

Dear Campus Community,

For each of us, our daily lives involve navigating the concerns, prejudices and sometimes very immediate fears that we encounter as a society in these tumultuous days.

These challenges were evident on our campus in a disturbing incident that occurred late last week. At 7:45 on Friday morning, UMass Police received the following voicemail on their anonymous tip line: “a gentleman, African American, bald, red/white pinstripe shirt, dark khakis, large duffle bag on the right shoulder, hanging off a strap, very heavy hanging on the ground, seemed very agitated, walking up the ramp, into Whitmore. I thought I would send that information if someone could go and check, because he seemed like a very upset young man walking into that building.” This voicemail raised immediate public safety concerns based on the behavior described in the message. As is standard practice in such cases, UMass Police responded, secured and searched the Whitmore Administration Building, and concluded, after speaking with the man who matched the caller’s description, that no threat existed.

The man described by the caller is a longtime university employee, known to many Whitmore staff members. He was going about his usual morning routine, carrying exercise clothes in a gym bag. He is greatly distressed to have been treated with such suspicion. UMass Police Chief Tyrone Parham and other members of the university staff reached out to him, providing resources and support, and expressed regret for what he had experienced. He is a valued member of our community.

We hope that the anonymous tip that precipitated this incident was well-motivated to protect public safety. But we also know that racial profiling, whether intentional or not, occurs and that it corrodes our efforts to ensure a welcoming living, learning and working environment for every member of our community.

For our community, this a difficult matter. We are living at the intersection of two very trying issues. We must all do our part to respond quickly to perceived threats of potential violence on campus, and we must build an inclusive community that respects everyone and rejects profiling.

The UMass police do train regularly in both threat response, profiling by proxy, and racial profiling, and they drew effectively upon that preparation in responding to this incident. In the days ahead, Chief Parham will debrief the incident with a variety of campus groups, connecting with them to participate in the ongoing work of building a safe and respectful community. For anyone who wants to discuss and reflect on this incident, please know that the doors of Anna Branch, associate chancellor for diversity and inclusion (374 Whitmore), and the Center for Multicultural Advancement and Student Success (101 Wilder Hall) are open to welcome you.

As this incident illustrates, we still have much work to do. We recognized this when introducing our campaign this fall to build a Community of Dignity and Respect, and we will be fully engaged to build awareness and to educate in the months ahead. I ask for everyone’s participation in this most important undertaking.

Sincerely,

Kumble R. Subbaswamy

Chancellor