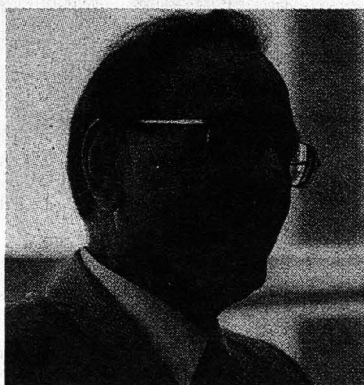


Letter to the editor: President Satish Tripathi's open letter to *The Spectrum*



September 24, 2015

Dear Students,
SPECTRUM
9/25/15

Starting last week, our campus community has been deeply affected by the controversial student art project that has sparked considerable response and dialogue across our university.

From my personal conversations with many of you, I know that our students continue to feel deeply hurt, saddened, confused, and angered by the events of the past week. While I continue to have daily conversations with our students, faculty, and university leadership about this issue and its campus impact, I've asked the *Spectrum* to print this open letter so that I can have the opportunity to share my thoughts with the student body at large.

I feel strongly that continuing to discuss this issue is critical for our entire university community. As an academic community, we are always seeking to understand the boundaries around academic freedom and freedom of expression. Exploring difficult, even painful topics from diverse points of view is part of what we do as an academic community. At the same time, it is absolutely critical that we do so in a safe, inclusive, and wel-

coming environment in which all our members feel respected, valued, and heard.

This student art project has propelled us into what is evolving into a productive campus dialogue about how to balance freedom of expression with the need to foster the welcoming and inclusive educational environment that is necessary to learning. This is an important conversation, and by no means an easy one.

Throughout this ongoing dialogue, I have been deeply impressed by the leadership role that many of our student groups are taking in moving this campus conversation forward in a constructive way.

This Monday, as part of this ongoing dialogue, I met with a group of student leaders and other concerned students, including Student Association President Minahil Khan and Vice President Sean Kaczmarek, Black Student Union President Micah Oliver and Vice President Deidree Golbourne, African Student Association President Charles D'Onigbinde, Caribbean Student Association Vice President Shawn Gibson, PODER: Latinos Unidos President Azalea Rosario, and People of Color Council Coordinator Jessica Calderon.

This meeting was a valuable opportunity for me to hear further from our student leadership about our students' strong concerns over how this project has impacted the campus climate. It also advanced a very positive dialogue about how, going forward, we can work together to foster the open exchange of ideas while ensuring that this discourse takes place in a campus culture characterized by mutual respect, understanding, and a genuine appreciation for diverse back-

grounds and points of view.

Last night's forum, hosted by the Black Student Union, continued that effort in a very positive way by providing a platform for many voices to be heard and perspectives to be exchanged.

Regrettably, I was not able to attend the forum, as I was en route to Albany for the Chancellor's fall meeting of the SUNY presidents. However, I have had extensive discussions about the forum and its outcomes with members of the university administration who were in attendance. They have shared with me the many concerns our students and faculty raised at the forum.

The questions we are grappling with are big ones—from the scope of First Amendment rights and the nature of protected speech to questions about campus safety, inequity, and what it means to foster a truly diverse and inclusive academic community.

These questions won't be answered overnight. It will take time, effort, and careful consideration on each of our parts to address them. But doing so is of critical importance for all of us, and will have lasting value.

Toward this end, let me briefly outline a few of the steps our university administration is taking to address these larger issues.

As announced at last night's forum, Dean of Students Barb Ricotta will be convening a students of color advisory committee to the University Police Department that will meet monthly to sustain a dialogue with campus officers and students about ensuring a safe and welcoming campus environment for all students.

Similarly, I have asked Provost

Zukoski to work with our faculty across the disciplines to engage in an ongoing conversation about negotiating the boundaries around academic freedom and freedom of expression.

We continue to explore the policy implications of this event, including the enforcement of our Environment, Health & Safety policy which states that "experimental apparatus, demonstration or art projects..." placed in common areas must be reviewed in advance for safety and security purposes.

As we continue this dialogue across our campus community, our Vice Provost for Equity and Inclusion Teri Miller, in her role as UB's chief diversity officer, will continue to provide guidance for our ongoing university-wide efforts to ensure that our UB practices and programs are characterized by the fair, inclusive, and equitable treatment of our diverse campus population.

I am also reaching out to the student leadership groups I met with earlier this week to continue our dialogue in the months ahead, with the hope of meeting with this group on a regular basis so we can continue to assess our ongoing efforts to foster a welcoming and inclusive campus culture.

I urge us all, as a campus community, to continue this dialogue over the coming days, weeks, and months. And as president, I am committed to ensuring our university community remains a safe, welcoming, inclusive, intellectually open space in which to have this dialogue.

Sincerely,

Satish K. Tripathi
President