

01/09/07

To Members of the Campus Community:

It was brought to my attention earlier this week that threats of violence against an American Indian student, and hate speech directed at all American Indians, were posted on a pro-Chief Facebook website created by students at the University of Illinois. The idea that the debate over this issue could degenerate to personal attacks that threaten the physical safety and well-being of members of the campus community is something that all of us should find truly abhorrent.

The men and women who built the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign over the past 140 years have worked hard to create a place where ideas could be explored and discussed in a safe and welcoming environment. Actions such as those that were recommended on this Facebook site really are an attack on each member of our community, and that site has now been removed.

I do not know the motives of the students who posted the threats, but I do know that their words are dangerous and racist. The threats have been forwarded to the Office of Student Conflict Resolution for investigation and action. The Student Code guarantees that members of the campus community should be able to discuss issues and express views, but it does not allow speech that threatens to harm other members of the campus community.

As Chancellor, I can not and will not tolerate such violent threats. The University will take all legal and disciplinary actions available in response to the threatening messages.

But far less extreme actions and words can traumatize and frighten those targeted, as well. The right of free speech--no matter how thoughtless, rude or dumb--is a hallmark of the American system. Yet as future leaders and as citizens of our campus community and later as citizens of a nation and world, we must engage in a far deeper dialogue about how we are to agree to disagree. Vigorous debate is good and it is constitutionally protected--but debate should be based on ideas, not empty-headed slurs or vicious threats.

To all members of the campus community I ask that you think seriously about what you can do to help build a campus climate with zero tolerance for racism and hate. Everyone has a role. We should expect nothing less from ourselves. I invite each of you to join us at 4:00 p.m. February 1, 2007 in Foellinger Auditorium for a forum on creating a more welcoming campus environment.

Together, we must find ways to implement our shared values of respect and dignity.

Thank you.

Richard Herman

Chancellor