Alter BOT Address December 19, 2015

“I have often inquired of myself, what great principle or idea it was that kept this Confederacy so long together. It was not the mere matter of the separation of the colonies from the mother land; but something in that Declaration giving liberty, not alone to the people of this country, but hope to the world for all future time. It was that which gave promise that in due time the weights should be lifted from the shoulders of all men, and that all should have equal chance. This is the sentiment embodied in that Declaration of Independence.

Now, my friends can this country be saved upon that basis? If it can, I will consider myself one of the happiest men in the world if I can help save it. If it can’t be saved upon that principle, it will truly be awful. But, if this country cannot be saved without giving up that principle – I was about to say I would rather be assassinated on this spot than to surrender it,”

Abraham Lincoln, Independence Hall, February 22, 1861

Purdue University was founded eight years later, and we are now preparing for our 150th anniversary.

A question to ask is: are we providing that equal chance? The nation is polarized, unrest is heightened, and perceptions are swirling that perhaps Purdue and other universities may be impeding that equal chance by failing to provide environments where both free speech and safe space may coexist.

The Senate took up the matter of diversity and equity at its November 16th meeting when it brought forward and passed a Public Statement in Support of Diversity and Equity in its Senate Resolution 15-5. In this statement, which can be found on the Senate’s website, the Senate resolved that:

Given the recent events at Purdue University, the University of Missouri, and Yale University, this is a time to affirm that we must all work together against any act of discrimination or institutionalized oppressive practices, which could obstruct our growth as a university community. The Purdue University Senate wishes to reaffirm our commitment to embracing and celebrating diversity in all of its forms, and we will continue to work actively with the University Administration and campus organizations to ensure that all individuals feel welcome, valued, safe and respected in our university community.

On December 1st the Purdue Graduate Student Government hosted a forum on free speech in academia with panel members including the chair of the committee that authored The Chicago Principles and a spokesperson from FIRE (Foundation on Individuals Rights in Education). The forum was well attended, and there was quite a bit of time allotted for questions and answers. The panelists were candid in their responses, and didn’t seek to dodge questions or skew the discussion.

I did find it odd that there weren’t any ardent spokespersons attending who sought to challenge Professor Stone – the architect of the Principles, or to bring to the fore the apparent tension between the Chicago principles, the notion of safe spaces, and the laws regarding hostile work and educational environments. I came to the forum wondering if perhaps there might be some protestors. I left feeling like an appropriate academic conversation had occurred.

My contentedness was short-lived, as I soon received an email from a faculty colleague thanking me for attending, but then articulating that students having the freedom and assertiveness to challenge speech with which they disagree – presented in the forum as both a fundamental right, and a “real-world” life-
skill which is required to be successful in society, is not something that students possess until we teach them to do so, and that we must protect them until we do.

I could not disagree more. My experience with students at Purdue is that they are adults, that they are sentient beings, that they are intelligent, that they – as all of us sometimes, make egregious mistakes, and often fall prey to hyperbole and bias, but that they typically fend for themselves quite well. I respect that about them.

At Purdue, we must provide Lincoln’s equal chance, we must ensure personally to be respectful of all, we must create an environment where hate speech has consequences. Purdue has clear policies on these matters, and President Daniels has repeatedly reinforced this.

So if we have the policies, and if we do provide that equal chance then where should we focus our efforts?

I think that it is on listening, talking, and building community. When I read each of the stories in the How Many More Fires collection I found myself appalled, saddened, and I suppose, not particularly surprised, much to my chagrin. These stories are about culture and community, and that’s a key place where we ought to focus our efforts.

As I thought about the stories I thought about the greater Purdue, West Lafayette and Lafayette community. Sometimes it is hard to distinguish the lines, and often that’s a good thing. But sometimes it’s not so good. Many of the stories included those of racial epithets being shouted from moving vehicles or by passers-by. It’s impossible to know whether those vehicles were occupied by Purdue students, faculty, or staff, or by non-Purdue community members. The answer, more than likely, is both. So the conversation about a welcoming culture needs to come from all quarters…town and gown alike. When we read a Purdue Exponent writer painting the Lafayette side of the river in wildly disparaging ways we know that we have a multitude of cultural opportunities for improvement. Race, bias, ignorance and hate are seldom one-way streets.

So what can we do? There are many groups in the greater community working on these issues, but I am calling for a broader conversation with Purdue, West Lafayette and Lafayette. I was talking with Bob Falk, CEO of PEFCU last week, and he and I were discussing the How Many More Fires stories, and what they said about our community. Bob and I discussed proposing to Purdue, to both mayors, to the Journal and Courier, and to TV18 to convene a town hall, or series of town halls where the community comes to gather to talk about the hard problems, and to try to find pathways to solutions to the problems of racism, hatred, bias and exclusion in our community. None of these entities can do it alone. The problems at Purdue aren’t solely Purdue’s, and the problems in the cities aren’t simply theirs.

The question I bring today to the trustees from the Senate is, will you endorse Purdue’s engagement in broadening the conversation about race, culture and community, to, as our resolution asks, ensure that all individuals feel welcome, valued, safe and respected in not only our university community, but in the entire greater community?

Thank you

Kirk Alter