Dear Pitt community,

I am writing to you at this busy end-of-semester, pre-holiday season to reflect on the recent news from Ferguson, Missouri last week and from Staten Island, New York yesterday. These two events are clearly profound personal tragedies for the families and friends of Michael Brown and Eric Garner. But like the earlier case of Trayvon Martin two years ago, these cases collectively are galvanizing powerful reactions of anger and outrage across the country because they indicate that for too many, especially those in our African American communities, the American promise of "equal protection under the law" is not being realized.

Our country was founded on the "self-evident" truth that "all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness," and that the role of government is to secure those rights based on "such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness." The recent events in Ferguson and New York seem to call these core principles into question for citizens of color. As Martin Luther King Jr. said, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." Injustice is a cause for outrage. Certainly, I feel that way.

But being angry is the easy part. As you know, some recent public demonstrations have become violent and have caused real harm and damage to both participants and bystanders. These actions may make the papers, but they also grow the distrust and fear that can stand in the way of real progress. A much better way is to positively engage. Dr. King once said that "every step towards the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering, and struggle; the tireless exertions and passionate concerns of dedicated individuals." Clearly, this is the harder road, but it is the one that will make the biggest difference.

I think we understand this here at Pitt. The Pitt Promise that each of us recites when we join the University says it best: The University of Pittsburgh is committed to the advancement of learning and service to society. This is best accomplished in an atmosphere of mutual respect and civility, self-restraint, concern for others, and academic integrity. But the Promise also asks us to play a role, and so when I made the promise this fall, I pledged with our other new students that "I will contribute to the development of a caring community where compassion for others and freedom of thought and expression are valued."

I am proud of our Pitt students and faculty and staff who are channeling their anger and outrage in positive ways that can and will make a difference. Through peaceful demonstrations, open dialogue and discussion, and through community service, our students are highlighting this important issue for others and advancing understanding in productive ways that can start to heal and make a difference.

As our nation struggles with the issues of race and equal treatment under the law, it seems an appropriate time to reaffirm the University of Pittsburgh's commitment to racial understanding and to maintaining a campus community that recognizes the worth and value of each individual. We welcome the diversity present among our students, faculty, and staff, and we remain steadfast in our desire that the equal treatment of all citizens will one day be the norm, not just at our university, but throughout society. To that end, please join me in recommitting ourselves to doing all that is within our purview to look for better ways to achieve racial justice.

As we move from Thanksgiving into the season of peace and reflection, I want to wish our students the best of luck on your finals. And to all of you, I extend my best wishes to you and your families for a peaceful and happy holiday season.

Patrick Gallagher
Chancellor