

Office of the President

Middle Tennessee State University
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August 4, 2021

Mr. Winton Cooper
President
MTSU Student Government Association
P.O. Box 1
Murfreesboro, TN 37132

Dear Winton:

As a follow-up to our meeting in May and in response to your letter of concern regarding events on campus that have created a sense of anxiety and unease among our students, particularly our students of color, I want to assure you that your voice is heard. You have my assurance that I, along with my Executive Team, share many of your concerns on our campus environment and are working to develop solutions that meet the needs of everyone in our campus family.

The matters we face are complex and, unfortunately, not confined to our campus community. Issues related to equality, inclusiveness and social justice represent challenges our nation continues to struggle with and require continue diligence and commitment. While we can address some of your concerns rather quickly, others will no doubt require time and patience to remedy. Nevertheless, we are committed to maintaining a welcoming, supportive environment for all our students.

One of the things that I have found, over the past twenty-one years, that makes MTSU such a unique institution is the commitment and dedication of our key leaders in responding to issues facing our campus. The consistently demonstrate a commitment to our students and the institution, assuring that the needs and perspectives of all involved are considered. In considering the issues outlined in your letter and to assist in responding to your concerns, I have asked our Executive Leadership Team to provide information on many of the issues outlined and make recommendations on potential solutions. I have considered this counsel and developed an action plan to begin to address the issues you have raised. This is not to say that our work is done, but to demonstrate that efforts are underway and more are planned.

While not specifically addressed in your letter, I feel it is important to mention one issue that has occupied a considerable portion of our time and efforts over the past few years, namely the status of the naming of Forrest Hall. With the recent decision by the State Historical Commission and the Tennessee State Building Commission to relocate the bust of Nathan Bedford Forrest from the State Capitol to the Tennessee State Museum, I am confident the building's naming will again be a topic of interest on our campus. Without detailing the extensive efforts we have undertaken over the past

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several years, our legal team continues to monitor state legislation and explore all options that might be available to us and I remain committed to our request to remove the name from the building.

In your role as SGA President, you represent the needs and concerns of our students and I welcome your input. In the coming months, it will be important that our students are aware of our commitment to their well-being and I will look to you and your colleagues on our Student Government Association to help bridge the communication gap between our administration and our student body. Your leadership will be crucial as we work through the issues you have brought forward.

Please accept my thanks for your efforts and I look forward to working with you in building a stronger university community.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Sidney A. McPhee".

Sidney A. McPhee
President

C: Vice President Deb Sells

Recommendations from SGA:

- **The University should create a racial justice toolkit and online resource platform for students and staff to access educational resources and university support services that include counseling and self-care/healing services akin to progressive universities across the United States. It is recommended that courses, research programs, activities, and initiatives that support Black, Asian and other disadvantaged/underrepresented communities be included among these resources.**

I have asked the Intercultural and Diversity Affairs Center (IDA) to explore ways to revamp its website to include a consolidated “toolkit” of resources and programming related to diversity and inclusion, similar to the one created to address LGBTQ+ issues (see <https://www.mtsu.edu/lgbt/>). While much of this information already exists, it should be reconfigured to make it easy for students to find what they need. Additionally, we will provide an easy link to the process to file complaints through IEC. These activities should be ready by the end of August.

In addition, have asked our office of Institutional Equity and Compliance (IEC) to provide information about Access & Diversity funding for faculty and staff, as well as the services we provided related to the non-discrimination policies.

- **The University bolster its annual student and staff campus climate and engagement surveys for the promotion of an updated Campus Climate Study. It is recommended that the updated study be conducted to examine the experiences, observations, and suggestions to create priority areas for the University to assess its weaknesses and develop data-based programming. We also recommend that the aforementioned findings be made public in a spirit of fostering greater transparency.**

IEC has conducted periodic climate surveys evaluating a wide array of topics, including sexual violence, harassment, as diversity, race and inclusion. These studies are available and used to help guide our campus activities and responses.

