September 8, 2016

Dear Members of the Clark Community,

Clark University was highlighted in the Sept. 6, 2016, New York Times article about diversity and inclusion efforts on college campuses.

Following the article’s publication, I and others on campus have heard from alumni, parents, faculty, students and friends, many of whom shared their own stories about Clark’s inclusiveness and the need to have these conversations. Others expressed concern that we may be overreaching in this area and that we aren’t preparing our students for life’s jagged edges.

While the story did not capture the breadth, depth and complexity of our work in diversity and inclusion, it does stand as testimony that heightening awareness of difference and creating a fully informed and more welcoming university has long been, and will continue to be, a core Clark value. It is a connective thread in the institution’s DNA.

I need to be clear on this: Central to the Clark University mission is the cultivation of a learning environment in which all members of the Clark community can flourish. Such an environment necessitates being aware of and responsive to the presence of bias and discrimination that can impede the free exchange of ideas and viewpoints. We pride ourselves on educating our students to be contributing citizens in an increasingly complex and multicultural world. We urge them to connect their actions to an essential awareness of practices and perspectives that may differ from their own.

We took a major step in this direction by hiring Sheree Marlowe as our first full-time Chief Officer of Diversity and Inclusion. Sheree recently sent a message to the Clark community addressing the question of what it looks like to successfully advance diversity, equity and inclusion in higher education.

Sheree’s presentation during new-student orientation, referred to in the Times article, was the start to a discussion in which she described microaggressions — chronic and subtle slights, snubs and insults targeted at marginalized groups. Supported by research, this talk addressed the history of the term, which emerged in the 1970s, and described its cumulative impact. The session highlighted the fact that difficult discussions are an essential piece of the college experience — we may have fundamental disagreements (and that dichotomy is healthy), but we also make a good-faith effort to reach common understanding from a historical and contemporary lens.

Our commitment has never been more intentional, and it has been formalized in our most recent Academic and Financial Plan. Our support for freedom of expression extends to the very discussions about diversity and inclusion that were critical to orienting our new students, and which inform the campus dialogue today. We can abide by our motto “Challenge Convention. Change Our World.” only by first challenging ourselves to engage with the respect and empathy we all deserve.

Sincerely,

David P. Angel
President