February 5, 2016

Dear Alumni and Friends:

Our beloved University of Missouri has been through some challenges during this academic year and has received national media attention. While I will not review each challenge here, I do want you to know about the Sinclair School of Nursing (SSON), our response to select challenges, and our work as this school advances.

1. There were instances of students experiencing racial slurs, being disrespected, resulting in racial tension on campus.

I met with as many of our diverse students as possible, together as a group, to determine their experiences in the SSON. They had not had the extreme negative experiences as publicized in the media. Their praise for the faculty and the SSON were noteworthy. I emphasized that a core MU value is "respect." We discussed how respect is manifested in individual and group behavior. Emphasis was placed on the fact that the SSON is to be a safe place where all uniqueness and differences are not only valued but these differences enable all to learn and be prepared to be citizens of the world.

Our SSON Executive Committee had a special meeting to review our values regarding diversity and to generate ideas to enhance the culture of inclusivity at the SSON. Ideas about enhancing our welcoming climate; specific experiences with underserved populations throughout the curriculum were identified as in clinical course work and the community health poverty simulation; work of the SSON Diversity Task Force was supported; support was renewed for the biannual Dean's Forum to include an expert speaker on "micro-aggression;" and facilitating international student experiences were some examples of 22 ideas generated.

I personally visited each class/course session, in the SSON to convey our expectations of them to be role models regarding how they conduct themselves, respecting differences in all persons, living inclusivity and enacting the expectations we have of all professional nurses. I received a verbal commitment from them to be examples on this campus.

Many MU initiatives were put in place, including required diversity training for incoming freshmen; appointment of an Interim Vice Chancellor for Diversity, Inclusion and Equity; diversity experts
brought to campus; hosts of activities for February, Black History Month; and listening sessions by the Interim Chancellor and Provost. Diversity and inclusion are not just buzz words to us.

2. Relationships with Planned Parenthood

Graduate Advanced Practice students in the Family Nurse Practitioner focus area are required to have 45 hours of gynecological practice. A few students have completed this requirement at the Planned Parenthood clinic doing cancer screenings, well woman checks, health promotion, etc. These students are not present when pregnancy terminations occur and have nothing to do with pregnancy terminations. The students do provide gynecological care for impoverished women in these settings. Agreements with Planned Parenthood were terminated briefly so that the language in the agreements could more explicitly express the state of Missouri statutes clarifying student roles in the clinic. These agreements are reinitiated now on a student case by case basis. Over the past 10 years, we have had only a handful of students in these settings.

3. Graduate student insurance coverage

Due to a federal IRS regulation prohibiting universities from subsidizing health insurance for graduate student teaching or research assistants, this benefit was precipitously stopped. Students did not receive advance notice of the change. Graduate student protests occurred. The insurance benefit as previously provided by MU has been reinstated. Graduate students in nursing do not, in general, depend upon this insurance.

I was assigned to an MU Interdisciplinary Task Force on the Graduate Student Experience. We arrived at three recommendations: 1) improve compensation and workload of graduate assistants; 2) improve support structures for them; and 3) improve the graduate education culture on campus. The 41 page report is available for review at http://gradstudies.missouri.edu/gse-task-force/

Going forward

An interim visionary chancellor, Hank Foley, is in place supporting the cutting edge work of faculty, staff, and students. Provost Garnett Stokes has been an advocate for our academic mission since her arrival on February 2, 2015. Much work is taking place by
Interim President Mike Middleton and Chancellor Foley with the state legislature to secure our state funding. Leadership to advance this university and this school of nursing is stronger than ever.

As alums, you are our solid base of support. This Sinclair School of Nursing prepared you with a sound career for a lifetime. We are continuing on that path of academic excellence and unprecedented levels of research and scholarship dissemination. Despite lack of funds to meet all of our aspirations, I commit to you that our work will continue to make you proud. Although campus strife has occurred, students are in class and in clinical practice; faculty are teaching, writing proposals, conducting research, and sharing their work throughout the nation and beyond. We are reaping the benefits of strong partnerships with the Academic Health Center.

Our goals are being realized with being at the top of MU’s list for a new building. The fundraising is in process to support this $52 million project. This facility will enable a 25% increase in students admitted to our clinical major. It will include a research and innovation center and other state of the art learning environments.

We are engaged in strategic planning for the SSON. We are defining goals and activities that stretch us with new programs and initiatives. We sent a survey to all alumni and students to obtain input for strategic planning. We want to hear from you.

I ask you to spread the message about this tremendous school of nursing recently named number one in the nation by College Atlas, Encyclopedia of Higher Education based on our NCLEX pass rates, cost, accessibility, and program quality. Our mantra has been, “Number one for a reason.” Visit us so we can show you that reason. Join us in this venture; be with us as we soar. Our annual awards banquet is April 8th and alumni reunion is April 9th. We would love to see you there. Information will be received in the next issue of Mizzou Nursing and in an e-mail.

If you want to talk about any campus events or the school, please call me at (573) 882-0278 or e-mail me at millerjud@missouri.edu. We want your ideas about how to continue to be the best nursing school in the nation.

Thank you for your support.

Judith Fitzgerald Miller
Dean and Professor
Sinclair School of Nursing