- **MTSU administration should seek to develop a set of guidelines when addressing the community after acts of violence, vandalism, and racial injustice on our campus, throughout the state, and the country. The University must ensure that this correspondence includes an action plan as to how the University intends to provide support for the affected community.**

The President will decide if and when the University will engage in communications regarding such acts. When the President deems such communications are necessary, we will also include information on what support can be made available, as appropriate, for affected individuals or groups. When appropriate, the President will consider using video technology for such messaging, if he deems the situation could be effectively addressed in that way.

- **Address campus safety concerns by reviewing camera surveillance and campus lighting infrastructure to deter threats of violence and vandalism. Seek student feedback on areas of campus that are perceived to be unsafe.**

Our campus security cameras network is managed by the Information Technology Division, including the total number of cameras, servers and staffing required to maintaining the infrastructure. We also have a Video Security Task Force, led by the University Police that includes members from the Information Technology Division, Facilities Services, and Campus Planning, that provides advice and guidance on the placement and coverage of the growing number of over 900 cameras and eight

emergency call boxes on campus. Their decisions are based on crime statistics, traffic patterns, and other related risk metrics.

In March of this year, University Police, Campus Planning, and Facilities Services participated in a campus physical security assessment with TN Department of Safety and Homeland Security (TSHS). The assessment was extensive covering numerous safety aspects for numerous facilities. Each building assessment was 30+ pages covering many items including lighting.

While we have not received a final report from the assessment, we received high praise, in general, for the safety of our campus and the ways in which we met the safety standards and practices. Once the final report is received, we will be reviewing the report and identifying resources and developing a plan to address any deficiencies.

- **The MTSU Counseling Services increase the diversity of its clinical capacity to reflect the percentage of Black students by hiring counselors who identify as Black/ African American. Additionally, it is recommended that Counseling Services evaluate its workshops and strategies to include group mental health counseling sessions for disadvantaged and underrepresented students on and off-campus.**

MTSU Counseling Services offers supportive counseling to students of color, with all staff having undergone additional Cultural Competency training in August 2020 focused on how to appropriately ask people of color how they identify racially; how to define racism, white privilege, and white fragility; and the importance of self-education so students of color do not bear the responsibility of educating white people on their experience.

MTSU Counseling Services works closely with MTSU Human Resources and with Institutional Equity and Compliance to recruit a qualified and diverse staff. Currently, one of our counselors is a female of color. Consistent with all our recruiting efforts, outreach and targeted marketing are regularly used in support of the University's goal to hire more People of Color, but quotas are not viable because of employment laws.

- **The Division of Student Affairs and /or its departments respond publicly to major crises/acts that are likely to cause distress amongst our student body as a show of unity. The Student Government Association encourages the use of direct language in denouncing racism and the naming of victims where appropriate. The continued sharing of resources to serviced communities is also encouraged.**

In most cases, the division of Student Affairs will defer to the President's Office and to Marketing and Communication to make the initial response to any incidents on campus. In addition, once we are aware of an issue that may seriously impact any group of students on the campus, it is our practice to:

- Alert Counseling Services of the potential additional need/demand for appointments; Counseling Services is also prepared to offer group sessions focused on a particular event/incident to allow students to gather together to process their reactions.
- Ask the appropriate departments to reach out directly and personally to students or student organizations with whom they work and that may be especially impacted, to offer support and resources.
- Alert housing staff of any issues that may need the response of our live-in housing staff.
- Ask all Student Affairs staff to monitor student reactions/responses and, based on those responses, offer additional resources or programming as appropriate.

- As an example, the 2017 “Hands Across MTSU” event was organized by Student Affairs in response to the threatened march to campus by white supremacist organizations. This was a large-scale response to a large-scale incident.
- More recently, CSIL directors, including Leslie Merritt and Jackie Victory, reached out directly to students they work with following the June 2020 protests related to the George Floyd murder. This month, Daniel Green, the director of Intercultural and Diversity Affairs, reached out via email to students and student organizations with whom he works directly to express his personal support and concerns regarding the discovery of racist graffiti in the Rutherford parking lot.
- We will also invite SGA to work with their advisor to create and produce additional programming in response to specific events.

