

Subject: A Message from University Leadership

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From: President Michael A. Fitts <mike@tulane.edu>



Dear Tulane Community:

With the first week of classes completed, our newest Tulanians moved-in and all of our students, faculty and staff back, the 2024-25 academic year is officially underway. We hope you are as excited as we are.

In preparation for the new academic year, we spent many hours this summer listening to a broad cross-section of Tulanians. We were grateful to receive their thoughts on how members of the Tulane community can be more supportive and respectful of one another this year – especially those with whom they disagree the most.

At Tulane we share certain core strengths, including our relational culture, our engagement with great ideas, our passion, inquisitiveness and endless drive to create a better future. The question is how do we build on these strengths in times of polarization, unrest and even political violence in our country and world? Our differences can, during such times, make it difficult to hear each other. But we must recommit to the central principle that by coming together as a community, with empathy and respect, we learn more, we ask better questions and reach better, more thoughtful, creative, compassionate and impactful answers. We are also better able to use our research and educational mission to improve life for all.

One way we can improve our own campus atmosphere is to recommit to the tenet of principled neutrality for ourselves as university leaders when it comes to incidents or issues of public debate. This includes refraining from making official statements about events or matters that do not directly affect Tulane's core mission of research, teaching and scholarship. This is something we and other universities struggled with last year. We will recommit this year to carefully determining when university statements might be made. But, as we move forward, we will default on the side of not making such statements.

Maintaining principled neutrality is critical to fostering a campus environment where divergent and dissenting views are protected and encouraged. Official pronouncements on

matters of debate or troublingly complex issues can limit essential debate by making one perspective the “official view of the university.” On the other hand, restraining from making official announcements respects and protects the freedom of expression for all Tulanians.

This is vital because universities, to a greater degree than any other institution, are comprised of members from the widest array of backgrounds and viewpoints. For that reason, it is not surprising that we are the site of impassioned debate, protests and demonstrations on global issues. The diversity of thoughts and perspectives so prevalent at universities tend to make college campuses, at times, necessarily uncomfortable places. However, this uncomfortableness is actually a good thing when accompanied by respect, inclusivity and empathy. That is what great universities should be about and how they further their academic mission. Critical thinking, questioning and offering alternative opinions are the primary drivers of education and discovery. Freed from the specter of an official imprimatur for any one view, competing opinions can fuel myriad contributions that advance society. Universities spark thousands of interactions between different groups and individuals daily. As paths cross and ideas are exchanged, innovation and understanding follow.

For universities to continue to thrive, free speech and freedom of expression must be fully protected and practiced daily. The safety of our students and their ability to learn while freely expressing their religious or cultural identities is paramount. This is why offices and departments across the university were busy this summer working on programs, initiatives and security measures that promote the right to free speech for all as well as the right to a safe and welcoming campus. Some of the initiatives we have planned for this year build on efforts we implemented last year. For instance, in addition to stepped up security we will continue to improve our dialogue with one another through trained student facilitators who lead conversations across differences in open sessions as well as within specific courses.

We will also continue and enhance our engagement and education of our community regarding the root causes and historical antecedents of antisemitism and Islamophobia. The President’s Commission on Equity and Tulane Values will serve as a center for our efforts to combat these and other iterations of bigotry and hate. There is no room for Islamophobia, antisemitism, racism or bigotry of any kind. Through our [Freedom of Expression Protocols](#), we will prohibit unregistered demonstrations but continue to provide the opportunity for students to host registered demonstrations with appropriate time, manner and place restrictions. Meaningful freedom of expression— both of the right to demonstrate and the right to refrain from demonstrating while pursuing one’s goals in an environment free of harassment, intimidation and disruption – is only possible if such

safeguards are in place. The Supreme Court has long recognized this by upholding time, place and manner regulations that protect everyone's freedoms.

We have also created a new position, the associate director for civic engagement and expression. This position will focus on cultivating a culture of free speech, civic education, dialogue and respectful encounters throughout the university. The person in this position will also collaborate with campus partners to provide year-round programming to educate our community on freedom of expression and engagement. These and other initiatives, including the restorative practice dialogue model offered through our Office of Human Resources and Institutional Equity, are aimed at equipping our students, staff and faculty with the tools and skills needed to embrace diverse perspectives and experiences while promoting a culture of empathy, accountability and mutual respect.

The solution to the divisions in our society and on our campuses is learning to talk to and, more importantly, listen to one another with respect and goodwill. Because our campus culture so highly values relationships and community, Tulane is uniquely positioned to make this simple, but difficult, shift in the current national conversation. Our hope is that we can meet on the common ground we all share and learn from one another through open and honest dialogue – always remembering the values and the friendships that bind us together as Tulanians.

Michael A. Fitts, President

Robin Forman, Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs and Provost

Patrick Norton, Senior Vice President/Chief Operating Officer/Treasurer