

5-2017

The Letter and Spirit of the Clock Tower Accords

Fred P. Pestello

Saint Louis University, President@slu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://epublications.regis.edu/jhe>

Recommended Citation

Pestello, Fred P. (2017) "The Letter and Spirit of the Clock Tower Accords," *Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal*: Vol. 6: No. 1, Article 5.

Available at: <https://epublications.regis.edu/jhe/vol6/iss1/5>

This Reflection is brought to you for free and open access by the Scholarly and Peer-Reviewed Journals at ePublications at Regis University. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal* by an authorized administrator of ePublications at Regis University. For more information, please contact epublications@regis.edu.

The Letter and Spirit of the Clock Tower Accords

Fred P. Pestello
President
Saint Louis University
President@slu.edu

Dr. Fred Pestello is the president of Saint Louis University (SLU). He is Jesuit educated and has spent all of his over 30-year career in Catholic higher education as a faculty member, a vice president of an academic senate, a department chair, an associate dean, a provost, a senior vice president for educational affairs, and a president. His academic training is as a sociologist. Pestello was inaugurated as SLU's first permanent lay president just ten days prior to the occupation of the campus by protestors and on the heels of a difficult period in SLU's history. In August 2014, after Michael Brown was killed in Ferguson and protests erupted, SLU held a vigil calling for peace and justice. At the vigil, Pestello called for dialogue and promised that in the fall, SLU would host scholarly fora where concerns such as poverty, violence, and racial disparity would be explored by members of the campus and greater St. Louis communities. An occupation of the campus is surely not what he had in mind, but that is what was to come.

Pestello's reflection focuses not on the events of Occupy SLU, but on its aftermath. An agreement known as the Clock Tower Accords ended the occupation. Two weeks later, Pestello received a [note of thanks](#) from U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder. The letter closed with the following statement: "Your leadership in a time of great difficulty has been nothing short of exemplary, and it provides an instructive model of inclusion and empowerment. I want to thank you, once again, for your dedication to peace. Our nation will continue to rely on you, and other principled leaders throughout the area, to help us reduce tensions, confront long-simmering conflicts, and to achieve lasting peace and justice for the people of St. Louis." The Clock Tower Accords commit SLU to various efforts to advance diversity, inclusion, and educational and economic opportunity for people of color on campus and in St. Louis. Pestello's reflection highlights progress towards these ends. It also admits challenges and failures, and calls for all of us to be inspired – by the spirit of those who occupied the campus – to work for justice.

It took two days of intense and committed discussions for protest leaders, key faculty, and me to agree about how Saint Louis University would publicly rededicate itself to racial equity and justice. And with that, six days of campus demonstrations and teach-ins came to a peaceful and constructive resolution — a stark contrast to the pervasive racial enmity that played out elsewhere in the nation and throughout the history of student protests.

The Clock Tower Accords committed SLU to 13 distinct but interrelated pursuits to advance diversity, inclusion, and educational and economic opportunity for people of color on campus and in St. Louis. In the two and a half years that have passed since the occupation concluded, the University's fulfillment of our written commitments is vexingly difficult.

The primary reasons are similar to those that provoked the protests in the first place: remedying structural barriers to an inclusive University is complex and protracted work, the challenge of

maintaining focus in the midst of other pressures, and the lack of consensus and resources for concrete action items. Accountability rests with everyone at the University, and most importantly, as president, with me. While we have struggled to fulfill the Accords in letter exactly as written, the SLU community has embraced the spirit of the Accords and made great strides in small ways that have contributed to a palpable cultural shift.

The advancement of diversity and inclusion at SLU — and our actions to address each item in the Accords — is not the sole responsibility of one person, one school, or one division. It takes all of us to change an institution, which like our society was built upon a system of inequality. It is easier to support diversity and inclusion in thought and then let others worry about the hard work. It is easier to be distracted by other tasks one has to do. But it is also easier to



Occupy SLU Collection

[Beabout & Wilson, Introduction and Overview](#)

[White, In the Light of Michael Brown: Living the Mission of a Jesuit University](#)

[Hagerty, S.J., Veterans, the Flag, and Protest: Facilitating Dialogue at Jesuit Institutions](#)

[Pestello, The Letter and Spirit of the Clock Tower Accords](#)

[Beabout & Wilson, Occupy SLU: Exchange, Entrepreneurship, Virtue, Jesuit Charism](#)

[Lucas et al., The Impact of Flag Desecration on Social Justice Movements: The Case of Occupy SLU](#)

[Linsenmeyer & Lucas, Student Development During the Occupy SLU Movement Through the Lens of Perry](#)

[Bradley, For the Greater Glory of Whom?: A Perspective on Occupy SLU](#)

be inattentive to the incremental progress made in the context of the larger narrative.

