

Unveiling of the SEC Football Trailblazers Statue

President Eli Capilouto

September 22, 2016

Thank you, Tom. Today we are here to celebrate and honor four courageous men. Pioneers against injustice. Builders of a better future.

In this spirit, I'm reminded of a quote from Henry David Thoreau. He said, "It's not what you look at that matters, it's what you see."

Thoreau's lesson to us is about the essentiality of context, history, and perspective.

In a sense, too, it is about empathy – the ability and the desire to walk a mile in another's shoes, to see through someone else's eyes – to experience what they experience, so that you fulfill your responsibility to one another and the essence of what it means to be human.

Every time we pass by the images of these men from this day forward, let us remember what it must have been like to walk in the shoes of Greg Page, Nate Northington, Wilbur Hackett, and Houston Hogg in a time of hatred and violence.

What awaited them when they crossed the color line? Shunning, shaming, shouting, and shadows of fear. Yet they prevailed, so that those who followed them could more easily prevail.

More than any other setting, college campuses must be spaces where we build upon these lessons of the past.

The intrinsic, ineffable beauty of higher education is that on a college campus we instill in young people the skills to absorb, understand, and navigate fundamental tensions and wrongs like these four brave men did.

We teach them, not to simply look and to see, but to act like these four brave men did.

Daily news reminds us that new and old differences are dividing us, but I remain hopeful because I see our students are standing on the shoulders of these courageous men. And with us, building a more open, inclusive, and accepting community.

We must – in honor of these men – be a place where we continue to respectfully build new bridges -- ones that reconcile honest differences of thought, identity, perspective, and ideology.

And on days that we do, we will find common ground, based on the simplest, but most challenging of admonitions to us:

We are to care for each other.

To these men, to their families, and to those who follow in their footsteps, thank you. This place, this conference, our shared world is for all people, and these four pioneers stand at the entrance to our community as a reminder that the ground they stood tall on in their time is hallowed, and forever beckons us to stand tall in our time -- however strong the wind. Thank you.