From: Tom Sullivan
To: University of Vermont Community
Re: Reflections

In the last several weeks, there have been significant frustration and disappointment with the outcomes in two grand jury proceedings, the first in Ferguson, Missouri and the second in Staten Island, New York. For so many, these results were an assault on the progress that has been made in the last fifty years, starting with the Civil Rights legislation passed in 1964.

As President Obama noted after the grand jury deliberation in the Michael Brown decision, “We are a nation built on the rule of law.” That bedrock principle of our country ensures that government action advances fundamental justice and individual liberties. The rule of law insists on a legal process that is due to each individual in our society based on fairness, equal treatment, and equal opportunity under the law. It requires governmental safeguards that respect and preserve the dignity, equality, and human and civil rights of all people. It ensures that life and liberty cannot be deprived to anyone without appropriate due process of law. For many citizens in America today, confidence in our criminal justice system has been seriously eroded. The anguish and sadness that have flowed across our country in the last several days is profound.

As an educational institution, we have an obligation and an opportunity to understand, learn, and share views on how we can turn around a system that is not working for far too many of our citizens. As we do, I encourage each of us to extend care, respect, and support to one another in these troubling and painful times. We will be planning a number of events this academic year to help us explore how we can move forward, together, to protect the rights of all members of our community.

As this semester comes to a close, I want to invite you to join me on Tuesday, December 9th, at noon, to come together for dialogue and reflection. Gathering at the Fountain on the Green at this time will give members of our community an opportunity to express and share views on recent events and how our society can move forward. Racial divisions in our country will not change if we cannot appreciate different personal experiences and their impact and to share those broadly among our community.

As Nelson Mandela said so eloquently, “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.” I hope that all of us, individually and collectively, will carry our campus conversations into our winter break and back to our campus as we reconvene in January for a new semester to discuss our shared values.