



June 9, 2020

Dear members of the Mansfield campus community,

As part of the flagship-land grant university in Ohio and as a public institution whose ultimate mission is to serve the public good by educating our students for citizenship (our official motto is “*Disciplina in Civitatem*”), we have a duty to think deeply about and help lead on challenging issues such as those raised by the tragic deaths of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor and so many others throughout the appalling four-hundred-year history of racial injustice that is part of our inheritance as Americans. Toni Morrison, one of our nation’s greatest luminaries, teaches us to remain profoundly troubled by this history and how it continues to shape our present time: in her famous masterpiece, *Beloved*, Morrison represents slavery and its legacy as a ghost that haunts us in the sense that it cannot be dispelled or ignored but also cannot be fully remembered or even adequately addressed. It is in this spirit that I write to you today about the need for us as a community to be troubled by the horrific racial violence we have witnessed recently, and to recognize in that violence the ongoing effects of our nation’s long history of racial injustice.

Too often, we slip into bad habits of thought by which we oversimplify our relationship to and responsibility for this history of racial injustice and its legacy in the present day. First, we tend to think in terms of an unreflective and reductive individualism whereby we attempt to abstract individual people and events from their larger contexts. A perpetrator of racial violence, we reassure ourselves, is merely a “bad apple,” an isolated case of someone who made bad decisions; we thereby ignore how individuals and their choices are shaped by cultural contexts, by the communities and larger society in which we live and were raised. We thereby also fail to see larger historical patterns, which means that we fail to appreciate the true scope of the problem. This, in turn, allows us to feel naively surprised when racial violence recurs.

Second, in keeping with this first bad habit of thought, we tend to think the word *racist* refers only to people who are deliberately and hatefully racist. We reassure ourselves, “I am not a racist because I don’t hurt other people; I’m a good person.” We thereby let ourselves off the hook, ignoring how we are part of a culture that treats people unequally.

These bad habits of thought oversimplify both the problems we face and the solutions we consider possible. My fervent hope is that the horrific events of recent weeks help all of us develop better habits of thought so that we can more fully recognize the historical scope and complexity of racial injustice as well as the complicity, even if unconscious, of those of us who are protected from such injustice.

We can and must do better.

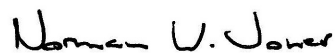
As members of The Ohio State University, we have a duty and a privilege to raise awareness, educate, and help bring together different voices and perspectives on such issues of civic importance in the spirit of the Latin root of “university,” *universitas*, meaning “the whole.” We can help build bridges across the virulent divides in our society and help more people understand why racial injustice is everyone’s problem.

As members of the Mansfield campus community, we have a special duty and privilege also to dedicate ourselves to student success as a matter of social justice. We are proud to serve a diverse group of students, and we are proud that we are helping increase the rates of student success for African American students, first-generation students, and Pell students on our campus. Higher education should function not as a gatekeeper but as a catalyst for students. Ohio State Mansfield exemplifies this ideal.

Yet we remain troubled, as all of us should remain troubled, by the ongoing legacy of racial injustice. Together, we as a campus will focus next fall on how we can continue to create a more inclusive learning environment for our students and employees. Some of the most important ways we can make our campus more inclusive – virtually as well as in person – are through actions we take every day. Each one of us can make daily choices that will help our campus be more inclusive for students, staff, and faculty. Whether we succeed will depend on whether we can sustain our commitment to inclusive excellence not just for a week or a month but for good, day in and day out, even when other important issues vie for our attention.

I am deeply grateful to work for a campus and a university dedicated to this vision and these values, and I am deeply grateful to serve you as we work together to create a more just and equitable society.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Norman U. Jones". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Norman Jones, Ph.D.
Dean and Director
Professor of English