January 15, 2021 – Campuswide email

Dear Students, Faculty, and Staff,

At the end of our first week of CentreTerm, I write with hope for the New Year, even as we face many on-going challenges. As we deal with the pandemic, and our deep concerns about the abhorrent events of January 6 and the need for a peaceful transfer of power in Washington, D.C. next week, I’m reminded of our common purpose. This moment impresses upon me that, now more than ever, the work that we do here at Centre College—focused on learning, leadership, and service—is of vital importance.

Reflecting on the purpose of our College in our tumultuous, modern world, Brian Rosenberg (Emeritus President of Macalester College) stated well a key principle that drives our common work forward:

The fundamental job of the college or university is to teach students to distinguish the true from the untrue, fact from opinion, evidence from insistence. This is not to say that colleges do this perfectly, that all or even most important things can be unequivocally proved, or that all people on a campus will agree on consequential truths. But an English major as much as a physics major, an artist as much as an economist, should, if the college is doing its job well, learn to understand the difference between assertions supported or unsupported by evidence. (Full article available here.)

Now, in our third century as an institution of higher learning, we join together at the start of 2021 to lift up our common goals of teaching and learning in a community dedicated to scientific investigation, an interdisciplinary and multi-cultural appreciation of literature and the humanities, and an abiding knowledge of and interaction with the arts in the service of advancing human understanding, equity, global civic responsibility, and justice.

For me, the past few months have brought into focus the need to think more concretely about how to be a responsible leader. This process has involved assessing my own biases and dispositions, and learning about competing and differing ideas, in order to collaborate effectively as we seek to advance our goals of not only critically analyzing our world but also advancing concrete initiatives that will help us be agents of change as we encounter local and global issues. As I’m sometimes compelled to do, in this hour of discord and tumult, I’ve sought counsel from wise friends, historians, sociologists, and other scholars from around the academy to help me better understand our current world. I invite you to share the names and references to wise voices that are currently inspiring and enlivening your thinking. To name just three for me, I recommend the work of Danielle Allen, Claudia Rankine, and Jason Stanley.
I’m grateful for all the ways that Centre faculty, staff, and students are sensibly responding to the threats to democracy that we saw in the riots and violence of January 6. Let’s continue to lift up our community as a place that values reason, the pursuit of truth, the airing of differences, and the quest for integrity, fairness, and kindness. In that light, I encourage you to join in the events that are being presented by the Office of Diversity and Inclusion and the Bonner Program on Monday, January 18 in honor of Martin Luther King, Jr. Day. (Additional information here and here.)

As we start 2021, I remain regretful that we have not been able to meet each other in person, but I’m grateful that we have had many helpful opportunities to see each other on Zoom calls over the past year. It is more important than ever to meet as a community and share our ideas, concerns, and information. Prior to the start of the spring term, we’ll look forward to hearing about vaccines, campus plans, strategic planning, and what we must do to keep the campus open during this pandemic. So that you can mark your calendars, our tentative dates for meetings in the next few weeks are as follows:

- Townhall for Faculty and Staff (two times, so people can pick what works best): Thursday, January 21, 9 a.m. or 4:30 p.m.
- Staff Forum: Tuesday, February 2, 11 a.m.
- Townhall for Students: Wednesday, February 3, 3 p.m.
- Townhall for Parents and Families: Wednesday, February 3, 6 p.m.
- Faculty Forum: Thursday, February 4, 1 p.m.

In the next weeks we will also host our annual winter trustee meeting (virtually). While our strategic planning process is the main focus, since this is so pivotal to our work ahead, we will have other pressing topics to discuss, including our budget during this pandemic. I will have more to report after we meet with the devoted people who hold this college in trust and provide invaluable insights, fiscal responsibility, and wise counsel.

As we begin 2021, I hope we can all be resolved to maintain the level of care and commitment to one another that made our fall term such a success. Despite the uphill challenges that remain, we will get through these unprecedented times. Please remain dedicated to observing the social contract as you come on campus, being respectful and kind to each other as we pursue a safe and healthy semester at Centre.

Sincerely,
Milton