we have faced painful and awkward questions about our president from colleagues around the country, as well as from students in our classrooms, we have struggled to find constructive ways to address what the *New York Times*’ headline proclaimed as a reopening of racial wounds at Emory. Nevertheless, a fundamental trust has been broken: namely, the faith that even when we disagree with our leaders, we believe that their decisions are based on sound reasoning, good judgment, and compassion.

The President has put himself – and us – in an untenable position by sending out an indefensible message in the name of our university. His apologies and public self-scrutiny have been understandable in response to the condemnations of his piece here on campus and in the national media. They do little, however, to mitigate the devastating impact of the original statement. Therefore, we ask that Emory’s Board of Trustees reflect deeply on what accountability for such damages would entail from an ethically engaged university.

Sincerely,

Deepika Bahri

Martine Brownley

Patricia Cahill

Jonathan Goldberg

Jim Grimsley

Geraldine Higgins

Lawrence Jackson

Abdul JanMohamed

John Johnston

Heather Julien

Walter Kalaidjian

Barbara Ladd

Valerie Loichot

Michael Moon

James Morey

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