

Comments to the Lexington Urban County Council

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August 15, 2017

Transylvania University is one of the finest liberal arts colleges in the country. We have been here since 1780, two years before the City of Lexington was incorporated.

Although Transylvania is a small school, it has played an outsized role in shaping the history of our country. We are proud of that history.

We have thrived for so long for two important reasons: the mission we fulfill and the values by which we live.

As an educational institution, one of our guiding principles is the pursuit of truth. Those who embark on this pursuit do not have the luxury of choosing where or how or when it turns up. Finding truth requires an openness to what is new and different. It is to call into question what we think we know for the sake of what is to be known. But when truth emerges, we recognize it for what it is and we adjust our thoughts and our actions accordingly.

This takes courage. It is easier to reinforce our ideas with information that affirms what we already think. But that approach can never last. Transylvania University would not be around if we conducted business that way. On the contrary, we are invested in the future of our students. We build upon our history by questioning it in order to better understand how to move into the future.

The two statues in question today memorialize men who were educated at Transylvania, as were many other notable figures throughout our nation's history. We do not try to hide the fact that some of our famous alumni were on the wrong side of history when it came to slavery. That is true.

The question is what we do with that truth.

I'm sure these men had many admirable qualities. Their statues stand outside the old courthouse, however, for reasons that do not reflect on any honorable

contributions they may have made. Those reasons are at odds with what we know to be at the heart of democracy, of justice, and of our humanity.

Just a few years after the Breckinridge statue was erected, another Transylvania alum, Justice John Harlan, demonstrated unusual courage and a deep understanding of the forces of democracy when he wrote the sole dissenting opinion in the Plessy V. Ferguson decision of 1896:

[T]here is in this country no superior, dominant, ruling class of citizens. There is no caste here. Our Constitution is color-blind and neither knows nor tolerates classes among citizens. In respect of civil rights, all citizens are equal before the law. The humblest is the peer of the most powerful. The law regards man as man and takes no account of his surroundings or of his color when his civil rights as guaranteed by the supreme law of the land are involved....

Moving these statues, to give them deeper and broader historical context, is to build on what we know to be true and on the values that are essential to a just and civil society. It is not to obliterate the past, but to learn from it as an investment in our future. We should not be focused on the symbols of tradition, but on the hard won products of tradition: freedom, democracy, and, yes, kindness and generosity.

We can be on the right side of this issue or the wrong side. We can lead by principle or follow for expediency. To the extent that these men subscribed to racist views, their time has come and gone. The pages of history turn with or without us. Where do we want to be? What page do we turn to for our children to read? We are lucky today in that we can do more than dissent, powerful as dissent can be. We can lead.

Thank you.