

November 24, 2015

Dear Rice Community,

Thanksgiving is upon us. By its very name, Thanksgiving is a holiday about gratitude. For myself, that includes being grateful for the privilege of being part of the Rice community.

Each fall I have written to the community about our Rice values, which have been summarized using the letters of our name: Responsibility, Integrity, Community and Excellence. These values are intended to guide our behavior and define our culture, and I refer to them often as I engage various parts of the Rice community. I ask you to share our commitment to using them to bring out the best in ourselves as individuals and as a university.

As I mentioned, I am deeply grateful for our community. But gratitude does not preclude reflecting critically about that community, both its strengths and shortcomings, as part of an overarching desire to improve it. Indeed, our values of responsibility and excellence require that we constantly work to identify what we can do to make it better. Our aspiration must be to ensure that Rice is fully inclusive for all who are part of it and contribute to it.

A crucial responsibility of membership in our community is therefore our respect for others. Such respect often begins with being polite, something my parents instilled in me and that, I hope, Ping and I have instilled in our children. Politeness is very important, but true respect goes much deeper and carries more extensive obligations.

Respect, particularly within an educational community, obliges us to listen to others and seek to learn from them, even when we don't always agree with or understand their perspective. Indeed, much of our education is aimed at learning to understand differing perspectives and how to listen to and communicate effectively with others who do not share our own background, experiences or ideas.

A core value of our community is the freedom of speech and ideas, a freedom that is especially essential and robust on university campuses. That freedom also carries a responsibility to think carefully about how others react to our words and expressions. That responsibility is not at odds with our freedom of speech, but integral to it for the best functioning of an open and diverse university community.

I emphasize these issues of community in part because this semester has been a challenging one for the sense of community on college campuses across the nation. Early in the fall, we released the Survey on Unwanted Sexual Experiences. The survey results make it clear that some members of our community are not treating others with the respect they deserve, and indeed committing acts that are completely unacceptable. As a community we must do more to provide the actions and education all of us need in order to prevent assaults and sexual misconduct from occurring.

Communities across our country have also been experiencing heightened awareness of the deaths of African Americans, and especially young black men and women, as the result of encounters with the police. While these events have occurred outside of our campus, they affect us in very important ways, and it is understandable and right that they affect many of us very deeply. As a result, members of our community have experienced this time as one of special concern and fear, and that calls for all of us to be even more mindful of how both words and actions may be perceived depending on each of our own experiences and the vulnerabilities that we face.

Most recently, particularly with events beginning at the University of Missouri, there is increased awareness on college campuses across the nation about issues of racial justice. There is questioning whether our campuses are truly inclusive, and whether our institutions of higher education are fulfilling their aspirations to be both engines of opportunity and centers for understanding of the racial and ethnic issues that continue to confront us. We must all listen carefully to the emerging dialogue and seek to understand the perspectives and experiences of others even, and indeed especially, when they differ substantially from our own. That is what an educational community should truly be about.

We ask each member of our community to help assure an inclusive environment and to reflect our values through our actions in the following ways:

- \* Show respect for everyone on campus, regardless of position or office. Think about how our words might be hurtful to someone else. Avoid careless actions that might endanger or make more work for others.
- \* Take care not to discriminate against any individual because of race, color, religion, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, national or ethnic origin, ancestry, age, disability or veteran status.
- \* As part of Rice's commitment to diversity, help recruit and retain people from diverse backgrounds.
- \* Make reasonable accommodations for persons with disabilities, and be ready to assist them.
- \* Avoid personal biases, preferences and preconceived stereotypes. Be inclusive and reach out to others who make up our diverse population.
- \* Always respect the privacy and dignity of others.
- \* Remain alert to, and help eliminate, bad behaviors that damage our community in the classroom, residential colleges, graduate student residences and every other campus venue so that we all can participate and perform to our fullest potential.

I wish you a wonderful Thanksgiving holiday — a time of gratitude, reflection and aspiration. I hope we will all recommit ourselves to building the kind of inclusive and diverse community at Rice that we aspire to, a community in which both fierce respect for each other and thoughtful exchange of perspectives characterize our experience. I have high confidence in our ability to meet those challenges, and I welcome the opportunity to be part of that effort.

With warm regards and best wishes for the holiday,

*David*

David W. Leebron  
President

Rice's affirmative action policy and the Board of Trustees' resolutions supporting cultural inclusiveness are available at <http://www.professor.rice.edu/professor/policies.asp>. If you feel you have been treated in a manner contrary to these policies, contact Russell Barnes, director of affirmative action and equal employment opportunity programs, at [rcb@rice.edu](mailto:rcb@rice.edu).