Statement Regarding Intolerance and
Discrimination in the Business World and University
Dean Robert F. Bruner
September 26, 2005

Recent incidents of discrimination and intolerance in the business world and the University prompt me to respond. Discrimination and intolerance have no place in our community.

First, they destroy the basis for open debate and exchange of ideas on which the vitality of a university community depends.

Second, they contradict standards of leadership and norms of best practice in professional life and organizations.

The Rector, President, Faculty Senate, and others have focused principally on the first reason—I support and echo these expressions. I would like to add to the discussion by focusing on the second reason.

I have argued that business is not first about money; it is about building vibrant organizations, delighting customers, inventing worthy new products and services, taking risks, finding new markets, and so on. To be sure, rewards follow from the successful execution of these activities, but to earn such rewards requires an inordinate degree of social capital, such as respect, teamwork, and sharing of thinking. We have structured the Darden learning experience to model such best practice.

Best practice organizations are said to be “cult-like”—they have a clear mission, norms and values around which everyone is aligned; performance expectations are very high and systems are in place to help all employees rise to meet those expectations; employees take an enterprise point of view, doing what is best for the entire community, rather than for one’s personal interest; innovation and risk-taking are encouraged because simply standing still in a dynamic world is to fall behind; employees solve problems wherever they are rather than wait for a manager to tell them to take action—this is called “leading from the middle.”

Intolerance and discrimination, left unchecked, eat like acid at all of these virtues. They will blur the mission, erode core values, dampen expectations, destroy teamwork and the enterprise perspective, and suppress innovation and risk-taking. In consequence one’s leadership and the enterprise will fall well short of potential.

The best organizations rally in support of their core values. So should we. We value a pluralistic society because of the richness of understanding it offers. Our business at this University is to pursue truth; we often find it in conversation with people different from ourselves. Darden and the University of Virginia stand for tolerance and open, respectful, debate. Darden’s stated mission is to better society. We stand for excellence
and the systems by which merit is recognized, and the free market for talent that that implies—in particular, we reject discrimination based on race, gender, creed, national origin, age, disability, and sexual orientation. And we stand for the dignity of the individual. We care about the treatment of the individual because a chain is only as strong as its most vulnerable link. As the Renaissance scholar, John Donne, said,

No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. …Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

Likewise, the recent acts of intolerance and discrimination diminish all of us. By rejecting such acts we reclaim our stature and reach toward our aspiration, to assume a position among the very best organizations and to offer an environment where we can do our very best work.