10 December 2014

Dear Emory Community,

As we come to the end of the fall semester before taking a welcome holiday break, I want to reflect for a moment about the state of our university as a community. In particular, I invite us to consider what it means to be an academic community in this moment of history.

The semester has been a good one. We welcomed an extraordinary class of new students back in August as well as stellar new faculty members in all of our nine schools and colleges. Our researchers, scholars, and teachers have achieved significant national awards and recognition. Our healthcare enterprise has earned global distinction. Our athletic teams have excelled while exemplifying the ideal of the student-athlete. New initiatives in shared governance on the part of the faculty are under way. The Employee Council has shown great enterprise in seeking avenues to make what is already good better. Through wise facilities planning, maintenance, and stewardship, we have met long-standing energy sustainability goals. We have much to be proud of.

At the same time, the semester has brought us challenges. These have ranged from hateful expressions of bias and discrimination to incidents of sexual violence — behaviors unworthy of a community of scholars. While we have taken steps together to address the particular incidents that occurred this semester, I am convinced that the vast majority of Emory people share a belief that we can be doing more to address systemic problems and raise the quality of our community.

These thoughts are sharpened, of course, by what has been happening across our nation in the wake of tragic deaths of two black men in Ferguson, Missouri, and New York City and the subsequent legal decisions rendered. There can be no question that we continue to struggle as a society with historic injustice and divisions. At Emory we are fortunate to have resources to help foster dialogue about the larger questions implied by the specifics. As our students showed us last week, we have in our midst thoughtful, compassionate, and energetic young people for whom these larger questions are a matter of passionate personal interest and social import. As some of our faculty members demonstrated during the Teach-In on the Quad in October, we are blessed to have wise, learned, and committed intellectual leaders motivated by the highest ideals and the deepest insight. Surely, as people of good will working alongside each other, we can find a way forward that might serve as a model for other communities around our country.

When we return from the winter holiday break, King Week will come upon us quickly. It will be a poignant reminder of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s call for making a reality, at
long last, out of that vision of a “Beloved Community.” There are certain policies and practices that can be adopted by the university administration toward this end, and between now and the start of the new semester I will be consulting with others about further steps we might take as a university administration. But there must exist also a community-wide aspiration to understand and own the values of justice, inclusion, and equity, and how it is that, as Dr. King wrote, “we are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality.” Our mutuality calls us to help forge new thinking, new patterns of behavior, new insights, and clarity of action. Here in the cradle of American civil rights, Atlanta, we must build on the legacy that has been bequeathed to us.

With gratitude for a remarkable fall semester, and with a sense of challenge and confidence for the future ahead of us, I wish you the peace and deep joy that are the message of this season.

Sincerely,

Jim Wagner
President