



OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT

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July 20, 2020

Dear Members of the American Indian Student Organization,

Thank you for your email regarding the removal of the statue of Saint Junipero Serra from our campus and for sharing your recommendations on how to improve our campus culture to make it more welcoming for our Native American students.

In recent months, the legacy of Saint Junipero Serra has once again become the focus for many in California. We have witnessed both peaceful protests and unfortunately, in some cases, the desecration of his image across the state. In response to these attacks, Los Angeles Archbishop José Gomez, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, has issued a public [statement](#) explaining the history of Saint Serra and why the Catholic Church declared him a saint. He also recommended that any statues of Serra be put into safe keeping. While we had no threats or actions against his statue on our campus, I did consult with Bishop McElroy locally and we agreed it would be a good idea to place the Saint Serra statue in safe keeping. Our plan was to publish a story in my monthly newsletter at the end of July to explain why we took such action.

We should have anticipated that social media would pick up the story before we could announce anything so when the Vista and other media contacted us, we provided them with a statement. Here is an [article](#) from the Catholic News Agency that inquired about the statue's removal. As the article states, it was an attempt to protect an image of a Catholic Saint and not intended in any way to be disrespectful to our Native American students.

In hindsight and under customary circumstances, we may have been more thoughtful about how we communicated our intentions. However, given how focused we have been on the urgent issues we face in planning for the fall during a global pandemic, my attention was not focused on how to best communicate what we were doing and that was an oversight on my part. In the moment, responding to a call from a Catholic Bishop to place a statue of a Catholic saint into safekeeping at a Catholic university, seemed like the appropriate action. We did not anticipate that we would offend anyone by doing so. I hope you can find it in your hearts to understand why the university did not communicate our intentions earlier.

My hope is that all of the good work we have done to decolonize the campus and make the university more welcoming to our native students in recent years will be able to be continued. The renaming of Serra Hall for Saints Tekakwitha and Serra was significant because it demonstrated the value of dialogue where all sides can be heard and a conclusion--fair to all parties involved--can be reached. It is also important to note that we did discuss how to recognize each saint and we agreed to hang an individual tapestry for each inside the building, which we did earlier this summer. It was during that time when we took additional actions that were important steps in our work. The renaming of Mission Crossroads to Mata'yuum Crossroads was a way to introduce the Kumeyaay language to campus. That action encouraged a deeper dialogue about the use of the word "mission" and why that is offensive to Native Americans. Out of respect to our Native American students and our desire to make our campus more welcoming, the

university decided to remove the word “mission” from two major housing complexes as well as our main parking structure.

In addition to that important work, we remain committed to making the campus more welcoming to our Native American students. In the coming weeks and months we will be announcing new efforts to help us recruit more faculty and staff of color and we look forward to working with AISO to help us attract more Native American students to our campus. In September a new Associate Provost for Diversity Equity and Inclusion will be joining our campus and that person will be responsible for helping us develop concrete steps to reach our full potential as an engaged, contemporary Catholic university. Your recommendations for dedicated space and more support for our Native American students will be seriously considered as part of our university’s plans to create a more inclusive campus environment.

Your recommendation to expand the use of our land acknowledgment statement will also be considered. As you know, each individual faculty member makes the decision about what is included in their syllabus but I know many included the land acknowledgement statement. For example, I can share with you that when I taught my class this past spring, the land acknowledgment statement was in my own syllabus. In the future, we will be sure to also consider new ways the university can do more to respect the history and culture of the Kumeyaay people and acknowledge that our campus sits on their ancestral land.

Thank you again for your letter and for your advocacy for Native American students on our campus.

Peace,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "James T. Harris III". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and "H".

James T. Harris III, D.Ed.
President and Professor of Education