Dear UConn Community,

Recent events have called national attention yet again to the destructive power of prejudice and racism. The death of George Floyd in police custody in Minneapolis serves as our most recent example. We are disgusted by the images we have seen capturing the unconscionable acts that caused his death. Demonstrations across the country make clear that communities are hurting and frustrated by repeated acts of violence against their neighbors, friends, and families. These events have saddened and angered so many on a deeply personal level, with the burden of fear for one’s own and their family’s safety placed squarely upon African-Americans.

Unfortunately, this is just one of many examples of the pain caused by systemic injustices that are present every day. Take, for example, the disproportionate rates of death by COVID-19 among African-American, Latinx, and Indigenous peoples, or the discriminatory acts targeting individuals of Asian descent and foreign nationals from many countries in this pandemic. This adds to the already vulnerable experience of so many in our community, including but not limited to DACA students who are unsure about their future; individuals with disabilities who can feel invisible; LGBTQ+ individuals experiencing verbal and physical acts of violence; individuals subjected to intolerance based on their religious identity and beliefs; and people of color who are forced to constantly question if they can engage safely in routine activities like jogging or bird watching.

These events underscore the critical importance of our infusing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in everything we do every single day. Not with mantra and platitudes, but with clearly articulated and tangible action that is supported by the University with budget and action. As scholars, educators, and colleagues, we are uniquely positioned to reflect, learn, and act.

We are committed to this work as UConn moves forward from some of its own recent struggles. We have a crucial new partner in these efforts with the recent hire of Dr. Frank Tuitt as our new Vice President and Chief Diversity Officer. We are all eager to work with him to sustain a culture that understands, respects, and appreciates differences, but also one that readily acknowledges our shortcomings and holds ourselves accountable for measurable progress at all times.

As he looks ahead to this new role, Frank shared the following: “I strongly believe that institutions like UConn should be at the center of creating spaces for students, faculty, and staff to imagine and invent ways to build more inclusive, affirming, and equitable institutions, organizations, and communities, and I look forward to doing my part to contribute to that collective effort.”

We have communicated closely with him over the past several days, and we all will benefit from his leadership and expertise.

We have the opportunity to engage our entire community in the work that is needed, building upon continued advocacy and efforts of concerned faculty, staff, and administrators at UConn in collaboration with our cultural centers and our amazing undergraduate and graduate students who are willing to speak clearly and directly about their experiences. Change cannot be carried
out by one person or one office alone. Too often the labor of this work is disproportionately undertaken by our most vulnerable, impacting their career progression, as well as their mental health and overall satisfaction with their work experience. This is a time when we can build momentum to share the responsibility across our entire community at our Storrs, UConn Health, Avery Point, Hartford, Stamford, Waterbury, and law school campuses.

We also have been extremely fortunate to benefit from the stewardship of Interim Chief Diversity Officer Dana Wilder. Building on strengths of the Office for Diversity and Inclusion, we are positioned as a national leader and a place where people of all identities feel they have a genuine opportunity for success and belonging. We encourage each of you to explore their website, which includes multiple resources including trainings and guides as well as information on events and cultural centers sponsored by their office.

There are no simple solutions or easy answers to solve the issues of injustice and prejudice in society and at our University. Of all of the various parts of our experience as administrators, this is the one area where we both feel like we have not done enough or met our own expectations. We do not experience that feeling as despair, but instead as a motivator to understand and accept our own privilege and the responsibilities that it brings to do more. We encourage our community to hold our entire leadership team accountable as we carry out that vital work together.

The challenge now is to remember this moment even if it fades from the headlines and to continue to strive for a society and a UConn that allows all to live safely and welcomed.

Sincerely,
Tom and Carl

Tom Katsouleas
President

Carl Lejuez
Provost and Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs