

Office of the President
SARAH LAWRENCE COLLEGE

November 6, 2018

Dear Students, Staff, and Faculty,

Last night for one of our “Difference in Dialogue” events I was joined by three other College presidents: Lt. Gen. Jay B. Silveria, Superintendent of the U.S. Air Force Academy; Thomas A. Isekenegbe, President of Bronx Community College CUNY; and Laura Sparks, President of The Cooper Union for Advancement of Science and Art. I am grateful to these three presidential colleagues for joining me and for the engaged audience participation in a dialogue on campus climate and inclusive excellence. We began many conversations that I hope will continue to resonate in the coming weeks.

At the beginning of the panel, I observed that when we planned this event months ago I suspected that one or more of the campuses represented would be facing challenging issues, but that I hadn’t necessarily expected it to be ours. I then made brief observations about the current situation at Sarah Lawrence as an illustrative case for the topic of the panel that I would like to share with you:

A couple of weeks ago, a member of our faculty, Sam Abrams, published an opinion piece in *The New York Times* entitled, “Think Professors are Liberal: Try Administrators,” which prompted a vigorous response and equally vigorous counter-response not only on campus but across various social media channels.

Let me state the principles that I believe are operative in this situation:

First, and unequivocally, academic freedom is a fundamental principle at Sarah Lawrence College. That means that as a member of our faculty, Professor Abrams has every right, and the full support of the College, to pursue and publish this work.

Second: Vigorous and rigorous debate is at the heart of our enterprise. The opinion piece made claims that many on our campus understandably found not only controversial, but insulting, and even personally intimidating, for which the proper response is vigorous and informed debate and criticism. Those who disagree with the published opinion have every right to respond and even to protest the views expressed in the piece.

Third: As a diverse and inclusive community, we are governed by principles of mutual respect. That means that no one has the right to remove or destroy personal property and replace it with messages of intimidation, as occurred on Professor Abrams’ door the evening following the opinion piece’s publication. Nor is it acceptable to post anonymous ad hominem accusations around campus, as occurred last week. While such responses are undoubtedly the action of a few, they not only contravene our principles of mutual respect and, as such, are subject to consequences, but they undermine our commitment to building a genuinely inclusive community.

Thank you to those who joined us last night and I encourage you all to join us at the next event in this series “Probing the Bounds of Free Speech,” with DeRay McKesson and Sanford Ungar on November 14th.

Yours,

Cristle Collins Judd
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