



May 25, 2022

Dear SMU Community,

This is a sorrowful day in our country as we mourn another in a long list of mass shootings. Nineteen babies and their teacher. Fourth-graders preparing for the end of school with thoughts of summer and parties. Taken from their families and our community in a senseless act that will change their community forever.

Compounding our grief is the realization that these events fall on the two-year anniversary of another event that rocked our country – the death of George Floyd. The images of Officer Derek Chauvin’s knee on the neck of Mr. Floyd for eight minutes and 15 seconds are as horrific today as they were on May 25, 2020. Sometimes, it’s all just too much to bear, and our hearts are weary.

For some of us, those images Mr. Floyd’s death only confirmed what we know as the precarious reality of “living while Black” in America. For others, the video recordings of Mr. Floyd’s desperate attempts to breathe and Mr. Chauvin’s indifference finally made visible the reality of injustice and racism in our country.

We acknowledge May 25 as a crucial galvanizing point for our country and campus. Within two weeks of Mr. Floyd’s death, SMU President R. Gerald Turner began convening town halls with Black faculty, undergraduates, graduates, staff, alumni and his senior leadership team. Working with the student-organized Black Unity Forum and the Board of Trustees, President Turner’s commitment signaled an institutional pledge that is realized in the Moving Forward Together Action Plan. Two years later we have made significant progress on a number of strategic fronts including faculty retention, historic hires and the creation of new pathways for students from all backgrounds to study at the Hilltop through Access SMU. Our efforts have allowed us to create greater partnership with our Asian American and Pacific Islander and LGBTQ+

communities. Of course, we have much more to do, but I encourage you to review our plan to **move forward together** each quarter to check our progress.

In their new book, *His Name Is George Floyd*, journalists Robert Samuels and Toluse Olorunnipa craft a provocative picture of George Floyd. The authors take the unusual step of reminding us that Mr. Floyd was a man – flawed, yet seeking redemption. Using job applications, interviews with his elementary school teachers, and Mr. Floyd’s diary, they share how poverty, education, college athletics, crime, race and the American dream came together on a fateful May afternoon. In a cruel twist of irony, the boy that family, friends and teachers often predicted would have his name in the newspaper found his significance in our national consciousness through his inability to breathe.

As we watch families in Uvalde and Buffalo embrace the painful task of burying their loved ones, we often ask, “What can I do that will make a difference?” Today, I encourage you to take eight minutes and 15 seconds and simply breathe. Choose to breathe in hope, grace and the opportunity to make a difference. Choose to breathe out hopelessness, despair, and cynicism.

Eight minutes and 15 seconds. It can change the world.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Maria Dixon Hall". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "M" and "D".

Dr. Maria Dixon Hall
Chief Diversity Officer and Special Advisor to the President for Campus Cultural Intelligence Initiatives