June 1, 2020

Dear LeMoyne-Owen College Community,

Over the past days, we have watched city after city, including our own, lament in righteous anger the tragedy and injustice we have all witnessed time and again, not only in the death of George Floyd. We are all once again reminded that we continue to be on a journey to achieve racial and economic equality and social justice in this nation. This is not a struggle only in Minneapolis, but rather the true cause for which HBCUs exist and why we do our jobs here at LeMoyne-Owen College, each and every day.

Some of you know, that while I was born and raised here in West Tennessee, over 20 years of my teaching career was spent in Minneapolis and I lived in South Minneapolis when I first arrived in Minnesota. My husband, Willie and I both have children and grandchildren and other family members who reside in Minneapolis and the twin cities area, so for us, we feel personally connected to these violent events. Our hearts ache, we are deeply saddened and we are also outraged that we continue to see individuals with so little respect and regard for human life and the human rights and dignity of others; and where systems of oppression persist without consequences for those who perpetuate harm to others.

As an historically Black college, one which has a history and legacy of leadership, service and civil rights, the LeMoyne-Owen College family must draw upon the values of our ancestors, many of whom sacrificed so that we would today NOT, still be in this tiresome struggle, to resolve and confront what we see. It is especially poignant as we acknowledge the 60th anniversary of some of LOC’s students participating in a sit-in protest to desegregate city libraries in 1960. It is up to us to create the conditions for transforming, rebuilding and redefining for the broader community who we are, the contributions of historically Black colleges to this nation, and why it is important that we continue to exist. We have a special and unique responsibility to educate the next generation of socially conscious leaders, and we, as the only HBCU in Memphis must become more deeply connected to being a part of the Memphis and mid-south community, its policy leadership and decision makers.

There is no more important work before us than reimagining our college community as a place where students are academically and socially prepared to confront injustice and to lead the revolution of ideas, research and policies that will eliminate racism and senseless harm. This is certainly beyond a single incident, or police department, but rather what we experience daily is embedded in a set of systemic structures that transcend multiple sectors and must be dismantled by those we educate. We can no longer ignore or tolerate injustice, if our students are to succeed.

Our students are watching events unfold, and while they already had many questions about the impact of the virus on their college future, and the disproportionate impact in the black community, they are now asking themselves how and why such bigotry and hatred continues unabated. Every single day individuals
make choices about how they will contribute to the betterment of their community and each one of us will choose to show up in ways that will add value and invite our students to join us, or not.

We all know that our students have many higher education options, and if we expect them to choose us, they must see in our hearts and in our minds, not just a syllabus or a rigorous assignment or lecture, they must see a college that is academically strong, is agile and can readily adapt to an uncertain future; they must also see in us a college that is proud and educators who care enough to do whatever it takes to help them to graduate and succeed in a world that has not always been fair to all, and in particular, African Americans. The road ahead is not easy, and our students will need every tool possible that we can give them to navigate society with confidence and support when they return. What we do know is this, "Not one of us can do this alone". It is our collective effort and energy and our intentional and deliberate focus on our community's well-being that is demanded. It is both what we do and what we say that matter. I call on you at this moment in our history to come prepared to meet our students where they are and guide them to lead, serve, and change the hurt and destruction we’re seeing now.

Right now, many of our students may be participating in collective activism in their prospective locations. Always remembering our history, we encourage them to advocate for equality and channel their frustration with the state of race relations and injustice through positive outlets whether it be through peaceful protest, fundraising support or community organizing of their own.

It will take all of us working together, with our students as the priority, to make the change we so desperately need.

Sincerely,

Carol Johnson Dean
Interim President