Clearly, the legacy of the Accords is complex. Progress is difficult to chart, and objectives addressing systematic issues require nuanced thinking and input from a wide array of people for the results to be transformative.

Most agree that diversity and inclusion bring fuller insights and benefits to the Academy, by strengthening study groups, research teams, clinical practice, classrooms, and social interaction. At SLU, our Jesuit and University missions are not only enriched by diversity and inclusion, they depend on it. “The pursuit of truth” rests on hearing from all voices.

New, inclusive advisory groups composed of representatives from constituencies across campus were created. Now, there is less distance between the challenges students have on a day-to-day basis and executive leadership. The encampment formally ended with the signing of the Accords in the administrative boardroom. In each challenging situation since, key groups have been invited back to that table.

For protest leaders, other students, faculty, and administrators, the lack of progress on some Accords can be disappointing. Especially because, in the weeks following the protest, there was a new vibrancy on campus about the roles that each of us have in fostering a welcoming community for all. Despite this frustration, failure in letter is not failure in spirit. Still, the Accords must be consciously and actively pursued. We must refuse to regress into a familiar path that maintains exclusion and inequality.

The Spirit of the Accords Has Blazed and Flickered

The occupation was led by black students and community members, and as such, black voices and issues became part of discussions in new and important ways. The prevalence of conversations on systems of inequality and social injustice in classrooms, dining halls, and residence hall rooms increased. Students, staff, and faculty created formal and informal opportunities for sensitive conversations to deepen respect for one other and

worked together to address racial disparities on and off campus. Art exhibits, music, and film drew people further into discussions, challenging presumptions and fostering unity. These initiatives — all living the spirit of the Accords — enriched and empowered participants. They certainly had that impact on me.

The Safe Space program held in College Church the night the Ferguson grand jury announced the non-indictment was staffed by more than 80 volunteers and visited by about 200 people. “The lines between students and faculty, volunteer and visitor disappeared,” organizers reported to me. “They were co-partners in staffing the Safe Space and the on-going discussions. They connected and struggled together to make sense of the grand jury decision and explore larger issues of racial inequity, interracial dialogue, political action, and injustice.”

Lunch-hour discussions such as “A House Divided Against Itself Cannot Stand,” hosted by the Faith and Justice Collaborative, were held that November. Another presentation, “We Are All Criminals,” apprised some 200 attendees of the barriers and social stigma created by criminal records by asking the question, “What have you had the luxury to forget?” In 2015, SLU hosted a “Jesuits and Race” symposium, followed by a “Race, Faith, and Justice” conference and an “African Americans and the West” symposium a year later. In 2017, we will host a conference on slavery, and co-sponsor and host the Diversity Awareness Partnership’s Annual Diversity Summit.

An inventory of SLU’s work in the St. Louis community was compiled over the summer of 2015 and reported online. It detailed hundreds of academic, research, and volunteer programs in St. Louis and throughout neighboring communities, some more than 150 miles from the city.

Shortly after the one-year anniversary of the Accords, Dr. Jonathan Smith, Vice President for Diversity and Community Engagement, and I reached out to the SLU community to solicit thoughts about how the University could be more welcoming and inclusive for all people: those of color, of other faiths, with disabilities, and of all sexual and gender identities. Our goal was to

promote further discussion and action within our SLU community.

The request was a catalyst for renewed and earnest conversations. Again, student groups, academic departments, administrative functions, and individuals convened formal and informal meetings, and we received dozens of pages of submissions. Many were deemed ideas we ought to do. Proponents determined that some ideas were so pragmatic and of potentially high impact they would be implemented within their department or function. This initiative was outstanding.

Today, it is critical to continue to foster and sustain these kinds of interdisciplinary efforts campus wide, including at the schools that have been less prominent in their engagement on racial equity. Dr. Smith often speaks of SLU taking a dialogic approach to inclusion, by which intergroup dialogues highlight our shared values, as well as extol our differences in individual life experiences. SLU has worked to embrace this model not only with respect to the Accords, but also in respect to the wide variety of crises the campus has faced since. Again this past fall, we faced difficult situations regarding bias, hate speech, and marginalization on our campus — and in our country. In these times, I repeatedly reflected on the occupation.

