November 11, 2016

Dear Rice Community,

Two and a half months ago, I wrote a column in the Rice Thresher urging that we choose to engage in difficult conversations around politics and religion, and to do so in a spirit of community. I wrote that I planned to schedule a series of “impolitic” dinners to discuss these topics in that spirit, while noting that the then upcoming election suggested that “we are a deeply divided nation.” As luck would have it, the first of those dinners took place at Lovett College last night. Unsurprisingly and appropriately, there were many, many thoughtful questions about the election and its implications.

In the 11 presidential elections in which I have voted, I do not remember any with the intensity of emotion which has surrounded this one – in the primaries, in the general election and in the reaction to the results. For many on our campus, the election provoked both anger and sadness and, for some, feelings of insecurity and exclusion. Many in our community and our nation experienced the rhetoric of the campaign, whether by candidates or supporters, as questioning their place in America.

It is worth asking why this election and the reaction to it are different, and how that should affect us as we, the Rice community, contemplate the results. As we do this, we must of course keep in mind the fundamental commitments of our nation and our university to freedom of speech and democracy. Those commitments call on us to examine thoughtfully the sources of distress in our country and seek to respond as best we can to those in our community who are experiencing such distress. Such concern for them does not conflict with the respect that is due to those with different views or who make different political choices.

It is appropriate in these circumstances that we reaffirm our fundamental values at Rice University. We have emphasized and taken pride in our commitment to diversity in all its aspects, including political perspective, ethnic and racial heritage, national origin, religion, disability, sexual orientation and gender identification. For example, we recently announced new policies to enhance our ability to support undocumented students. Holding diversity as a core value requires that we constantly engage in thoughtful examination of the impact of our practices on all members of our community.

These commitments to diversity, dialogue, civility and respect are fundamental to our values and identity as a university. They remain unchanged not only on our campus, but in our advocacy and outreach beyond our campus.

I urge everyone in our community, regardless of which candidate you supported, to seek to understand the perspective of others and engage with those who are experiencing doubt about the degree to which their fellow citizens include them in their vision of the tapestry of the American people. We can best achieve our aspirations as a community not by ignoring these issues, but rather by seeking to address them in the caring spirit that characterizes Rice.

These are challenging times. These are divisive times. These are, for some, threatening times. They call on us to engage with each other, and in our actions to reflect the care for each other that lies at the very heart of who we are as the community of Rice.

President David W. Leebron