

May 7, 2010

To the University of Idaho Community:

In the final days of the semester and the academic year, I write to reflect on some comments that I heard during a meeting this week with a group of students who were concerned over bias-related incidents that occurred on our campus this year.

The incidents are disturbing because they do not reflect the qualities that we value and have come to expect in our community. We will be strongest when we stand united and support our commitment: that the University is a place of excellence, where the culture reflects trust, respect, fairness, inclusiveness, openness and consistency and it is supportive and characterized by integrity and accountability.

Last month, in their leadership roles, Carmen Suarez, director of the Office of Human Rights, Access and Inclusion, and Mark Edwards, assistant to the president for diversity and community, wrote to the community about this issue. Let me share with you some of the steps we've taken to ensure a positive culture and climate at the University of Idaho:

In January, I formed the President's Diversity Council. The council, comprised of 50 members of the University community, is reviewing numerous issues and opportunities for the University of Idaho. One sub-committee is reviewing best practices at higher education institutions for developing bias incident/hate crime teams for response and ongoing educational programming. We've found excellent models and hope to have some systems in place by the start of fall semester.

As Dr. Edwards and Dr. Suarez conveyed earlier this semester, we are mindful that expressions of opinion are constitutionally protected. However, when their purpose is to express hostility or encourage discrimination against entire groups, they fall beneath the ideals that we aspire to at the University, ideals embedded in the Idaho Legislature's affirmation that "the right to be free from discrimination because of race, creed, color, sex, or national origin is recognized as and declared to be a civil right," an affirmation the University, through our policies, extends to discrimination based on religion, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity/expression, age, and status as a Vietnam-era veteran.

Our student judicial review system is involved in working on some issues. College leadership has worked to review and discuss inclusive and accepting communities and what it means to be a University of Idaho community member. Law students have come together and independently authored and signed an affirmation of a just and welcoming community, and the faculty and staff have taken part in Safe Zone programming.

These are just a few ways that our community has united to send a message, along with me, that bias-related behavior is unacceptable.

Dr. Edwards and Dr. Suarez continue to work diligently to encourage a change in behavior through programming, dialogue and actions that directly substantiate the expressions of inclusive values. I uphold and affirm their good work and my commitment to ensure that the University of Idaho remains true and is committed to diversity and equity.

I have appreciated hearing from students and look forward to ways in which constructive dialogue can enhance our educational outreach to combat bias and discrimination.

The University of Idaho embraces a present and a future that is welcoming and inclusive. It will take all of us working together to make that happen. I look forward to this great partnership.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "M. Duane Nellis". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized initial "M".

Duane Nellis
President