In addition to incident-based response, the Division of Student Affairs offers a variety of race relations/diversity programming, including:

- IDA programming to address issues of inclusion, diversity and racism. Among the programs offered annually are:
 - Critical Conversations, designed to bring together groups of students, faculty, and other resources to discuss “hot topics” and current event issues.
 - History and Awareness Month Programming, celebrating Hispanic Heritage Month (September 15 – October 15); Filipino American History Month (October); German-American Heritage (October); Native American Heritage Month (November); Irish Heritage Month (March), Arab-American Heritage Month (April) and Asian Pacific American Heritage Month (April); additionally, CSIL staff work with MT Lambda to offer an LGBT+ PRIDE night.
 - Intercultural Graduation Reception, celebrating students of color who are completing undergraduate or graduate degrees. This event, offered each term, also includes representatives from MTSU Career Development Center, as well as employers looking to diversify their workforce.

- MTSU Black History Month is a major focus for the campus during February of each year.
 - MLK Candlelight Vigil and Celebration
 - IDA administers five endowed/sponsored scholarships for students from diverse backgrounds.
 - IDA provides physical gathering space and both formal and informal advisement and mentorship to a variety of student organizations that support multicultural students, including the Caribbean Student Association, Chinese Student and Scholar Association, Collegiate 100, FUTURO of MTSU, Minority Graduate Student Association, MT Lambda, MTSU Japanese Club, MTSU India Cultural Exchange, Bahamian Student Organization, Black Student Union, Muslim Student Association, MTSU NAACP; National Pan-Hellenic Council, Saudi Student Association; Students United for Africa. Africa (Note: Re-registration for student groups for 2021-2022 is in progress and some of these groups listed have not yet re-registered)
- In addition to the programming supported through IDA, other resources are available in areas such as these:
 - Seven active chapters of the Divine Nine of NPHC are advised through our Fraternity and Sorority Life staff.
 - SPARE (Student Programming and Raider Entertainment) co-sponsors a movie(s) during Black History Month either related to the Black History Month theme and/or addressing race-related topics.
 - The University College supports the Scholars Academy and the STARS programs, both of which provide on-going academic and personal support for all students, but with a focus on students of color. Housing & Residential Life provides on-campus accommodations for both programs.
 - TRIO Student Support Services is a federally funded program designed to work with first generation, income eligible students. The program offers tutoring, academic/career counseling, personal support/encouragement, cultural/campus events, and success workshops.

- MTSU offers the first African Studies major in the region, and the only one in Tennessee with the option of either a Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) or a Bachelor of Science (B.S.) degree.
- **Publicize the mission, work, activity, and/or recommendations of the University President's related Task Force and create opportunities for more student engagement. Report to the University periodically on how we are addressing institutional bias and racism.**

I have asked our Office of Marketing and Communications to develop plans for disseminating the work of the Task Force and to include regular updates in our campus communications.

- **Organize a regular schedule of open forums where students, faculty, and staff can engage and participate in dialogue about race-related issues similar to successful programming by the division of Intercultural and Diversity Affairs.**

IEC has previously offered Brown Bag Lunch events for this, but none were held in AY 2020-21 due to pandemic restrictions and understaffing. As we return to a more open campus environment, post COVID-19, we can resume these events and/or explore other alternatives.

- **Make the process to file complaints involving discrimination, harassment, or bias more easily accessible to students. See current page here:**
http://www.mtsu.edu/discrimination/complaints_discrimination.php

There are a number of existing links on university pages that provide the ability for individuals to file complaints, but I am always open to suggestions on other possible locations, that would be of use to students, Among the locations currently in use are:

- IEC's webpage, at <https://www.mtsu.edu/iec/index.php>, which has a button labeled "Discrimination and Harassment Reporting Form" that routes directly to multiple members of our staff so that it can be addressed as soon as possible.
- On the university's A-to-Z Index (<https://www.mtsu.edu/atoz.php>) the link for "Discrimination" takes users to the Title IX page; that also includes links (in the left-hand panel) for other forms of discrimination. On this page, we are looking at possibly replacing the "Discrimination" link with <https://www.mtsu.edu/iec/discrimination-harassment-form.php>.
- We can look at the revised "toolkit" reference earlier for another possible link for reporting.