

Dear President Michael Benson and the ECU community,

I am writing you to express my shock and despair at learning that Donald Trump will be holding one of his propaganda and hate filled rallies at my alma mater, ECU. Actually, I want to send my condolences, for I fear we are living through the death of democracy. ECU and other universities teach critical thinking—the very thing the Trump regime abhors. This is why it is gut wrenching to know all that hate will fill the same coliseum in which I received two diplomas. This regime despises critical thinking because it challenges their power. Trump will continue to embolden hate for women, Mexicans, the black community, the LGBTQI community, and basically anyone else who doesn't think or act like him. Before I get into why ECU should deeply reflect on its role in this, let me share some reasons why I love ECU and why your decision to be part of one of our darkest hours in American history kills my soul.

I grew up in Wolfe County, Kentucky. My parents worked their asses off to give me a good life. My father broke his back daily working in a factory while my mother worked a string of jobs that were available to her in our small town. Neither of my parents were privileged enough to attend college. Dad was drafted into Vietnam straight after high school. Mom left high school her senior year half a semester early to marry my dad when he got back to the US. We were poor but not “food stamps poor” which at the time made me proud. Later I realized that way of thinking was just a hatred of poor people I had slowly learned to internalize. Somewhere along the line, I learned that people like me, people like those in my community, were not good enough because we didn't have money. I was told we didn't work hard enough and that's why we were poor—not because there's a well-established system that functions like an aristocracy to hoard wealth at the top levels of society. This establishment also hoards power. It forms the messages that tell us who we are through our media and social institutions. Its laws impact everyone but are written by lawmakers who have no idea what it is like to be an average American. And it does all this while hating, overtly and covertly, certain demographics of people. The American experience is one made possible by divide-and-conquer tactics. Pit one group against another so you no longer see their humanity and it's easier to invade them for war, rape them, shoot them, rip them off. It's all just business as usual to the people in our modern American aristocracy. But there are millions of us—the “others.” Millions of people, who like myself were told they were “trailer trash” because their parents couldn't afford a wooden a-frame or brick house like others. It used to be a point of shame for me. I grew up feeling embarrassed to bring friends home, especially once I started school at ECU and met people from other states. Jokes in the culture and movies had taught me that trailer trash and people like me who spoke in lilting “country accents” were literal garbage. I believed it because I was young and lacked the critical thought to examine why messages so full of hate pervade our society; how they can make someone hate their neighbor. Or hate themselves.

It was my time at ECU that changed me for the better. It is where for the first time in my life I felt accepted. I found my people. Other working poor kids from Eastern Kentucky who discovered their brilliance; who learned that speaking with an accent didn't mean thinking with an accent. I met others so drastically different from myself, feeding not only my intellect, but also my soul. The professors were amazing and supportive—they taught me how to see the interconnections of everything in this world. I learned about wealth inequality and the mechanisms that have allowed it grow worse each decade. I learned about earlier dark days in American history where we replaced the slavery of black people with the horrors of Jim Crow and built the path for our privatized prison system; a new form of slavery. I learned about authoritarianism and how a society of truly good people can allow their neighbors to be rounded up and incinerated like, well, human garbage. I

learned that my country put Japanese-Americans in internment camps and stripped them of their humanity. (See a trend here for what happens when we treat people like garbage?) My most life-altering intellectual moments, those a-ha moments- happened because of ECU. I love ECU so much I completed a Masters in Criminal Justice after my Bachelors in Sociology. I worked at ECU as a part-time instructor in Sociology and Criminal Justice for seven years off-and-on. I was barely scraping by financially but absolutely loving that I was able to teach and work with so many wonderful ECU students. Standing at the front of their classroom, looking at all their faces, I saw myself in many of them. First generation students told by their society that they were not good enough, that they'd always be a little "less than" simply because of their accent or their poor families. And in our classwork we smashed all those stereotypes and lies to bits. We smashed all that noise with critical thinking, empathy, and pure love. Love for one another, love for our homes, love for ourselves—love that doesn't always come easily in our modern, hate-filled society. It is from this love of ECU—*my ECU*—that I write you.

So now that you know I'm coming from a place of love, I'd like to break this down using the critical thinking skills ECU taught me. I'll try to do this in the TL/DR style; everything below is easily evidenced by a search of reliable online sources.

