January 8, 2015

To the John Jay College community:

Over recent weeks, following tragic events here and around the country, our city and nation have been engaged in a deep, complicated, and sometimes polarizing discourse regarding the role of the police in our society. One dimension of this discussion – following the deaths of Michael Brown in Ferguson and Eric Garner in Staten Island arising from encounters with the police -- has focused attention on the complex relationship between the police and communities of color, the role of grand juries, and the proper use of force by law enforcement agencies. A second, more recent, dimension of this discourse – following the deaths of two NYPD police officers, Raphael Ramos and Wenjian Liu, ambushed while sitting in their patrol car -- has highlighted the important role the police play in providing for public safety and the risks police officers face in carrying out their duties.

The public discussion on these topics has been intense, sometimes at a fever pitch, sometimes acrimonious. The question that we face, as a College, is what role John Jay should play in helping our students, faculty, staff, alumni and extended network of colleagues move toward a better understanding of the issues involved, a deeper recognition of the values at stake, and a more respectful dialogue among the factions in our society that too often talk past each other. I know that our community can embrace this challenge and I am writing to invite you to engage in this effort.

I believe we should approach this challenge with confidence, reflecting our unique strengths as an academic institution. As we celebrate our 50th anniversary, we are reminded that John Jay College of Criminal Justice was created during a time of tension between police and communities. Our College was founded in large part to bring the transformative power of a liberal arts college education to improve the workings of our system of justice, starting with law enforcement. Our first classes were held in the New York City Police Academy. Our first students were police officers who came to John Jay before or after their tours of duty to pursue a college education. They went on to leave a lasting mark on the modern police profession. John Jay College can also take pride in the role of its faculty in creating the scholarship of policing, starting in the 1960s with Arthur Niederhoffer, Jerome Skolnick and Abraham Blumberg, who wrote seminal articles on the role of the police in our democracy. In many ways, the history of policing and the history of John Jay are deeply intertwined.

Today we are called upon to live up to that tradition to meet the challenges of the moment. We should strive to leverage the expertise of our faculty, the experiences of our students, and the perspectives of our alumni to help the extended John Jay community learn from recent events and emerge from these difficult days with a renewed commitment to a justice system that is effective, fair and based on mutual respect.
I propose that our College commit itself to a year-long exploration of these issues. Our discussions should be respectful and should include all perspectives on the issues of the day. In addition to faculty, students, staff and alumni, we should engage colleagues from outside the college, including community groups, law enforcement representatives, and scholars and experts from other institutions. True to our liberal arts mission, this initiative should be built on several platforms, including the performing arts, lectures, debates, social science and physical science, poetry, graphic arts, literature and history. We should use social media creatively to extend the reach of our campus activities to engage a broader community. Of course, planning a series of activities for the coming academic year does not preclude members of our community for undertaking activities this semester.

We bring to this task an impressive array of assets. True to our traditions, today’s John Jay faculty include some of the leading scholars of policing, many of whom have provided insightful media commentary over the past several weeks. We also count among our faculty others with deep expertise in issues of race, social inequality, and community capacity. Others are expert in the relationship between law and society, comparative analysis of justice systems around the world, and the history of criminal justice in America. Our College has also been selected by the Department of Justice to lead the National Initiative on Building Community Trust and Justice, is home to the Center on Race, Crime and Justice, and recently hosted a national conference on policing and communities of color, called “Bridging the Divide” which explored many of the issues now part of the national discussion. These and other capabilities are poised to contribute to the proposed undertaking.

Our immediate challenge is to develop a comprehensive initiative that can build on our history, leverage our assets, and infuse our campus life with the knowledge, ideas, and perspectives that befit a great academic institution. To design this initiative, I will name a committee of faculty, students and staff that will work throughout this semester. Please write me if you wish to be a member; the full membership will be named by the beginning of the semester. This ad hoc committee will accept ideas from our community for a series of activities, inside and outside the classroom, to be launched in the 2015-16 academic year. I am pleased to announce that Dr. Jama Adams, the Chair of our Department of Africana Studies, has generously agreed to chair this committee.

We should be proud of the role that John Jay College has played in framing the issues of justice over the past half century. We are now called upon by this moment to embrace that role once again, in a thoughtful and productive way that reflects our values and traditions. I look forward to working with you on this important undertaking.

Sincerely,

Jeremy Travis
President