

Tuesday, February 16, 2021

An Open Letter from a group of concerned Newfields Staff,

We are writing to express how deeply disheartened we are by Newfields' continued lack of leadership in addressing racial equity. The latest crisis regarding the job description for the Director of the Indianapolis Museum of Art (IMA) and subsequent botched response is a symptom of a much larger problem. It has been difficult and painful watching the institution to which we dedicate so much of our lives, both professionally and personally, fall short of meaningful action repeatedly when it comes to racial equity work. We are reaching a boiling point after months of feeling frustrated and silenced over diversity, equity, access, and inclusion (DEAI) failings while holding on to optimism for progress in light of contracting with a DEAI consultant last year.

We acknowledge and recognize the important work that has happened at Newfields under Dr. Charles Venable to financially stabilize our campus. This work enabled us to weather the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic without sacrificing employees to stay afloat. However, this stabilization means very little if we continue to fail our community. We, Newfields staff, are nonprofit employees in the cultural heritage sector because we care about arts and culture work. **We assert this work must be done *for and in partnership with our community*.** Senior leadership's words and actions have subverted staff efforts to create a more inclusive institution by breaking trust and community partnerships time and time again. We are tired, we are frustrated, and we have been grappling with the July 2020 departure of our colleague Dr. Kelli Morgan--all while striving to continue serving our community and pushing to make Newfields better.

We join both our local community as well as the larger arts & cultural heritage community in expressing outrage over the most recent public incident and hope we can channel this energy into our ongoing efforts to improve the institution. We invite community support and appreciate the solidarity with our staff.

After staff gave over four hours of our time yesterday listening to members of senior leadership attempt to explain themselves, their actions, and their plans, we only feel more distrustful and confused about our future. We assert that in order to effectively move forward, large and sweeping changes are necessary. We endeavor to continue and accelerate staff efforts that have been historically hindered by leadership. **At the present time, we do not see a way forward if Dr. Charles Venable remains at the helm of our institution.** We have no chance of hiring the kind of Director for the IMA we need without a serious reckoning of the Board of Trustees and Dr. Venable's immediate removal. The original job posting for the Director of the IMA centered whiteness. This is in direct contradiction to our institutional core value of Inclusivity. When the language of the posting was questioned in an All-Staff Meeting in January, it was defended by both Dr. Venable and Laura McGrew, Senior Director for Guest Experience & Human Resources. Furthermore, Dr. Venable's continued gaslighting of the staff and refusal to take responsibility for any of the events leading up to Dr. Morgan's departure silenced staff members due to fear of retribution, even in summer/fall 2020 meetings with our DEAI consultant, which were intended to be "open and honest."

To make Newfields a place where we are proud to work, significant changes are imperative. In order of urgency, these are our demands:

- Our first and most urgent demand is that Dr. Charles Venable steps down from his position as President of Newfields.
- Our second critical demand is that the contract with the search firm m/Oppenheim Associates be terminated.
- We demand a restructuring of the Human Resources department so that it operates as an independent unit within the organization. The current organizational structure, in which the Guest Experience, Volunteerism & Community Engagement teams report up through the Senior Director of Guest Experience & Human Resources, fails in providing a path for the employees on those teams to voice their concerns through official channels that don't include their direct or secondary manager(s).
- We demand a reevaluation and expansion of both the Board of Trustees and Board of Governors and subsequent Board committees to include dedicated positions for representatives of local communities such as Indianapolis Public Schools (IPS), surrounding neighborhoods, and local artists and arts organizations.

We acknowledge that these demands are serious and sweeping and would like to reiterate that this is what we believe is best for the institution to move forward. We believe in Newfields and we believe in a better future. Newfields should be a treasure to the Indianapolis community and it is a tragedy that these issues of institutional racism have continued to hinder many of our initiatives and our mission to enrich lives through exceptional experiences with art and nature.

Thank you for your consideration and we look forward to hearing leadership's action plan moving forward.

Sincerely,

A concerned group of 85 Newfields staff and stakeholders including representatives from:

- Advancement
- Board of Governors
- Collections Support
- Conservation
- Culinary Arts/Events/Hospitality
- Curatorial
- Design, Interpretation, Media & Publishing
- Education
- Exhibitions and Rights & Reproductions
- Guest Experience, Volunteerism, & Community Engagement
- Horticulture
- Library & Archives
- Marketing & Communications
- Public Programs
- Registration
- Retail Services
- Security
- Technology

*A culture of fear of retribution at a vulnerable time has led the staff to sign anonymously.

**Due to the nature of working from home we were unable to reach the full breadth of the staff.

To any Newfields staff & stakeholders who wish to voice their support, please reach out to us on Twitter @ChangeNewfields or changenewfieldstogether@gmail.com and we will add you to the tally and update the PDF version of this letter.