Dear Campus Community:

Like you, we are incredibly excited about the start of the school year. New adventures and explorations await you at one of the world’s great universities. This is a moment to embrace opportunities for unparalleled learning, discovery, and challenge, together with distinguished faculty, staff and fellow students from around the world.

Despite our excitement, we also recognize that past few months have been difficult, filled with natural disasters as well as human eruptions of hate and conflict, as in the horrific killings in Las Vegas last Sunday. For all those who have had to endure storms and earthquakes, we reach out with our good will and compassion. As for hate and conflict, we feel an obligation to reflect upon those particular confrontations that have occurred on or near university grounds, such as Charlottesville.

We start by recognizing that many of us disagree on styles, values, goals, methods, and even facts. Thus, it should not be surprising that we battle over those disagreements in heated ways. But increasingly within our national culture, we see disagreements play out through harsh caricatures and dehumanizing language. Even worse, barbed words and images have transformed into physical threats and violence.

As senior administrators at UCLA, we want to set clear expectations that all Bruins should resist these national trends of divisiveness and intolerance. We do so by asking a simple question. Why are you here, at a university? More specifically, why are you here at UCLA, one of the greatest public research universities, in one of the most diverse spots on the globe?

The answer must alter how we engage fellow Bruins over passionate disagreements. We are at a university, at least in part, because we have commitments to the life of the mind, to learning, to challenging, to testing, and to growing intellectually. That means what might be accepted elsewhere, in terms of cheap shots, strawmen, and taking comments out of context, is not acceptable here. We must elevate dialogue over demagoguery, ideas over insults, listening over shouting.

We also believe that the “public” in “public university” matters. We are in Los Angeles, one of the most diverse cities in the world. Surely that diversity will include diversity in views, values, experiences, and yes, culture. We joined this University understanding that we would encounter
such variety. But we must commit to engage across that variety, that difference. In other words, we must strive to disagree, but thoughtfully and respectfully. We must exercise and thereby cultivate good judgment, discerning the difference between what we legally can do and what we ethically should do. While we embrace difference, we must bravely seek out “micro-connections” – the surprising similarities, unexpected understandings, and overlapping values that help connect us to each other.

Let us be clear. The University is fundamentally committed to protecting the physical safety of everyone in our community and at our events. But as we ensure “safe spaces” that allow us to rest, recharge, and express ourselves, we simultaneously encourage “brave spaces,” where we question our own assumptions, open ourselves to others, and seek transformation. Both types of spaces are essential to the mission of the University.

If you look and listen deeply, you will find that your fellow Bruins are fabulous and flawed, as well as brilliant and bewildered. They can soar and they can stumble. In short, they are like you. Every one of us is trying to figure it all out. Every one of us is worried about looking like we don’t have it all figured out. You have something to teach your classmates and you have something to learn from them.

We want to help. The division of Student Affairs engages in a variety of initiatives — including the Intergroup Relations Program, and the Common Book experience — that allow students to understand and explore their differences and commonalities. Student Affairs departments, such as Counseling and Psychological Services, the Community Programs Office, the Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Campus Resource Center, the Bruin Resource Center, Residential Life, and many more have programs, services and resources that support the student intellectual and emotional resilience necessary for life at UCLA and beyond.

The Office of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion has the CrossCheck blog and the CrossCheck Live fora that tackle complex issues, beyond the sound bite. We are curating “Free Speech 101” in October, a week of expert panels and community discussions addressing how to engage skillfully in difficult conversations. Reach out to the Student Advisory Board or your unit’s Equity Advisor who can channel information, ideas, and advice on how we can build an equal learning environment for all.

Communities are not automatic. They are an act of will. They are created by individual attitudes and actions. And they can be undone by the same. We seek the will to build a Bruin community worthy of us as scholars and citizens, a community honest and humble, principled and open-minded, critical and constructive, rigorous and kind. Long ago, President Abraham Lincoln appealed to “the better angels of our nature.” More recently, during his new student welcome, Chancellor Block reminded us that in order for a community to thrive, “passion must walk hand in hand with compassion.” With this inspiration, let’s build a community that challenges us to rise higher and do better. Together.

Sincerely,

Jerry Kang
Vice Chancellor
Equity, Diversity and Inclusion

Monroe Gorden
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