



Dear Ashford Staff Members,

Since becoming the university's president, I've reflected openly in several of our gatherings about having chosen education and teaching as my vocation. I have always believed that my choice consciously involved taking on certain obligations. One of those obligations was that I would use my skills as an educator to try to improve the lives of those I was privileged to teach.

The current national debate impacts our Ashford students, staff, and faculty members. It impacts the communities in which we and our students live and work. It impacts the health of our society. It also affects me deeply and personally. In that spirit I want to let you know that Black Lives Matter to me. During this time of crisis, therefore, my focus is on using my skills to encourage and facilitate dialogue that will foster greater understanding and bring about real and lasting change.

This passionate debate cannot help finding its way into our classrooms. Racial injustice and inequality are subjects about which too many have been too silent for too long. It is important to me that you receive a copy of this letter that was sent to the faculty a few hours ago. They are the members of our Ashford community responsible to create learning environments that represent safe places for discussion and for promoting equity and civility. For that reason, I have shared in the following message what I believe are the obligations our faculty bring to our classrooms.

Sincerely,

CRAIG D. SWENSON, PH.D. / PRESIDENT
Ashford University



(This message was sent to all Ashford University faculty.)

A MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT OF ASHFORD UNIVERSITY



Dear Ashford Faculty Colleagues,

My decision to write this message emerged from my appreciation of the purpose and commitment for the welfare of our students that I know we share—and that embodies the Ashford University culture. It was also motivated by an awareness of the responsibility institutions of higher education share during times of crisis.

I've often reflected that in choosing education and teaching as my vocation, I freely took on certain obligations. As educators, we share the responsibility to expand and transmit knowledge, create learning environments that promote the growth and development of every student, and through service, to contribute to improving our communities and our world.

We are currently engaged in a highly emotional national debate regarding how we can guarantee that equality and social justice, our birthright as Americans, apply to all. This place in time is, therefore, of such critical importance that it ought to compel us all to reconsider how we view and attempt to understand the perceptions and experiences of others. The success of this effort will depend on whether, as individuals and as a society, we can open ourselves to seeing the world through others' eyes. If we can accomplish that goal, we may finally ensure that the last phrase of our Pledge of Allegiance, "with liberty and justice for all" signifies more than just words upon a page.

This passionate debate cannot help finding its way into our classrooms. Racial injustice and inequality are subjects about which too many have been too silent for too long. As difficult and painful as open discussion can be, only by exposing it to the light of day will we be able to create real and lasting change.

One of Ashford's institutional learning outcomes—to me one of higher education's most fundamental purposes—is to help our student become critical thinkers. Not only is this key to our students' personal and professional success, it is essential to the health of our democracy. Discussion and dialogue that leads to mutual understanding is a critical aspect of helping students develop these skills.

With that in mind, and considering the daunting challenges we now face, our classrooms must be places that foster understanding and contribute to civil discourse. To that end, I believe it is incumbent upon each of us to consider the power and import of the words we choose. This is particularly important when members of our class are members of marginalized populations whose life experiences may be very different from our

own. Creating a common base of understanding invites these students to risk sharing. In the current climate, words and phrases whose meanings we often take for granted may take on larger, unintended meanings.

One example might be found in the use of the phrase “all lives matter,” as a response to those in the Black Lives Matter movement. In a different time and place these words may not have given reason for offense. In the context of our current national debate, however, the term has become politicized.

For many African Americans, the term “all lives matter” negates and minimizes the legacy of violence against members of the African-American community. The phrase dismisses the need for further discussion by failing to acknowledge that unless black lives matter, all lives cannot matter. The number of highly visible recent incidents of continued violence, particularly against young African-American men, has ignited national and global protests and increased pressure for political action demanding change.

The high pitch of our current national debate truly challenges us as we attempt to promote discussion, dialogue, and learning. Being aware of our words shouldn’t be taken to suggest that our classroom discussions shouldn’t challenge students to think. A university is a marketplace of ideas. However, the purpose of course discussions is to facilitate learning. Discussion leadership involves guiding, prodding, questioning, clarifying, and correcting. We want students to truly engage with us—and that can only happen for all of our students in an inclusionary environment. We should ask ourselves whether our choice of language creates a safe environment for discussion or, instead, has a chilling effect on real dialogue.

I previously [released a statement](#) that represents the official position of Ashford University and its Board of Trustees regarding the challenges we face in building an equitable and just society. Building on that initial communication, we intend not only to continue the discussion, but to take action within our community. In partnership with our colleges and CETL, we will be hosting events designed both educate and foster dialogue, share resources, and encourage action that will enrich our classrooms and strengthen our university’s culture.

I also encourage you to visit and contribute to our [growing library of both academic and experiential resources](#).

Finally, I am grateful for the good hearts, good thoughts, and good works embodied in our culture. I believe that the decisions we now make as a society will determine how the future story of our grand experiment in democracy is written. I hope we will be an important contributor to the next chapter.

Sincerely,

CRAIG D. SWENSON, PH.D. / PRESIDENT

Ashford University



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