

Message of Accountability

Chief Diversity Officer <diversity@middlebury.edu>

Mon 6/29/2020 3:11 PM

To: Chief Diversity Officer <diversity@middlebury.edu>

Dear Middlebury College Students, Staff, and Faculty,

We write today with a focus on accountability, specifically as it relates to both the existence of systemic racism and the ways we at Middlebury must address that racism. Yesterday Dr. Marissel Hernández-Romero, Departing Visiting Assistant Professor of Luso-Hispanic Studies, sent an email to our campus community describing incidents of racism during her three years as a member of our faculty. Her email demonstrates the ways that individual incidents of racism and our inability to respond to such incidents in a way that addressed the underlying climate both reflect and reinforce racism at the systemic level. We understand that racism is entrenched in the culture of our institution, and we acknowledge the ongoing harm it causes to our Black students, staff, and faculty as well as our students, staff, and faculty of color. We must be accountable for responding to incidents as they arise and for addressing the culture that enables such incidents to occur.

We also write to acknowledge that part of responding to such incidents requires that we act in accordance with existing policies. While those policies are governed by the principles of due process and confidentiality, which means that we cannot comment on the specifics of any individual incident, we can acknowledge that these incidents reflect an underlying atmosphere that we have an accountability to transform. We want to acknowledge that although we cannot respond to questions about any of the individual incidents, we understand the harm Dr. Marissel Hernández-Romero experienced. We must be accountable for following up on those claims individually while simultaneously identifying and implementing strategies to change the attitudes that would allow such incidents to occur in the future.

We also write to acknowledge that Dr. Marissel Hernández-Romero's email to the campus community was removed from our servers. We understand the impact this had on silencing a colleague who was actively naming the racism she encountered on our campus. We removed the email in order to prevent an influx of reply-all messages from the thousands of recipients and the additional harm that might have been caused if anyone responded in ways that did attempt to dismiss or make light of her experiences. We realize that by making this choice, we removed the opportunity for her to be heard. We understand the power and value of being heard, and we acknowledge that many members of our campus community have begun to share their experiences as part of a national impetus to call attention to systemic racism on college campuses. We must be accountable for dismantling the systemic climate reflected in each of these posts.

We want to close by acknowledging that we have a lot of work to do to make our campus a space where our Black students, staff, and faculty as well as our students, staff, and faculty of color can not only be successful but can also enjoy being--and can exist without experiencing invalidation or harm--as the climate assessment we concluded last year

demonstrated. One of our standing faculty committees--the Committee on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion--launched an initiative during the spring semester to interview faculty and staff of color about their experiences at Middlebury. We plan to support that initiative and to ensure that each of their voices can be heard. We also pledge to be accountable for identifying strategies that will address the underlying issues inherent in the experiences they share. We have begun conversations with our Board of Trustees, and they are committed to a full-scale review of our institution's history with an eye to how to effect change in our current culture. We will include the strategies we identify in the five-year strategic plan that is currently being shared with key stakeholders and that we will share with the broader community for feedback and additional recommendations in late August. Our goal is to use the feedback from our campus community members to revise and finalize the plan this fall. We recognize how embedded racism is in the fabric of our lives and of our institution. We will be accountable for mapping out a path forward that is both intentional and systematic.

Sincerely,

Miguel Fernández
Chief Diversity Officer

Sujata Moorti
VPAA / Dean of Faculty

Laurie Patton
President

Miguel Fernández, PhD
Chief Diversity Officer, Professor of Hispanic Studies
Office of Institutional Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Middlebury College
Middlebury, VT 05753
802-443-5792
fernande@middlebury.edu
middlebury.edu

“Be the change you want to see in the world.”