

MACALESTER COLLEGE



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To the members of the Macalester community,

During the past several days, a number of executive orders have been issued by the White House that would, if fully enacted, represent a dramatic change in the way the United States interacts with and understands the rights of many groups of people from around the world and many people who are residents of this country.

These orders would have a direct and profound impact on many who attend and work at American colleges and universities and an indirect impact on many more. It is wholly appropriate, therefore, for colleges and universities to respond, and some have begun to do so in statements from their presidents and from others.

I applaud these statements. I also believe that they are, in some instances, too cautious. This caution is understandable, given the vulnerability of institutions to governmental action and, maybe more important, the responsibility to allow our campuses to be places where varied and conflicting views can be freely expressed.

But there are times when policies pose so great a threat to the central purpose of higher education that leaders must speak with particular force, even while recognizing that not everyone in the broad community that comprises a college will agree. An example would be the response to the various legal challenges to the use of affirmative action in college admissions. Though views on affirmative action among students, faculty, staff, and alumni are surely varied, many schools, including Macalester, have more than once signed amicus briefs in support of its preservation. The standard for taking action cannot be unanimity of opinion, but the degree of importance to our core principles and activities.

The recent executive orders pose threats to our work that are at least as great as, if not greater than, the challenges to affirmative action. They would affect who can attend and be employed at our schools, where members of our community can travel and study, and who might visit us. They would threaten the safety, security, and basic human dignity of many people who walk beside us every day.

I respect the right of anyone to argue that one or more of these proposed changes in policy is defensible. I hope others will respect my right to argue that they are not. I will leave it to the courts to determine whether or not they are legal, but history has shown us far too often that legality and morality are not always aligned. It takes no court to see that these orders are cowardly and cruel. They make a mockery of the claim that we are a country of generosity and decency.

It is also impossible to see them as anything other than antithetical to the mission of a college that, to cite our own words, embraces “internationalism, multiculturalism, and service to society.” Again, one is free to assert that this is the wrong mission, but it is our mission, and until and unless it is altered we are bound to abide by it and to acknowledge that these new policies fly in its face. They are an assault on the work that we are called upon to do.

There are of course a very limited number of institutional actions we can take in response to these executive orders. It is also the case that the situation we face changes daily, as new orders and a raft of legal challenges emerge. Part of the perniciousness of these actions is the extent to which they have, through lack of competence or lack of compassion, spread confusion and panic. I want to be clear, however, about what we will prioritize as we make decisions in the days ahead.

Our highest priority will be the welfare of those in our community who are most directly affected and most vulnerable, particularly Muslim students and employees and DACA students. Within the limits of our ability, we will provide them with all that they need: financial aid, housing, legal help, and counseling. We will also place their wishes and their safety above all else.

When there is a concrete action that we can take, within the bounds of the law, to lessen the impact of these policies, we will take it.

We will respect the privacy of all our students and release no information that is not already public and unless compelled to do so by the law.

In every possible setting we will argue against the wisdom, justice, and efficacy of these orders: with elected officials, with community and business leaders, and with the broader public. There will be no uncertainty about where we stand.

We will work with Macalester Plymouth UCC, which has voted to become a sanctuary church. This means that in partnership with ISAIAH, an interfaith organizing body, they will help place and support those who invoke sanctuary while they battle legal matters pertaining to immigration and deportation.

We will reach out to many of you for help. Already I have received offers from alumni, parents, faculty, and staff to provide housing for students who might be stranded. I expect that there will come a time when such assistance will be invaluable.

If you are a student or a member of our faculty or staff who needs help of any kind, do not hesitate to reach out to me directly. I will take it as a personal responsibility to connect you with the best available resources.

Please know that there are many of us to whom Macalester is entrusted who are thinking about this every day. We are heartbroken and we are angry, but we are not defeated. This is far from the first, and will not be the last, shameful moment in our country's history. But at every one of those moments, people have arisen to call forth and inspire "the better angels of our nature."

Let us be among them.

Brian Rosenberg