



A Farewell Message from Dr. Rhonda Y. Williams Founder and Director, Social Justice Institute

Dear Social Justice Institute Community,

Greetings! Ubuntu!

This is my last day and message as the Director of the Social Justice Institute. At the end of the summer, I will be moving to Nashville, Tennessee, where I have been appointed the inaugural John L. Siegenthaler Chair in American History at Vanderbilt University.

I have been on quite an extraordinary journey. So much so, that summoning just the right words – those that are poignantly full and pithy – well ... feels a bit awe-inspiring. So, let me just start.

In the last two decades at Case Western Reserve University and in Cleveland (and now I am dating myself!), I learned a lot about inequalities and social struggles (past and present), universities and communities, champions and allies, the status quo and oppressive power, transactional relationships and authentic friendships, rigidity and principled flexibility, adversity as well as persistence and joy, and the art of discernment. All of this, and much more, informed and fueled my work as a black woman intellectual, an author, a scholar-activist, and a human being.

And ... amidst all of this work – the teaching, the writing, the publishing, the voicing, and the action – creating the Social Justice Institute (SJI) stands as a momentous and incomparable accomplishment.

Indeed, envisioning and actually bringing the Institute into existence at CWRU has been a labor of love and struggle. SJI started as a concept, an idea, a vision in my head in 2008. Because of passion and tenacity, individual and collective efforts, long days and nights of hard work, moments filled with excitement and possibility, a fair measure of conflict, and dedicated support and contributions from those I'll call "the believers," the Social Justice Institute no longer exists simply in the realm of ideas. Now, it is an operating entity in its 7th year.

My vision was to create and institutionalize a space where social justice, equity, and moral courage not only serve as foundations for critical intellectual analyses, but also inspire

educational opportunities, scholarly engagement, community bridge-building, and actions on and off campus – all in order to challenge oppression and contribute to making the world better for more people. This requires daring to be revolutionary and making society meaningful and just, or in the words of the radical democratic humanist and social justice activist Ella Baker: “This means that we are going to have to learn to think in unapologetically radical terms. I use the term radical in its original meaning – getting down to and understanding the root causes. It means facing a system that does not lend itself to your needs and devising means to change that system.”

The Institute’s definition of social justice is: “eradicating systems of oppression with the purpose of advancing fairness and equality through the redistribution and expansion of resources and opportunities and exalting human dignity and respect.” Its work is driven by two big questions; “What kind of human beings do we want to be?” and “What kind of society do we want to live in?” And its mission is “working toward equal access to opportunity for all people through understanding and addressing the root causes of social injustice and developing innovative solutions.”

Since its launch in Fall 2010 with the inaugural intergenerational Think Tank, “Social Justice, Race, and Profiling,” the Social Justice Institute has continuously grown. This has been possible because of so many people. While naming specific people always brings with it the risk of forgetting to name others, I would be remiss if I didn’t mention at least some people.

I must start with CWRU’s College of Arts & Sciences Dean Cyrus Taylor, whom I approached with my initial idea. Ever since that moment, he has been a champion. Thank you, Cyrus. Thank you, President Barbara R. Snyder and Provost William A. “Bud” Baeslack III for your initial and ongoing support of me and the Institute over these many years. Thank you, Dr. Marilyn S. Mobley, VP, Office for Inclusion, Diversity and Equal Opportunity, for spreading news about the good works of SJI. My thanks to Chris Ash, Tayrn Smith, Denise Donahey, and all who provided sage administrative and budgetary advice.

Heartfelt appreciation goes to the SJI Leadership Team, including currently: Timothy Black, Spencier Ciaralli, Janice Eatman Williams, John H. Flores, Jessie Hill, Daniel J. Lacks, Loretta Lafitte-Griffin, Sana Loue, Marilyn S. Mobley, Diana Lynn Morris, Camille Warner, and Ruqaijah Yearby; to the Institute Administrator Lisa Kollins; and to the SJUS Instructors. I have valued your time, energy, ears, ideas, talents, contributions, and dedication. To former Institute staff members – Shelley (Shaii) White, Tanetta Andersson, Allison George, Dr. Misty Luminais, and Kayode Omoyosi – thank you and much love! And, a hearty thanks to all of you: our partners and supporters over these past years and into the future.

As I depart as Director, I am glad to be able to announce that Dr. Timothy Black will serve as the Interim Director for 2017-18. The second faculty member hired through the Social Justice Institute, Dr. Black is an associate professor in Sociology. Dr. Black has been a member of the SJI Leadership Team since his appointment at CWRU and most recently he has been serving as the Institute’s Research Coordinator.

To all of you who are reading this, I want to say: it is my expectation and utmost hope that the Social Justice Institute – in staying true to its heartbeat and mission – will continue to grow and engage in meaningful and impactful work!

Indeed, the Social Justice Institute has another fabulous year in store for you! As we move into the 2017-18 academic year, it is time again for the Institute's Biennial Think Tank. This year's theme is "Educating for Struggle: State Violence, Then and Now." Save the date and join us November 16th-18th. The Institute also will continue to build its Social Justice (SJUS) Minor Program; work with its SJI-Supported Student Groups; offer student conference travel grants; host its monthly research luncheon series; have its faculty, graduate, and undergraduate research grant competitions; sponsor and co-sponsor a multitude of programs; and so much more! (Visit the website regularly for details and updates.)

Please stay engaged. Continue to support SJI both through participating and giving. Gifts of any size will impact its work and support signature programs. Donations may be made online or sent to Social Justice Institute, CWRU, 10900 Euclid Ave, Cleveland, OH 44106-7243.

In closing, this likely goes without saying: We are in a qualitatively different kind of "tryin' times." Truth be told, for many people locally and globally, times have always been trying. But the current moment requires that we continue the work towards understanding, analyzing, diagnosing, discerning, and strategizing against retrogressive, inhumane forces. Whether they are individuals, institutions, or the state. Whether they masquerade as advocates, or unabashedly spew hateful "-isms." We must teach, write, speak, and act powerfully for social transformation. As one of my favorite Audre Lorde quotes states: "When we speak we are afraid our words will not be heard or welcomed. But when we are silent, we are still afraid. So it is better to speak."

My very best and, as always, In Struggle,

Dr. Rhonda

June 30, 2017