

Good afternoon,

Regarding yesterday's demonstration on campus by an outside group, I would like to focus on two aspects, the issue yesterday and the questions regarding free speech on campus. Before I get into those, however, please know that I have asked the Office of Campus Events and Dr. Travis, the VP for Student Affairs, to address questions that have been brought forward regarding notifying the campus community about future events that occur on campus that may be controversial or upsetting to members of our campus community. While I understand information about this event was shared sometime earlier in the semester, a timelier reminder would have been appropriate, and we will take steps to do that in the future.

Yesterday's event deals with a topic that this country has been wrestling with for many decades, from a period of women seeking abortions in a medically risky and unsafe environment because of laws banning abortions, to the Roe V. Wade decision, and the nearly half-century since then of division within this country leading to a potentially far-reaching decision from the Supreme Court this summer. The country's polarization regarding the government's role in regulating abortions is very emotional from protecting a woman's right to making a very personal decision to the government's role in protecting lives. What some members of our campus community experienced yesterday was a very understandable emotional and upsetting response to a presentation by an anti-abortion group. I believe eliciting that response was the goal of the group yesterday. Members of this community were subject to a very negatively emotionally charged event. I wish that it had not been. Unfortunately, I don't think, as a country, this is an isolated incident or the last that we will be exposed to on this issue.

The group that was on campus is experienced and has traveled to other campuses and knows the limits of free speech and the first amendment. As a public university, our options are extremely limited regarding the content of the speech and presentations as well as limiting anyone's ability to record video in a public place. The courts have ruled that speech that is upsetting, discomforting and even hateful is protected by the Constitution. The university administration and I are expected to protect this university from legal actions and the negative publicity of disregarding the Constitution. That can result in us permitting what occurred on campus yesterday. Quite frankly, I would not be surprised if the group would have welcomed more publicity regarding their demonstration/presentation here.

Earlier this semester, the Office of DEI and the Division of Student Affairs brought a nationally known legal expert on the First Amendment to campus to talk about events like yesterday. Unfortunately, less than two dozen students took advantage of that presentation. Over the past several years, along with other members of the administration including our legal counsel, I have learned more about the rights of speech, especially on a public campus. While the email interchanges on campus have offered solutions and actions, most, if not all, of those actions would not be legal. I encourage those that want to better understand what actions are possible to google the literature on public higher education and the first amendment.

I also want to publicly thank our police chief and campus officers for ensuring the physical safety of all yesterday. The administration, faculty and staff care deeply about the feelings of our students. We appreciate that CAPS and Brady Health have been on standby during this entire process. For those directly impacted, I want you to know that your mental health and well-being is always first and foremost on my mind. And thank you to the entire Student Affairs team for being present and available to support the students.

While I recognize that yesterday was an emotionally charged day with many feeling outrage, pushing back or taking action in an emotional manner would not have served the campus well. And, while I wish

I could promise that we will not have future events that engender negative feelings, I know that would be a false promise. What we can do is acknowledge our feelings, share those feelings with others and look for ways to more fully understand the issues that we confront.

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