

2025 MLK Observance

Remarks by Provost Katherine Black

Thank you for the opportunity to welcome you to our annual Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Observance. It is an honor to be with you all today, and to celebrate Dr. King's work and legacy.

Our theme for today's observance is "I am My Ancestors' Wildest Dreams." For us, this statement is powerful, affirming, and uplifting. It also says a lot about our ancestors. Our ancestors dreamed big, and look what we've achieved. They had the vision of what was possible and they worked and pushed for freedom and justice to make that vision come to life. But we are not finished. Let us continue to dream big, so that future generations achieve our wildest dreams and so they look back at us with pride for our vision, our courage, and our persistence. Indeed, we have young people in the audience today. They are looking to us to light the way so that they may dream even bigger and achieve even more.

At the University of Hartford, President Ward calls upon us to reimagine excellence – to look at the way we do things and think about how we can do them differently and better. This is hard work and can be scary work, especially when you're not sure where it will lead. At President Ward's inauguration, I cited one of my favorite quotes attributed to Dr. Martin Luther King. "Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase."

As we reimagine excellence, we need to focus on one of our core values as an institution, which is inclusive excellence. Perhaps you're wondering what this term means. It DOES NOT mean that we have abandoned our commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion, justice, and belonging. Let me re-affirm that our commitment to DEIJB is strong and unwavering. Inclusive excellence is simply a reframing and strengthening of our commitment. It also doesn't mean that our DEIJB work is finished. On the contrary, we have much more work to do! We welcome continued conversation and engagement as we support each other in this work. Through conversation and engagement come understanding, and through understanding comes action.

The Office of Inclusive Excellence and Belonging, led by Chris Grant and now Kayon Morgan, has a wonderful website with learning resources, including a glossary of terms. Here you can learn all about the definitions for diversity, equity, inclusion, justice, and belonging, as well as all the resources available to you at the university to do this work. In that glossary, it states "Inclusive Excellence is the recognition

that an organization's or community's success is dependent on how well it values, engages and includes the rich diversity of its community members, including its students, faculty, staff, alumni, friends and affiliates." Let me say that again. Our success is dependent on how well we value, engage, and include the rich diversity of our community.

The term inclusive excellence is not a new term. It was originally developed in 2005 by Alma Clayton-Pederson of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U). If you read AAC&U's commitment to inclusive excellence, it touches upon access, campus climate, culturally competent practices and policies, and ensuring the success of ALL students.

What I especially appreciate about this terminology is that it ties inclusion and excellence together. As we apply this to our university, think of it this way. Only when everyone feels included, that is when they feel like they belong, will everyone contribute. Only when everyone contributes will we fully realize our mission as a university. That is, only when we achieve inclusion will we achieve excellence. That is, inclusion is the means by which we achieve excellence.

So, how do we achieve inclusion? Each of us has a sphere of influence, and that's where we start. For example, let's look at the curriculum. Whose voices are heard in that curriculum? Whose voices are not heard? There is no such thing as "what I teach has nothing to do with DEIJB." EVERYTHING we teach has to do with DEIJB. If you're not sure where to start, you might look to your professional association. It likely has guidance about the impact of DEIJB in your discipline.

Next we might take a look at the climate of our classrooms. Are they welcoming? Do all students participate? Are the students' backgrounds woven into the course itself? To help you in this area, you might use a "get to know you survey" at the beginning of your course. You will be amazed at the rich culture and experience your students are bringing into the classroom – cultures and experiences that have often been ignored or undervalued.

Next, we should take a look at our policies. Are there policies or procedures that inadvertently create barriers for some students? You might ask, how would I know if a barrier exists? One possibility is to ask your students, what is enabling their success and getting in the way of their success?

Finally, I would like us to think about our campus climate and the ways in which we interact with each other. The recent DEIJB Pulse Survey found that not everyone is feeling welcomed in all circumstances. As we work to enhance our campus climate, we should ask ourselves how often we consider our own background or perspective the norm and others' backgrounds and perspectives as "less than"? How often do we talk as opposed to listen? How often do we emphasize our own opinion and never ask others what they think? How often do we only associate with people who are like us, and not extend ourselves to those who look and sound different from us?

As we reflect on Dr. Martin Luther King's work, let us remember there are people in this nation and world who are dehumanized, marginalized, and underserved. We have a long way to go to ensure ALL humans are treated with dignity, kindness, and empathy. Let us as a university do our part to educate ourselves and our students, to think critically, to problem solve, to ask questions, to listen, to advocate, and to empathize. Only when we achieve inclusion will we achieve excellence. In my mind, this is the greatest challenge of the human race, because it prevents us from truly working together to solve all of the world's other challenges. We, at the University of Hartford, have a moral obligation to address this.

If we think back to Dr. Martin Luther King's words – "Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase." None of us can see the staircase, and it's scary. But imagine what we can do if we hold hands and climb together.