



A Year of Challenge and Opportunity

1 message

Farnam Jahanian <president@andrew.cmu.edu>
Reply-To: president@andrew.cmu.edu
To: [redacted]

Wed, Sep 2, 2020 at 7:26 PM

Dear Members of the CMU Community,

Welcome to the new academic year.

Addressing the Incident at the Fence

Let me start by saying this is not the fall semester welcome that I originally prepared to send on the first day of classes. I decided not to send my previously written message on Monday, as a result of the disgraceful act that took place that day, when someone altered the message on the Fence on the Pittsburgh campus from “Black Lives Matter” to “All ~~Black~~-Lives Matter.”

Seeing this offensive message on one of our campus’s landmarks was certainly not how anyone wanted to start the first day of classes, most especially our Black community members. This message is deeply hurtful to this community in particular, and we should all pause to contemplate its profoundly cruel impact, and how raw this emotion still is.

Proclaiming that “All Lives Matter” invalidates the experiences of so many in our nation and our world, who have seen their right to liberty denied and their very lives extinguished. Let me be clear why this message is racist. It is worth taking a moment to understand how this phrase has taken on a specific meaning in contexts such as this one. The phrase “All Lives Matter” emerged in direct response to the phrase “Black Lives Matter,” and has come to be seen as a purposeful provocation meant to signal that Black people’s concerns aren’t important or worthy of being addressed by our society. It serves to distract from, deflect and silence the calls for justice and equality for Black people, which is utterly contrary to our values as a community. Protests against police violence, systemic racism and societal inequity have been cause for great self-reflection for many of us about the future of democracy and the possibility of true justice for all. Within this context, it is our moral and ethical responsibility to speak in a loud voice that “Black Lives Matter.” Saying these words does not erase or ignore other lives. In fact, it affirms the equity we all strive for.

We are grateful to those students who repainted the Fence to restore the original message but unfortunately, there is no undoing the damage that was done, including to those for whom Monday was their first day as a CMU student.

This incident has also thrown into question many of the traditional norms governing the Fence as a self-regulating, student-owned space for open expression. Despite the fact that this is a student-governed space, given the seriousness of this matter, I have asked the CMU Police to look into all possible avenues of information and they are doing so. At this point in time, we have not been able to determine the person(s) responsible, including whether that person is a member of the CMU community, but we are committed to pursuing all leads.

University leadership respects the tradition of the Fence that has been in place for 75 years, and by generations of students who have asked that the administration refrain from substantively commenting on its content or intervening in its function, even in instances of offensive use. Members of the Student Government are currently working to determine whether and how these protocols might be amended, given the current climate, and how the administration can support them in doing so. I applaud their leadership and together with Provost Garrett and Dean Casalegno, I offer my partnership to them as they work through these issues. I will also be speaking with Student Government and other student leaders in the coming days to engage on the issues that led to Monday’s incident, and I look forward to hearing our students’ perspectives on these critical topics for our community.

Whether driven by ignorance or by malicious intent to antagonize, whoever was responsible for the Fence’s altered message must not succeed in sowing division in our community. We cannot allow their poisonous and hurtful message to distract from that which unites all of us at Carnegie Mellon — no matter where we are located. As we look to the months ahead, we will continue to be tested, and we will need our values to fortify us, as well as meaningful action to back them up.

Importantly, Monday’s incident serves to underscore the immediacy and urgency of our commitment to confront racism and promote equity and inclusion across the university through our [recently announced plan](#). Our plan includes 34 concrete actions to make CMU more inclusive and accessible and expand our engagement in the broader communities we serve, especially in Pittsburgh. Our entire leadership team is deeply committed to these priorities and to making meaningful progress on these actions this year. Many of them are underway, and I look forward to sharing specific details on the progress of this work in the coming weeks.

A Unique Year

At this time, I would like to share with you the welcome I planned to send on Monday.

We begin this academic year knowing full well that it will be unlike any other in our institution's history, one defined by a shared commitment to health and well-being in the face of an ongoing public health crisis, as well as a period of political divisiveness and profound societal challenges.

However, this year will *also* be shaped by an indefatigable Tartan spirit that believes in the power of ingenuity, determination and shared commitment to overcome any challenge. I have witnessed the creative and resilient CMU spirit firsthand this summer through the hard work and collaboration of our university's faculty, staff, student leaders and volunteers. Countless people worked around the clock to re-imagine and re-engineer all that we do in light of this pandemic, so that everyone can succeed and thrive this year. I am truly grateful for their collective efforts.

Welcoming New and Returning Students

The start of the academic year is always an exciting time because it means that another outstanding cohort of students is joining our community — here in Pittsburgh as well as at locations around the world, including CMU-Silicon Valley, CMU-Qatar, CMU-Africa, CMU-Australia and more. I am delighted to welcome more than 1,700 incoming undergraduate and 2,400 incoming graduate students to Carnegie Mellon University, joining 10,700 returning students! To these new students: I know you didn't expect to be starting your CMU experience during a pandemic, but my colleagues and I are thrilled to welcome your diverse talents and perspectives to our community.

Many of our students have made the decision to study remotely this semester. In fact, for our Pittsburgh campus, about 40% of our students are studying remotely, from locations all around the globe. No matter where they are located, ALL students will receive an outstanding education, thoughtfully developed by CMU's faculty and world-renowned experts in the science of learning and tailored to serve your needs at this unique time. And we have made sure that student and campus services remain available to *all* students and have developed virtual community-building opportunities so you can stay connected, even in this physically distant time.

A Shared Responsibility

If you have chosen to study on or near one of our campuses, I also wish to emphasize the responsibility you are taking on. The CMU community has worked extraordinarily hard to be able to offer the privilege of in-person instruction wherever regional conditions allow. But a plan is only as good as its execution. I am sure you have seen recent news stories about college campuses going fully remote within a few days after the start of the semester. This is a stark reminder that the in-person mode is not guaranteed, and that imprudent actions by a few can have unfortunate consequences for many. But I believe our CMU students will rise to the occasion.

To our students: you are at Carnegie Mellon because you are among the best and the brightest. You have already proven you have the talent and determination to forge promising futures for yourselves and the leadership to be change-makers in society. There has never been a more important time to let these qualities shine and show the world just what CMU students are made of! Especially for our in-person students, by faithfully and consistently following the various protocols and practices that have been designed to keep our community safe, you can determine the trajectory of the entire academic year. I urge you to take this very seriously. Remember: our actions ripple beyond just our university community. What we do and how we behave during this public health crisis has a profound impact on our neighbors in the regions where we are embedded. So, no matter where you are — even if you are staying home — please be mindful of public health guidelines.

There is no doubt that this academic year will look and feel different. But one thing has not changed. Carnegie Mellon University is still positioned like no other institution to shape the next chapter of human development. Whether you are a returning or incoming student, a member of our faculty or of our staff, I urge you to seize the many opportunities ahead to add *your* voice to this exciting CMU story.

Over the next few weeks and months, I look forward to seeing many of you in person or on Zoom. In the meantime, I wish you a safe, healthy and fulfilling year ahead.

Sincerely,

Farnam Jahanian
President
Henry L. Hillman Chair

PS: I invite you to watch my [welcome video](#) which, keep in mind, I recorded last week, with a few reminders for the start of the year.