

# **Presidential Task Force for Opportunity and Equity Meeting Minutes 10/22/2020**

## **General Ronald Burgess:**

Called the meeting to order thanking the committee for being here today. Noted that several Task Force members will not be in attendance at today's meeting. He also informed Ada Ruth Huntley that he is still having discussions with campus security about safety concerns during this election season. General Burgess went on to read a letter that was sent to President Gogue from an Auburn University alum. The letter covered this particular person's views and opinions about the diversity efforts/changes that have been ongoing at Auburn. After reading the letter, General Burgess opened the floor for a discussion.

## **Mrs. Gretchen VanValkenburg:**

Thanked General Burgess for reading the letter as it provided a glimpse of her daily experiences. She reminded everyone that people definitely do have a right to their own thoughts and opinions and that she enjoys when she can engage in respectful conversations. She informed the Task Force that sometimes these conversations end in alumni choosing not to receive the magazine anymore but she continues to provide the good customer service that Auburn University always provides.

## **General Ronald Burgess:**

Added to Mrs. VanValkenburg's point about how we may not always agree on everything that is discussed but the conversation can be civil. That is the purpose of a college campus; for good civil discourse to occur.

## **Dr. Taffye Benson Clayton:**

Went on to add that it feels like there are three buckets: one is that this is what diversity of thought looks like, this is what diversity of thought sounds like. A lot of practitioners say this is the diversity of thought but there often is not a multiplicity of fact. Facts, thoughts, opinions, and experiences are all different things but the diversity of that is important. Dr. Clayton also offered that we find ourselves in an era where student needs are being thought of. The Institution is here, chiefly to educate the students, really needs to be thoughtful of the needs that are diversity at Auburn University and that is beyond of what that diversity thought may have been 30-40 years ago. This poses a new opportunity as the students are talking about diversity and inclusion throughout the University. Dr. Clayton went on to note its complexities but also how she appreciates when these discussions are had because even though it is not an easy journey, it is an important one.

## **Mrs. Gretchen VanValkenburg:**

Wanted to provide an additional update that there was a slight surplus of funding this year due to the lack of in-person events, the Board elected to establish a need-based scholarship that will support incoming and underrepresented students. The scholarship will be named after Dr. Joretta Matthews – the first African American graduate from Auburn University in 1966 and

was also Auburn's first African American faculty member. Mrs. VanValkenburg also noted that Dr. Matthews' daughter recently graduated from Auburn with her Ph.D.

**Mr. Kevin Coonrod:**

Noted that there wasn't anything mentioned in the letter that he has not read through in the survey evaluations from the beginning of this journey. Mr. Coonrod agreed with General Burgess that we need to be mindful of the different perspectives; whatever the Task Forces' definition of success turns out to be, we need to prepare for and expect some blowbacks. He went on to note that a way to diminish the amount of blowback is by being mindful of how we present things. Mr. Coonrod went on to add that one thing that stood out to him from the letter was the emphasis on hard work; part of what the Task Force is doing is getting people to engage in hard work.

**Dr. Melody Russell:**

Noted how in the discussions about equity, everyone's voices need to be heard and respected. She went on to share a quote by Nicky Gumbel, "You can't change how people treat you or what they say about you. All you can do is change how you react to it." She ended by noting that everyone should have a voice to be at the table.

**General Ronald Burgess:**

Reminded the group that he is still waiting on the recommendation for more discussion topics. Noted that they will be moving forward with the establishment of the subcommittee that would help bring to life the vision of a Civil Rights Movement center/institute at Auburn University. This subcommittee will be led by Dr. Melody Russell. General Burgess also reminded the Task Force that this will be a long journey that the Task Force is about to embark on. He went on to add that the charge that Dr. Russell and her subcommittee will have is to explore the ways of bringing the institute/center to life and to see if the rest of the Presidential Task Force will support whatever is proposed. From there, the recommendations will be passed to the administration. General Burgess also added that it will need to be decided if it will be an institute or center. He went on to add that the core group of the subcommittee has been selected from the existing task force; there are more people from throughout the University that General Burgess is reaching out to. The selected members from the current task force include Dr. Taffye Benson Clayton, Dr. Katrina Akande, Mrs. Gretchen VanValkenburg, Mr. Kevin Coonrod, Ms. Ja'lia Taylor, and Ms. Ada Ruth Huntley. General Burgess added that this is just an initial announcement of members and that more individuals from the Presidential Task Force will be added to the subcommittee as the project develops.

**Dr. Melody Russell:**

Thanked the Task Force for their confidence in having her chair the committee. Dr. Russell echoed General Burgess' comment in saying that this initiative will be a long game. She noted that the subcommittee may evolve as time goes on and she wants to make sure that they draw on the expertise of individuals who have been through this process before. Dr. Russell reminded the task force members that the project is organic and that it will grow, shape, and evolve to include more members from the Presidential Task Force. There will be continuous

communication between the task force and the subcommittee throughout the development of this project.

**General Ronald Burgess:**

Asked the group if anybody had anything else to add before he turned the rest of the time over to Dr. Russell and her subcommittee to begin planning.

**Dr. Joffery Gaymon:**

Noted that she will be happy to help when it comes to the discussion of the space for the building for the center/institute. Dr. Gaymon's second point was that she felt the Task Force rushed through the student recruitment and retention conversation. She noted that she hopes the group can further discuss this important topic as even though the recruiting seems to be going well, the retention is still not. Dr. Gaymon hopes to readdress the conversation around retention.

