JULY 12, 2016

A Message to the Price School Community:

On July 11, 1977, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was posthumously awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom -- the highest civilian honor in the U.S. We often turn to his words and example in times of division and strife. Dr. King once noted that mankind's survival is dependent upon our ability to solve the problems of racial injustice, poverty, and war, the solutions to which depend on learning how to live in harmony.

In recent days, it appears that we have been moving further away from these goals. We have witnessed the brutal police shootings of African American men in Louisiana and Minnesota, followed by confusion, questions and protests. We have seen the relationship between the police and our communities become more and more strained and rising tensions give way to distrust; we have seen fatal attacks by a gunman against police officers in Dallas — all of which contribute to further eroding our civic relationships.

As I write these words, I am in London, England where the headline for one of the tabloid newspapers on Saturday was “America’s Race Hate Nightmare” and Sunday saw large, peaceful demonstrations in central London in solidarity with “Black Lives Matter.” These were not the activities I was expecting after arriving here in the midst of the political and economic turmoil over Brexit, the United Kingdom’s unanticipated and controversial decision to leave the European Union.

While for the most part, Brexit and the recent events in the US are unrelated, there is one common strand: a profound distrust and fear of people who are different in ethnicity, culture and race. There may be reasons to support leaving the EU, including excessive regulations and lack of democratic processes. Yet for some, the issue was more about opposition to immigrants and the growing diversity of the population, especially in large urban centers.

The events this past week in the United States have also taken place in a political context in which anti-immigrant sentiments, hostility toward different cultures and religions, including violence against those who protest such sentiments, have become part of the presidential campaign and are supported by a segment of the population. As a school, we are nonpartisan, but this kind of divisive political dialogue challenges our core values of inclusiveness and social justice, and the violence of the past few days threatens our future as a civil society. We are addressing these issues in three broad ways:

First, we are dedicating our resources to help at the community level. Price's Safe Communities Institute (SCI) has been working to address the causes of violence and help public safety agencies develop the necessary trust between law enforcement and their communities. Building trust requires engagement, open communication, constructive dialogue and relationships based upon respect for both the community and public safety.
During the past year, 63 public safety professionals from 29 different agencies have completed SCI leadership courses. The graduates include law enforcement, fire, public health, education, corrections, city government, and human rights from the Simon Wiesenthal Center. In fact, SCI’s Erroll Southers has written a deeply personal op-ed in USA Today on the need to have a real conversation about race, religion and extremism.

Second, we recently launched the Initiative on Diversity, Social Justice, and Inclusion here at Price that formalizes and expands our longstanding commitment to social justice. The Initiative builds upon our efforts to include diversity in the curriculum and increase diversity in hiring new faculty and staff, and in recruiting students. The initiative also cements efforts inside the Price School to ensure a supportive climate for diversity through mentorship programs, leadership role models, and professional development.

And third, through the Bedrosian Center on Governance, the Schwarzenegger Institute, and the Center on Philanthropy and Public Policy we foster scholarly research and outreach on good governance, civic engagement, collaboration across partisan lines, and the role of nonprofits and philanthropy in public problem solving. Through our Schaeffer Center for Health Policy and Economics, Price Center for Social Innovation, Tomás Rivera Policy Institute, and Center for Economic Development as well as many individual research projects, we support research on health disparities, affordable housing, effective schooling, alleviating urban poverty, and integrating immigrants. Our goal in these efforts is to develop knowledge on these issues in academia and to help shape political dialogue and public policy.

These recent developments prompt us to reflect and further act. We cannot view these divisive political attitudes and community tragedies through the prism of indifference. Racial injustice is a collective problem – it’s not just about a handful of individuals. We’re all in this together, and we need to summon our collective courage and strength to find a solution. That’s our responsibility as a community. I would welcome and encourage any ideas and suggestions on how the Price School can further our social justice efforts.

Thank you,

Jack H. Knott, Dean