

Statement on the events in Charlottesville, VA
The Faculty in the Program in Social Studies, Teachers College, Columbia University
August 22, 2017

The events in Charlottesville a week ago encourage us to reflect upon who we are and need to be as individuals and as social studies educators. It has never been more important for people to understand the whole of their history, their civic duties, and the forces and factors that have been unleashed when we as a nation got complacent. Many of the stories and ideas about what the United States is and where it stands in the world are being upended at a dizzying pace. Arguably, it has never been more important to be a social studies teacher. And to take on that work, we need to be willing to challenge whatever comfortable notions we may harbor about who and what we are, if we ever really were, and how we might one day truly be. Our participation in a democracy demands this of us. This school year we invite those hard conversations and the community-building necessary to support all of our growth.

The Program in Social Studies renounces hate-groups in this country and elsewhere. Hate-groups are not legitimate political groups nor democratic in spirit. The core beliefs of these groups are not only undemocratic, but antithetical to the decency and dignity of our shared humanity. At the core of the Confederacy was the desire to maintain chattel slavery, rooted in the notion of racial (white) supremacy and black subjugation. The goal of racial supremacy wherever it has been enacted by governments is genocide, because the eradication of those deemed “less than” is essential to maintain and reinforce the superiority of those in power. By denying the dignity and personhood of each individual to determine the life that is best for them, the bankrupt notions of racial supremacy are fundamentally undemocratic, only strategically and cynically exploiting the affordances of a free democracy to install tyranny.

The Program in Social Studies supports the right to protest and applauds the courage of the activists in Charlottesville to stand up to the weapons and words of hate-groups. These activists acted in the spirit of democracy. US democracy is imperfect; the language of equality, freedom, and justice have long been espoused but not actualized for many within its borders.

This democracy is one we must repeatedly fight for. African Americans, Native Americans, women, immigrants, LGBTQ communities and other disenfranchised groups have long modeled and embodied the practices and voiced the conditions necessary for a more inclusive democracy that truly values its diverse populace. The events in Charlottesville and the marches and rallies across the year, beginning with the Women’s March, blockades at airports, and the 40,000 citizens who marched against hate this past weekend in Boston, remind us the change will come from working together and listening to one another.

Whether or not statues come down, this is just the beginning of our work as social studies educators. The history of oppression and the silencing of voices is ever-present in the texts and curricula available in our classrooms. Our responsibility as educators and the particular one offered by the faculty to our students is to amend the materials in front of us and design curricula that teach toward the democracy we want and know that we need, one that invites all our students across race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexuality, class, ability, and nationality and critically analyses oppression. Through it we teach how injustice and inequity harms our society and democracy both historically and in the present.

This work does not exist in isolation. Schools, teachers, families, and community groups must come together for these discussions. We must be constructively critical about what to do in each community to account for the differences and redress the divisions in our communities. We must listen and engage with these differences to preserve and perfect our democracy for everyone it is meant to protect.