

April 19, 2017

Dear UA Community --

The art installation at UAA that has sparked recent concern and debate has people asking whether a public university should be home to controversial, or even offensive, ideas. My answer: A vital and vibrant university, regardless of the campus, must be a place of ideas, opinion, and debate. A place where the most controversial ideas abound, and where assumptions and positions are openly tested.

Meaningful ideas and debates are often informative and, sometimes, unsettling. Throughout history, ideas and points of view that were controversial, even abhorrent or offensive at the time, have upset the status quo and led to significant advances in science, art, and understanding of the human condition. On other occasions, what we now think of as controversial and abhorrent ideas were once widely accepted.

The point is that historical or social context determines what is "mainstream" or "acceptable," and may have little relevance to truth. Requiring that ideas be "acceptable" begs the question, "acceptable to whom?"

Not all ideas, opinions or artistic expressions stand the test of open debate or time. The dust bin of history is filled with such ideas. But ideas that we profoundly disagree with may be the very ideas needed to broaden our understanding of the world around us. I can think of no better place in a free society than a university to test ideas, especially those that are highly controversial and objectionable, through open and rigorous debate.

Jim Johnsen