Provost Jones Remarks
Martin Luther King Jr. Plaza Dedication and Ribbon Cutting
Monday, August 28, 2017

Penn State Executive Vice President and Provost Nick Jones was one of several speakers during a special ribbon-cutting and dedication ceremony at the new Martin Luther King Jr. Plaza along Fraser Street in downtown State College. Following is a transcript of his remarks.

On behalf of the University and President Barron, it’s an honor to join you in celebrating the life and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. through the dedication of this community plaza.

Thank you, Mayor Goreham, members of the Plaza Committee, and others for your hard work to bring this important project to fruition, and for inviting me and others representing Penn State to be part of it.

Fifty-two years ago, on January 21st of 1965, Penn State was fortunate to have Dr. King speak to about 8,000 people crammed into Rec Hall – along Burrowes Road, just a few blocks north of where we are now. He talked about the civil rights movement, America’s legacy of slavery and segregation, and the principles that he hoped and believed would change the world.

That event was commemorated in 2006 with a historical marker placed outside of Rec Hall, on the corner of Curtin and Burrowes roads.

During his speech in 1965, Dr. King cited examples of social progress, such as the signing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and he noted how far we had come since some truly dark times. He said, “The whole nation has come a long, long way in extending the frontiers of civil rights.”
And so, it has. And yet, I can’t help but wonder what Dr. King would say if he were to speak in Rec Hall today.

One need only to read, watch, or listen to the news to know we still have so far to go.

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One of the University’s core institutional values is Respect: That we respect and honor the dignity of each person, embrace civil discourse, and foster a diverse, inclusive, and safe community.

This value is so significant that we incorporate it in the University’s strategic plan along with one of six essential foundations. Called “Foster and Embracing a Diverse World,” it reaffirms our staunch commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion.

All of these tenets are central to Penn State’s obligations and responsibilities as a public institution of higher education.

President Barron and I consider the diversity of our University community a key strength. It is at the core of what makes Penn State great.

We are here in part to learn from and about one another. And so, our diversity is critical to the education of our students, broadening their exposure to people who are simultaneously like and unlike them in meaningful ways.
As a great University, Penn State helps to build bridges of understanding while recognizing and celebrating the intrinsic value of every person.

In 2017, this all still matters – in ways that many of us could have never envisioned.

Last year, Penn State launched “All In,” a diversity- and inclusion-focused effort that engaged individuals throughout the University and this community around a core message:

“Be who you are. Together.”

We had several events throughout the year to re-emphasize how diversity and inclusion are integral to all we do and parts of Penn State’s institutional identity.

Integral to “All In” was and remains authentic community involvement and engagement.

Our commitment to diversity and inclusion goes beyond all of Penn State’s campuses and into their surrounding communities, and the positive impacts of that are significant and long-lasting.

We will commemorate “All In” with a landmark installation on the east side of Old Main – a permanent representation of the University’s achievements and aspirations.

But today, we have this spectacular memorial and plaza honoring the great life and legacy of Dr. King.
With it, we send a strong message to our community – a single entity that includes Penn State – that his mission and teachings remain so meaningful today, and that we all must continue to learn from and act on them.

In essence, that is Dr. King’s legacy. Still today, we all can follow Dr. King’s leadership and show the courage required to make our community one in which we can all be proud – one in which every person is valued for what he or she contributes to it.

With this plaza, we have a permanent reminder to inspire people for generations to come. And onward we shall go.

Thank you very much.