1. Trump lost the popular vote by around 3 million votes. He won the Electoral College vote by numbers which have been thrown into suspicion for possibly being hacked by Russia (suspicions cast by our intelligence agencies, no less). Leading intelligence experts now believe his election is part of a larger plan (one that's been a long time coming) to destabilize the US from within since we have long been Russia's "enemy."
2. Trump filed to run for 2020 re-election shortly after his inauguration. This is unheard of among presidential hopefuls who typically file to run again a year or so before the next election. Why does this matter? It allows Trump to continue to enrich himself off his campaign events—charging the GOP to use his branded properties, using tax payer money for his security details as he attends rallies instead of running the country, etc. In short, it's a brilliant con for him. For taxpayers, not so much.
3. Trump's rallies routinely utilize the tactics used by authoritarian leaders around the world. Divide and conquer. Choose an enemy, build them up as a threat, castigate them, embolden violence against them, and shut down any criticisms. He pays people to stand behind him and if they don't toe the line by clapping and chanting "lock her up" on cue he has them removed. He gaslights people into believing his version of reality. He tells us that things he said yesterday were not said. Even though we saw him say them on live TV. He has attacked women, sexual assault survivors (including the women who have accused him of rape and harassment), disabled people, Mexicans, immigrants, NFL players, African Americans, Muslims, and basically everyone. When privileged white people in power look at the majority of Americans now protesting Trump they see "enemies of the state, Soros-funded lefties." When people protesting Trump look at his rallies and his supporters, we see people who want to kill us, rape us, imprison us for speaking up, degrade us at every turn, take away our healthcare, give tax cuts to the richest 1%, and turn us into indentured servants. (By the way, keep your eyes on this last one since Trump-loving Governor Bevin has recently said indentured servitude is basically like an apprenticeship. Guess that's his plan for the future of education after all his cuts to the budget!)
4. Trump looks up to authoritarians around the world—Russia's Putin, Turkey's Erdogan, Hungary's Orban, and Poland's Duda. Trump fawned over the Philippines' Duterte who said rape exists because beautiful women exist. This same Duterte recently admitted on live TV, without an inkling of remorse, that he has personally murdered citizens. And don't forget

how Trump “fell in love” with dictator, Kim Jong-un. Wonder what Cincinnati native Otto Warmbier’s family felt when they heard the President of the United States profess love for the man who tortured their son? The man whose regime appeared to have “rearranged Otto’s teeth with pliers” and “removed portions of his brain”?

5. Trump has dismantled the three things in American government that act as checks on his power. He has taken the legitimacy away from journalism which can speak about his abuses of power. (It was relatively easy to do since “mainstream media” was already problematic and profit-driven.) He has attacked the judiciary with claims of partisanship, while installing over 30 extreme right-leaning judges to the lower courts for life. He has now put a man on the Supreme Court who was chosen explicitly because he will dismiss any charges that might come from Mueller’s investigation. Lastly, he has destroyed the Congress by further removing any inkling of bi-partisanship. He has made it clear to those Republicans who are not loyal to him that they will pay for any lack of support or questioning of his motives. This is done to such an extent that scholars are now saying some Senators have likely been compromised with blackmail in order to do Trump’s bidding. When the media, the judiciary, and Congress fail to act as a check on any president’s power, you are looking at the end of democracy. No one person should have that much power and the framers of our country and Constitution knew it and put those checks into place for a reason.

These five points bring me to the darker theme of this letter—the role of ECU in a propagandist, con-man’s authoritarian take-over of our democracy. The typical authoritarian move to take power has several components that can play out over years, or more quickly, depending on the role of the military and police apparatus. These components work in tandem and it is difficult to sort out which is most important:

- You make people turn against the media or any form of journalism which can act as a check on power and point out the corruption of the leader.
- You create a false reality where people are so bombarded with a new crisis each day that they get burned out on caring or thinking or worrying.
- You create an enemy of the people—you dehumanise them and attack them verbally, which turns into physical attacks eventually.
- You fill all government offices with cronies who will be loyal to the leader instead of ethical.
- You enrich yourself off the process so you have even more power.
- You purge the judiciary of legitimate judges and universities of scholars who see the long arc of history.
- You employ mafia-style organized crime tactics that render the rule of law moot.
- You criminalize dissent, imprison any opposition, and torture or kill anyone who dares to speak out against you.

In the last couple of years I have followed the news with a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach. Things I never dreamt I would see in my lifetime started happening. I was horrified when my government supported neo-nazis marching and killing in our streets. They were dismissed as “fine people” despite killing Heather Heyer and nearly beating anti-neo-nazi protesters to death. I was terrified to learn that my government has been stealing asylum-seeking children at the border and putting most of them in cages while letting Betsy DeVos put some of them up for adoption in her for-profit adoption agency. I am continually in mourning for those massacred in mass shootings while doing things like going to school, church, or concerts. I am angered that in 2018, neo-nazis are still spray-painting swastikas on Jewish Centers and cemeteries in the US. I am disgusted by the

fanatical right-wing NRA making extremist propaganda films that label people who want equal rights or basic human decency as “enemies of the country” who need to be approached “with a clenched fist of truth.” I’m sick of these people stoking a civil war against everyday Americans who simply want human decency. I’m sick of explaining that having basic levels of human decency and standing up for what’s right isn’t “being pc” or “being a snowflake.” I am heartsick for my black brothers and sisters who peacefully take a knee to say, “stop shooting unarmed black people in the streets” and are treated like *they’re* the criminals. I found myself crying and physically shaking as I watched Trump’s recent rally where he attacked Dr. Ford and by extension all women who have suffered sexual assault and harassment—including myself. Is this our America? No, this is Trump’s America—one version of America that has existed all along. It embraces the white supremacist aristocracy. It’s the one that refused to help Jews fleeing the Holocaust until the last minute. It’s the one that tried to wipe Indigenous peoples off the map and out of our history books. It’s the one that treated Africans worse than animals- enslaving, raping, murdering, stealing children, stealing wealth, stealing futures. That is one America. But it is not all of America.

