December 12, 2015

Dear James Madison College Community,

On May 12, 2015, I was sent a letter by a group of African American students outlining a wide range of concerns regarding the College, race relations, and curriculum. I responded to the students directly, on May 14th, inviting a wider dialogue and informing them of a series of steps I had taken to make the existing Racial Climate Committee, the Faculty Affairs Committee, Field Chairs, and the Chairs of MC 201 and MC 202 aware of the letter and asking them to apprise me of steps that ought to be taken to assess and address these concerns. A week later, I invited Madison’s African and African American faculty to consult, and I began a series of conversations with university officials, African American alumni, and others who could provide prospective. I have addressed the Senate and met with the E-board of the DuBois Society. The original student letter and my correspondence are attached. I am also attaching the fact sheet distributed at the December 8th Town Hall, which outlines actions taken by the college this calendar year. It was at this meeting that I realized that many people were unaware of the letter, my response, and the subsequent steps taken by the College. I have asked Ms. Jasmine Lee to distribute the attached texts and to establish and maintain a website that will permit access to these and future college documents on these issues. The website will be active by Friday, Dec. 18th and will be accessible from the JMC main webpage.

The issue of race remains a matter of central importance to the faculty, staff, and students of Madison College. One of the most important actions we can take is to understand the race climate as accurately as possible. In 2009, a 25-page study was produced after a year-long examination of students, faculty, and staff through 14 focus group interviews. One of the recommendations of that report was to survey the climate at least every five years. In Fall 2014 such a review was carried out by the Faculty Affairs Committee (FAC) and staff of the college, resulting in a report to the faculty in November 2014. On recommendation of the FAC and myself, the Racial Climate Committee (RCC) was formed in March 2015 to examine new concerns about the racial climate. I amended the charge for the committee to take account of the student letter after it was received. The RCC is tasked to forward a full list of recommendations no later than April 2016. Recommendations will include issues related to curriculum, faculty-student interactions, classroom dynamics, issues of college policy, communication, and peer culture, and, like the last report, will be shared with the full JMC community. The RCC is comprised of faculty, staff, and students. Its immediate task, which it has begun this Fall, is to conduct a series of focus groups and surveys of students, faculty, and staff. In order to have a full sense of the racial climate of the College, we need significant student participation in forthcoming surveys and focus groups.

Let me say a few closing words as Dean. We cannot be a great college and have people feel excluded on the basis of race, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, religion, or creed. It remains my goal to create an environment for all students that is both intellectually challenging and emotionally safe. As faculty, staff, and administrators we strive to make JMC a community of scholars, in which all students feel valued, visible, and heard, in all
aspects of the college. Please know that I am open to hearing any concerns from students and will do my due diligence to ensure they are addressed in a timely fashion. I have asked Ms. Lee to pass on the suggestions and stories that emerged at the Dec. 8th Town Hall to the RCC, and I am working with FAC on immediate issues that can be fixed in a much shorter timeline such as college events, commencement, summer readings, and freshmen orientation.

Good luck on finals, and I hope you have a relaxing break.

Sherman W. Garnett, Dean

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