**General Ronald Burgess:**

Noted Dr. Gaymon's request and said he will add the continued discussion of student recruiting and retention to his list of topics to be added.

**Dr. Taffye Benson Clayton:**

Asked if General Burgess received her email about the conversation about the potential opportunity to examine the unevenness of individuals with diversity and inclusion related responsibilities, particularly in the academic units in colleges and schools. With the priority of some of the diversity action plans, the new metric model towards, the integrated strategic plans that now have diversity and inclusion goals as a part of them, the need for a comprehensive institutional diversity and inclusion inventory – all of the information is sourced out of colleges and schools. There is a diversity model for how this is done in other universities. Individuals are placed in the various colleges and schools but are just stationed at different levels (directors, assistant deans, etc.) but this is an opportunity to better normalize it, especially as the goal is to become more sophisticated around the metrics. Dr. Clayton also noted how some institutions have mini job descriptions where a faculty member has a .25 percent or less of their appointment specifically focused on this area of DEI; she noted it is also a cost-effective way to do it as normally the stipend is \$10,000-\$15,000 in addition to their salary but would give us great capacity in terms of what is trying to be done.

**General Ronald Burgess:**

Acknowledged Dr. Clayton's comment and said he will be sure to look at the email.

**Ms. Elizabeth Devore:**

Asked about the status of the notes that she sent the General.

**General Ronald Burgess:**

Informed the group Ms. Devore's notes discussed communication – which the Task Force continues to work on; he added that only the Task Force members can talk on the improved

visibility of the website and information being put out on AU news. General Burgess added that there has been no movement on transitioning from a task force to a committee as the President is comfortable with where the Task Force is right now. The safety piece (around election season) is still an ongoing discussion. The General did mention the measures of accountability and that it is going to be further discussed as well. He mentioned that Dr. Gaymon has been spearheading the conversation about outreach. General Burgess added that there have been no updates to the university calendar as those updates are controlled by the senate. He also added that the purchasing and financial spending conversation is still at hand; he mentioned the ruling of the Alabama state law in the need to go with the lowest bids.

**Ms. Elizabeth Devore:**

Added that the communication was bought up last week but there were no further updates.

**General Ronald Burgess:**

Mentioned that Ms. Devore should keep reminding him about the communications piece and anything else she would like discussed as this work is continuous.

**Dr. Joffery Gaymon:**

Added to Ms. Devore's note that with the communication, the Task Force needs to be more proactive with reaching out to certain groups. She noted that she has set up several standing meetings with BSU (once a month) to discuss student retention as well as doing a presentation to Faculty Senate about the developments of the Task Force. She added the importance of these interactions being standing commitments.

**Ms. Elizabeth Devore:**

Agreed with Dr. Gaymon's point and thanked her for the reminder as she was planning on checking in with the BSU President.

**General Ronald Burgess:**

Noted that they had a meeting this past week where Dr. Gaymon had to leave due to her presentation and he commended her for all the positive feedback he had received from not only the president but members of the senate as well.

**Ms. Mya Strickland:**

Also wanted to commend Dr. Gaymon for taking her time to speak to BSU during their Cabinet Hour as she provided a reassuring conversation about plans as it relates to the students. Ms. Strickland also extended an invitation to the rest of the Task Force members to speak to the BSU Cabinet. She continued to ask if Ms. Ada Ruth Huntley provided an update about the special safety measures around election season.

**General Ronald Burgess:**

Informed Ms. Strickland that no update has been given yet.

**Ms. Mya Strickland:**

Continued to provide the update and noted that it was decided that all the student leaders would come together and generate letter stability that would touch on the important points of the Auburn Family mentality. Ms. Strickland added that the letter will provide a Q&A link directly to Kelvin King/AU Police.

**Dr. Melody Russell:**

Added to Ms. Strickland's point that she wanted to ensure there was a clear open line of communication with BSU as the center/institute proposal begins to be conceptualized. Dr. Russell added how invaluable BSU's insight and input would be and that she would also be reaching out to the Black Graduate Student Association – as well as several other groups on campus. Also wanted Ms. Lastella Paradise to know that she wants to ensure that staff will be involved with this project as well.

**General Ronald Burgess:**

Inquired if there was anything else for the good of the order, reminded the Task Force members that he had two topics to move forward with, and dismissed the rest of the group to allow Dr. Russell and her subcommittee to begin the initial planning for the development for the Civil Rights Movement center/institute. The next Presidential Task Force meeting will be via zoom, Thursday, October 29, 2020, at 3:30 pm.

**Presidential Task Force for Opportunity & Equity Members:**

Ada Ruth Huntley

Amy Weaver

Angela Cannon

Bill Hardgrave

Bruce Pearl

C. Kevin Coonrod

Donielle Fagan

Elizabeth Devore

Gretchen VanValkenburg

Ja'lia Taylor

Jaime Hammer

Joffery Gaymon

Katrina Akande

Kim Brown

Lastella Paradise

Madison Birkhead

Melody Russell

Mya Strickland

Oladiran Fasina

Ronald Burgess

Ronny Isaac

Royrickers Cook

Seymour Irby

Sylvia Masango

Taffye Clayton