The America I know and love is a democracy, not a dictatorship. It’s a country where trailer trash like me can find people who believe in them and invest in them. It’s a country where grassroots organizers fighting the good fight for equality, fair wages, a clean environment, justice, and freedom organize so brilliantly and fiercely that countries around the globe look to us for examples. My America is full of different people from various cultures who bring the best of themselves to an unknown land and do the hard work of creating a new home while missing their old communities. Like anything worth having, our nation was flawed. But we let those flaws fester over the years. It festered from the systemic robbing of wealth from working class people like my family. It festered from a thousand cuts to education which undermined critical thinking. It festered in our nation’s inability to protect itself from propagandists who sought to sow seeds of discord—those who get rich off dividing and conquering (like talk radio hosts spewing xenophobic bile and red faced pundits forever on the verge of a heart attack). And it festers from the silence that lets all of this darkness continue to act as a cancer in our democracy.

Beyond providing a life-transforming place to grow, we know universities also grant professional credentials. We tell everyone—if you study something long enough, you can become a recognized expert on it. Well, as someone who has studied our society since 1999 and now holds a PhD in Sociology, I give you my expertise: We are in the fight for our lives and need to act accordingly. As an empathetic person living in this world for nearly 40 years I say this: we have a choice. Enable the authoritarian take-over of our democracy by giving Trump a platform- the (in my eyes) sacred EKU platform- and you become a key player in the darkest period of North American history. EKU should not have given Trump the platform to begin with, but now that he has it, don’t play into their manipulation. Don’t attend. Don’t be an audience for Trump’s hatred and propaganda. Don’t fight with the neo-nazis that are most definitely going to attend. They want to be “victims” of censorship from the “pc police.” They want to get you arrested and have videos of you fighting them so they can use it for future propaganda. A tactic the far-right (alt-right/neo-nazis) uses is to attempt to spread hate at universities because they know they will be counter-protested for their abhorrent, ethnic cleansing views by people who are in the throes of learning about critical thinking. The alt-right neo-nazis despise education and the power it brings. When people who support justice and democracy challenge them, the neo-nazis act like they’re the victim. There are no laws preventing them from speaking their mind. They are not the victims here. They simply fail to recognize that we don’t have to listen to them and this enrages them. They hate they have no control over how people receive their white supremacist views. (Listen to On the Media’s podcast titled, Face the Racist Nation for more on their tactics.) Whatever we do, we can’t allow Trump, or anyone else, to divide

us—because the next step is conquering us. In times like this I think of Kentucky’s motto, which I have always loved, “United we stand, divided we fall.” I seem to recall the same message in a holy book many Kentuckians cherish referring to a “house divided, cannot stand.”

Young people, what can you do? Continue to educate yourselves—read news from other countries. Learn how to recognize bias. Recognize the difference between legitimate journalism and the 24-7 TV news pundits. Read books on the history of fascism; learn the difference between populism, fascism, and white nationalism. Read about sociology, psychology, and economics. Read authors who lift the voices of those most often silenced. Get involved in political campaigns for people who are decent, ethical people. Run for office yourself—this is going to be your world for longer than it is your elders. Volunteer in your community. Vote! Use an absentee ballot if you need to. Talk to people who are different from you. You’ll learn, like I learned, that we are more alike than we are different. At the end of the day most people want the same thing—a good job, a nice home, enough money to live a decent life, the love of family, and freedom. Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise. We have massive global issues to face that will require the best of us working on the best ideas. We can’t allow more time to be wasted by arguing over what used to just be a given—that being a decent, compassionate person is a good thing. If you need a barometer, it might be good to harken back to the message from the little woven bracelets everyone in my generation wore (even those who weren’t Christians) “what would Jesus do?” After all, one tenet that seems to be found in nearly every organized religion is *do unto others as you’d have them do unto you*. How hard is that?

EKU what can you do? Show that you stand for the values you espouse. Integrity, honor, critical thinking, compassion, leadership, and good will toward others. Fight for your democracy, because when it dies, it will take down everything else we hold dear, including you. Especially you.

EKU is not just President Michael Benson, it is all of us. And this is our message:

We can’t go back.

We won’t go back.

With love,

Lisa Conley, PhD

Class of 2003 and 2005