

STUDENT ACTIVISM

Commission Assesses Race and Diversity

President and CEO Joel Seligman charges commission to help “strengthen a University that is welcoming and supportive of all.”

By Jennifer Roach

A University-wide commission exploring issues of race and diversity at Rochester is expected to complete its report this spring.

The Presidential Commission on Race and Diversity was charged late in the fall by President and CEO Joel Seligman with assessing the state of the campus climate and offering recommendations for improvement.

Cochaired by Paul Burgett, vice president, senior advisor to the president, and University dean, and Richard Feldman, dean of the College, the commission held the first of a planned set of forums and town hall meetings in December.

“It is clear to me that the climate on our campus is not all that it should be,” Seligman wrote in a statement to the University community. “Some of our students, faculty, and staff have experienced instances of hostility, notably recently because of their race. I cannot ignore evidence that our campus climate can be improved.”

In his address to campus, Seligman responded to student leaders from several minority leadership groups, who presented him with a three-page petition designed to improve the racial climate on campus. The students organized a peaceful march from the Douglass Leadership House on the Fraternity Quad to Wallis Hall and then to Rush Rhees Library.

In addition to forming the commission, Seligman outlined several actions, including

- implementing a Bias-Related Incident reporting system—similar to the existing Care system, which provides reports about students who may need emotional or academic support—by the start of the semester in January;
- the launch of an effort—similar to the national “It’s On Us” campaign to raise awareness about campus sexual assault—to address hate speech based on race;
- a review of the Student Code of Conduct to determine if additional provisions should be added to address hate speech.

Seligman had already approved a campus-wide survey of faculty and staff to assess campus climate. The results are anticipated by May.

One item on the petition asked the



SPEAKING OUT: About 150 University students marched across the River Campus to protest racism at the University and to present President and CEO Joel Seligman with a list of demands to improve the racial climate at Rochester. Leaders of the Douglass Leadership House, the Minority Student Advisory Board, the Spanish and Latino Students’ Association, and the Black Students’ Union organized the demonstration.


University to block the anonymous social media application Yik Yak from Rochester’s wifi network. At a forum in December to discuss Yik Yak, students acknowledged that the app would still be available on campus through cellular data connections if it were blocked from wifi, but said barring it would be an important symbolic gesture on the part of the University.

The app has been a particular point of concern for students and the administration after anonymous users last spring posted what University Counsel Gail Norris described as “very concerning” comments that threatened particular students and the Douglass Leadership House. While the company behind the app failed to respond earlier last year to a subpoena issued by the Monroe County District Attorney as part of a University-led investigation to determine who posted the comments, Norris says there are indications that the company

is being more responsive to complaints about abusive and threatening comments. “In addition to our work with the DA to issue the subpoena, we communicated with Yik Yak directly on the troublesome posts.”

In his address, Seligman asked the commission to recommend whether Yik Yak should be barred from the wifi network.

“Mutual respect and mutual pride is what all of us should most want to strengthen at the University of Rochester and at each institution in our lives,” Seligman said. “Working together we can further strengthen a University that is welcoming and supportive of all in our community.”

The commission includes administrators, students, faculty, and staff. 

Seligman’s full message is available at [Rochester.edu/president/memos/2015/petition-response.html](https://rochester.edu/president/memos/2015/petition-response.html).