

# TO ADDRESS STUDENT NEEDS, UNIVERSITIES MUST COMMIT TO SOCIAL JUSTICE

By Joe Bertolino

**T**his fall, Southern Connecticut State University will celebrate its 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary—celebrating all that is good about our institution and its time-honored mission of building communities and empowering lives.

Southern students come from varying racial, ethnic, religious, gender and economic backgrounds. Many have had to overcome life's obstacles to earn a degree: working jobs while studying; supporting children or elderly relatives; taking those initial, uncertain steps as the first in their families to attend college.

But the needs of our students cannot be addressed, and their goals cannot be achieved, without an institutional commitment to social justice as a core value of our university. In my view, social justice is not a political platform, but rather the full realization of the values on which our nation was founded: the right to be who you are and to espouse and express what you believe in.

These values have been tested at institutions across the country during the past year, with angry, sometimes violent reactions to speakers from the far right or, in our case, the use of a racial slur in a classroom setting.

I must emphasize that at Southern, while we abhor hateful words and actions and will confront them when they occur, we are also wholly committed to academic freedom, free speech and respecting divergent points of view.

As a public institution, we must engage in courageous conversations, taking time to listen and to hear. Sometimes, we must agree to disagree.

Yet during a time of heightened emotions and uncertainty for our country, cultural, racial and economic boundaries have hardened, and high-profile confrontations have occurred on campuses nationwide.

Dr. Walter M. Kimbrough, a colleague of mine, was president at Dillard University, New Orleans, when former Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke's presence on campus for a U.S. Senate candidates' debate led to impassioned protests.

"It signaled that we were in an era when rational dialogue and debate had been abandoned for the high of in-your-face confrontation," Kimbrough said. "How can colleges and universities be true to the ideals of a liberal education when the climate in the country is simply to yell and scream at anyone we disagree with?"

As the product of a Jesuit education, I was taught the importance of the Ignatian tradition of *cura personalis*—"care for the entire person"—which includes distinct respect for another's unique circumstances and concerns and an appreciation for their individual gifts and insights.

This ethic of care is the guiding force behind social justice. In this spirit, as president of Southern, from day one I have emphasized that every voice at our institution matters: that we will create opportunities for substantive debate while ensuring the members of our community are treated with dignity, respect, kindness, compassion and civility.

It is only by taking on the mantle of social justice that we will ensure that our campus environment is safe, nurturing and welcoming for all.

And in doing so, it will be a model for society as a whole. **P**

---

*Joe Bertolino, Ed.D., is president of Southern Connecticut State University in New Haven, Conn.*