The protest and the resulting Accords fundamentally changed the way the University approaches crisis situations and our response to concerns from our community. Across our campuses, more voices and opinions are shared in decision making, which results in a more thoughtful consideration of what we say (or do not say) and what actions we take (or do not take). Decisions may take longer to arrive at, but they are better because of this proactive approach. The experiences gained from the demonstration have contributed to new relationships and collaborations, created new group structures, and further enshrined our commitment to solidarity. These may not come across as monumental changes, but their impact cannot be overstated.

The Letter of the Accords Has Yet to Be Fulfilled

Our efforts on the Accords, while insufficient in some regards, have resulted in real material progress at SLU writ large.

One Accord created the position Special Assistant to the President for Diversity and Community Engagement, which has since been elevated to Vice President for Diversity and Community Engagement. In July 2015, Dr. Jonathan Smith left the classroom he loved to assume those responsibilities. He immediately started leveraging his long-standing relationships with faith leaders and community activists in St. Louis and defining our priorities in order to become a better neighbor. He also initiated conversations with students, staff, and faculty about opportunities to promote equity and inclusion.

Through a Speakers Series Grant, the Office of Diversity and Community Engagement (ODCE) provides financial support each semester for speakers on topics of diversity. Community organizations, student groups, and academic departments have brought in a broad range of scholars, speakers, and performers such as Diane Nash, Laverne Cox, and Nikki Giovanni. As more events occur and collaboration grows, we hope the programs will reach an increasingly broader audience.

The African American studies program received a permanent increase in funding to support research and professional development of faculty and to underwrite service trips for students.

The Black Student Alliance was also given a prime space in our student center to make their own with assistance from the ODCE and the Division of Student Development.

It has been easier to achieve and measure these concrete actions compared to the cultural and structural shifts desired. This is partly because they are largely discrete actions under the administration's direct control. They are not subject to committee deliberations, to agreement on direction, or to sustained and difficult effort across a range of individuals who must remain committed and focused. Many of them have not required new resources, which are difficult to find

at a time that SLU is experiencing budget deficits. Nonetheless, they have taken a considerable amount of time and energy from many dedicated members of the University.

An example of a more difficult Accord to advance is the establishment of a community center. Some faculty dedicated to this cause think there may be better ways to approach this and instead would like us to collaborate with existing centers. Others disagree over location and intended purpose. “Even more difficult,” says Dr. Smith, “are those Accords that call us to address accessibility, affordability, and retention for African American students. The work required to repair and rebuild educational pipelines is slow and unglamorous. It requires work from the smallest local level in K-12 schools to regional and national partnerships.”

Another Accord called for bi-weekly meetings of a steering committee. Early on, some of the non-SLU members were so disruptive in meetings that others, who were among the protesters, disinvited them. Later, many of us attending came to feel that the meetings were unproductive, with too much political posturing, power plays, and obsessing over minutia. We agreed we were not making progress on strategies and specific actions and there had to be a better way. At that point Dr. Smith established several working groups.

Constructing a More Just Future

Going forward, those involved in student recruitment efforts, financial aid staff, student development professionals, and faculty in all disciplines can provide special expertise and counsel to advance elements of the Accords. SLU’s current fiscal challenges are real, which means that we have to be innovative and creative. Neighborhood activists, educators, and faith leaders will continue to be tapped to help SLU where appropriate. Ultimately, our goal is a mutually beneficial partnership.

The occupation is just as much a part of our present as our past. The physical occupation at the clock tower may have ended on October 18th, 2014. But the impetus — the spirit — of the occupation will continue in the minds, hearts, and actions of all of those who work for justice. The demonstration at the clock tower is not merely an

historical event to be celebrated for its novelty in the realm of protests on college campuses, but also for its pervasive power that makes it imperative to repudiate injustice and impossible to act with indifference.

It is fundamental to our Jesuit mission and values that we be coworkers with God on issues of poverty, education, economic empowerment, and equity. Our mission has guided our faculty, students, clinicians, and staff to pursue hundreds of programs in the region and work with neighborhood partners in some of the most disadvantaged communities to improve health care, education, and child nutrition.

Despite the various roadblocks we have encountered since the signing of the Accords, our commitment to our students is steadfast and strong. As the landscape of higher education changes, so too do the needs of our students, and the effects of the challenges we face often fall harder on students of marginalized groups. As such, our approach and the aim of some of the Accords may need to be modified over time, and new conversations will need to be initiated.

What we must remember and share with others is that the passion behind the occupation and the intention of the Clock Tower Accords attempted to bring into focus the necessity to systematically change how our students from marginalized groups experience a SLU education. When we tell prospective students that anyone can “Be a Billiken,” we must mean it.

I believe we do. 