A message from the NRI Co-Directors: Kenneth S. Kosik and Stu Feinstein

The murder of George Floyd has prompted soul searching and calls to action.

A university with many disciplines has many perspectives, and therefore as the Co-Directors of the Neuroscience Research Institute allow us to offer our perspective on the painful issues that have come to the fore in the past couple weeks. Inherent racism in our institutions was unmasked by the relentless eye and brave steady hands of Darnella Frazier who recorded every detail of the horror including the smirk on the cop’s face, and has opened a deep vein in the country, has made visible centuries of injustice, bigotry and violence with impunity toward the Black community. And like the parallel pandemic, a virulence is surfacing toward the LatinX and Asian communities and toward anyone, usually the privileged, who does not project the institutional image that “all is well in the cosmos.” All is not well right here in our own university.

On Friday, in a Town Hall on State Violence, Anti-Blackness and the Black Student Experience, twenty-four of our black students and black studies faculty voiced the discrimination, the fear, the isolation, the daily micro-aggressions and overt aggressions as well as vulnerability and resilience in a poignant show of strength. We heard a powerful message along with the refrain that the message has been delivered many times but neither heard, believed, nor acted on.

The Town Hall made it clear that we have a lot of work to do, but it was particularly sad to hear the life sciences specifically called out as unresponsive to the concerns of black students. The comments are not new—what is new is that the pandemic is forcing us to reinvent how our campus will operate in the face of a lurking virus that has crumbled both the good and the bad of our social structures. Planning for the unknown is daunting, but it is also an opportunity to right the wrongs of the past and tear down institutionalized racism in higher education and in STEM.

In the uneasiness of our future, let’s open the university under the banner of racial justice. In our mission of discovery and the conveyance of knowledge, let’s make our research and teaching responsive to our times. Every discipline touches what our students will take with them when they leave here. Our genetic mixtures and their interplay with traits, the statistics that validate flagrant economic and health disparities including the far greater mortality of COVID-19 in Blacks, the cognitive science of unconscious bias, our anthropological origins as
small isolates that feared outsiders in a way that no longer serves us well, artificial intelligence algorithms that discriminate, facial recognition software that falsely indict people of color, the detection of pollutants that contaminate our poorest communities, and the vastly greater impact of environmental degradation on those at the margins. In our current system, these topics are not ignored, but they are not treated in sufficient depth, not integrated throughout the curriculum, nor widely disseminated. And beyond the sciences, the noble values found in the arts and humanities geared toward molding good citizens needs a more visible platform to educate a wider slice of our community and to remind us that free speech does not mean hate speech.

As an Organized Research Unit we are fortunate to draw upon the talents and interests of faculty and students in many departments who share an interest in Neuroscience. Few disciplines have so many opportunities for collaboration. Just add the prefix neuro- to whatever topic interests you and you have an entry point. However, in the thrill of our scientific discoveries and with the expectation that our students will immerse themselves in the academic agenda, we have forgotten about the roiling undertow of their pre-existing social issues. We have denied what we know: that the damage of chronic stress to the brain pertains to our students. We have tried committees and colloquia, prayers and protests. Eventually the system breaks.

Now more than ever, we have to hear what our Black colleagues are saying and stand with them. The NRI echoes the words of Dr. Tettegah, the director of The Center for Black Studies: We stand “in solidarity against violence, discrimination, marginalization, intolerance, negative attributions, bigotry and the historical genocide of Black people throughout the diaspora.” We owe it to ourselves and the community to affirm those words while knowing that a truly deep understanding of living in the skin of our black students and colleagues must necessarily remain elusive, as Toni Morrison conveyed by a haunting number on an otherwise empty page in the epigraph of Beloved: Sixty Million and more. Count them—George Floyd, Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, Michael Brown, Eric Gamer, Philando Castile, Rayshard Brooks, Breonna Taylor...