



September 6, 2016

An Open Letter to the Murray State University Community:

It is with great importance I write this open letter to you today. Two very powerful and important values of American higher education, of American Society and our own personal values, came in great conflict last week on our campus.

For those who are unaware, last Wednesday, August 31<sup>st</sup>, members of the Traditionalist Worker Party (TWP) rented a table in the Curris Center and distributed information about the organization and discussed their political platform and beliefs. The TWP is an active political organization that is also listed by the Southern Poverty Law Center as an extremist organization and categorized as a “white nationalist group.” This group followed all University policies and procedures required by any outside organization to be on campus, and while on the Murray State campus they abided by all rules and policies.

First, let me state as clearly as I am able, that I vehemently and fervently disagree with the platform and ideas presented by the TWP. The values espoused by the TWP are not in line with mine and, in fairness, I am fully aware that there are members within our community who do agree with the beliefs and ideas of the TWP; and as such, I am sure, they do not agree with my views.

I have stated, and will continue to present, that I am an ardent believer that we, as a community, are at our best when we create an environment that allows all people, from all walks of life, to be active participants. This belief is shared and affirmed by the University Vice Presidents and other leaders as I discussed this letter with them. One’s skills, talents and desire for personal growth, an individual’s intellectual curiosity and ability to think logically and creatively along with the ethics and a moral compass of compassion and civility are what defines the character of any person. To me, how they use those attributes for the betterment of society is the ultimate determining factor—not the color of their skin, their national origin, their religious beliefs, their gender or gender identity or their sexual orientation or political persuasions. We live in a global society; we all have something to add, and something to lose, if we are unable to be inclusive and accepting of all persons. I believe in our University community pledge and the four principles it espouses: accepting one another, learning from one another, creating an atmosphere of positive engagement and challenging bigotry.

Yet, we had a group like the TWP on our campus presenting ideas and beliefs that, in many respects, do not reflect the principles outlined in the University’s community pledge. And therefore, how do we maintain the values of our community and what is the response to individuals within our community?

In reflecting on the events of last week, I am reminded of a quote credited, erroneously, to

Voltaire, "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it." It is easy to stand up for freedom of expression and speech with those whom you agree; however, it is much harder, and more necessary, to ensure the same freedoms exist for those with whom you disagree.

Thus, how do you balance personal beliefs, the values of the University and the tenants of the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution? Would it not be hypocritical of me to prevent them from presenting their ideas? Do I make a decision, based on my beliefs, and ignore our policies, procedures and our tradition of civil and respectful debate by preventing the outside groups, from coming on campus and expressing their ideas?

I am a firm believer that Murray State University, as an institution of higher education, is the "Marketplace of Ideas." It is our role to hear all ideas and to test them. It is our responsibility to come together and have competing thoughts debated, to question one's assertions and theories, to allow one to make statements, however contentious, but then to have them back up their stance and to question their logic and to challenge their conclusions.

Murray State University, in its role as the Marketplace of Ideas, is a place where members of our community should debate differing opinions and we must set the example that diversity of thought can exist in an environment where ideas are debated civilly and with respect, ensuring that we have a zest for learning, discovery and enlightenment. John Henry Newman, the great educational thinker whose ideas provided the foundation for liberal education, believed that the clash of ideas brings forth truth. This belief is codified in our Statement of Student Rights; in our pledge to uphold the standards of academic freedom and in our policies, procedures and codes to prevent administrative censorship. Furthermore, it is our responsibility as a public institution to uphold the Constitution, particularly the First Amendment, in our work efforts.

If we limit who is able to come on campus to present ideas, however controversial, are we fulfilling our role as the Marketplace of Ideas? And, if we decide that, where is that line? Who determines where it is? And how far does it go? How do we determine who, or what organization, has a right to come onto campus and which do not? Instead, we can discuss and debate what an open society that has founding tenants of freedom of expression, thought, assembly, speech and that strives to be free of tyranny, oppression and censorship means. What are the rights, responsibilities and privileges of the society in which we live?

Over the next several weeks, I hope our campus community will take this opportunity and truly examine the complex issues presented by the TWP being on campus. I envision classes taking a moment to reflect on this living example in order to explore the inherent tensions of the First Amendment, academic freedom and personal freedom. Ask yourselves, "Should President Davies establish policies that prohibit outside organizations from coming on campus" and, if so, where does that power to decide such things end? (i.e, can a future President of the University determine what plays are presented, what art work is displayed, what speakers come onto campus? Or, more importantly, which of the preceding are not presented, not displayed or who is not allowed to speak to campus?) Efforts should instead be made to discuss the current political environment and the language used to ask whether this reflects the values of America. Discuss Colin Kaepernick's boycott of standing for the Star Spangled Banner and if he is right or

wrong—and if you were the owner of the 49ers, what would you do?

I must add that while diversity of thought is critical, the safety of our community is paramount. I will never put the safety of our campus community at risk. Whenever a scheduled speaker or event occurs on our campus, we strive to ensure the safety of all participants—the speaker and audience—by providing proper security and services. Organizations or speakers clearly have free speech rights, but should they advocate and/or begin to incite violence, they will be removed. Additionally, all organizations and participants must follow all policies, rules and our code of conduct while on campus. Furthermore, if people wish to discuss any of these matters, there are many individuals on campus able and ready to assist.

To conclude, nothing is more important than when the fundamental values of our University are at stake and to some, seemingly at odds with one another. Yet, if we truly believe as a community that “The hope of democracy depends on the diffusion of knowledge” as stated prominently and in noble block letters on one of, if not the, most historic building on our campus, it is our responsibility to not shy away from ideas that upset us, but rather we must shine light on those things with which we morally disagree. We must engage in the intellectual pursuit of civil debate and discourse and let our ideas, not our bodies, clash to spark the truth.

We do this as it is our duty, our proper role, to protect the Marketplace of Ideas and deepen the roots of democracy.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'Bob Davies', with a stylized 'B' and a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Bob Davies