Dear Rice Community,

I am writing to address issues surrounding the treatment of immigrant students on our campus, and in particular students with recognized status under the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program (DACA). We have also been approached with questions about Rice becoming a “sanctuary campus.” These issues arise because during the presidential campaign, President-elect Trump made statements about significantly changing U.S. immigration laws and policies, including the possible repeal of the administrative order establishing DACA. We believe that such a repeal would be an unwise and discriminatory action, and recently, on behalf of Rice I joined a group of university presidents strongly opposing any such action. I write today to share my decision, based on an extensive consultation process that included many of you, to maintain Rice University’s policy of a gun-free campus. To do so, we are exercising the “opt out” provision of this new state law.

Rice University is, of course, subject to Houston, Harris County, Texas, and federal law, and we cannot declare ourselves exempt from such laws. However, in some instances, it may be appropriate in a court of law or other forum to contest the application or interpretation of laws as they apply to Rice or to our students. Meanwhile, our policy remains one of nondiscrimination on the basis of immigration status or citizenship. For applicants and students with DACA status, as we announced earlier this year, we will treat them as citizens for all purposes; in addition, we will provide augmented scholarship aid when loans through traditional federal financial aid programs are unavailable.

Because DACA and other immigrant students are important members of our community, it is natural to begin to ask questions about what actions we might take if for any reason DACA was repealed or significantly modified, or if other government measures were taken that threatened the status of immigrant or international students. We do not think it wise to speculate at this point on how we would react to legislative or administrative actions that have not been specifically presented or formulated. We are, however, committed to support and help our immigrant and DACA students in whatever ways we can to assure their wellbeing and continued ability to pursue their educational aspirations and achieve their goals at Rice University. If actions are taken that threaten their ability to do that, we will explore all available legal avenues to continue enabling and supporting the success of our students. Such support might include additional financial support, housing, and counseling resources. Absent legal obligation, we will not reveal any information that might be used to identify students who could be subject to deportation.

We will be monitoring closely developments in this area, and we will communicate with our community if indeed we face any significant changes that would adversely affect our students. We treasure the diversity of our campus community and expect all in our community to abide by Rice values. We will not tolerate any discrimination, harassment or intimidation based on race, religion, national origin, ethnicity, gender identification, citizenship, immigration status, sexual orientation, disability, or political beliefs.

As noted above, some are also requesting that Rice be declared a “sanctuary campus.” Although it’s not entirely clear what this would mean in practice, there are very significant concerns surrounding such an idea. First, Rice is subject to the law as indicated above, and we should not suggest in any way that we are determined to violate applicable law. Second, such a designation could put our students at greater risk in two ways. It might suggest that the risks they face are
reduced because of such a designation, when in fact “sanctuary” status has virtually no effect on enforcement of the law. Moreover, it might make our students more of a target of enforcement efforts. Again, we must wait to see what actions are actually proposed by the new administration, and then determine the best course of action. We will continue to welcome ideas and suggestions from our community as we monitor policy developments.

We want to be clear that all of our students — whether citizens or not, whether born in the U.S. or not, whether recognized as immigrants or not — are a cherished part of our community, and we will always work to assure their ability to complete their studies and pursue their dreams.

President David W. Leebron