Dear Class of 2019:

Your first year at the College of Charleston comes 150 years after the conclusion of the Civil War and 50 years after the Civil Rights and the Voting Rights Acts were signed into law. With this historical background in mind, we selected Bruce Watson’s *Freedom Summer* as the 2015 College Reads! selection and asked you to read it over the summer.

*Freedom Summer* chronicles the violence and brutality of segregation in Mississippi as Lyndon Johnson signed the 1964 Civil Rights Act and one year before passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act. Young people, most of college age, “invaded” Mississippi to register voters, teach in Freedom Schools, run community centers called Freedom Houses, and rally support for the Mississippi Democratic Freedom Party. Volunteers were trained by Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) staff, peers in age but already veterans of Mississippi’s raw violence. They were all afraid, but headed to Mississippi together intent on changing America for the better.

Your convocation discussion with faculty was organized around the ideals and events represented in *Freedom Summer*. We asked you to prepare for this conversation by writing an essay in response to one of three prompts, and we collected over 1,500 essays at convocation (a stack measuring 13.5” and weighing nearly 30 pounds). In taking seriously this assignment, even though you did not earn a grade for your effort, you demonstrated to everyone your readiness to be College of Charleston students. Since we cannot provide each of you with feedback on your essay, we write now to reflect some of the insights you offered.

When asked to select a figure from *Freedom Summer* that you identified with and to describe the nature of your connection, many of you felt drawn to Fran O’Brien because of her strong religious values and her deep care for children; or to Bob Moses for his quiet, steady, and practical leadership. You noted Rita Schwerner’s unyielding pursuit of justice for her slain husband and Muriel Tillinghast’s remarkable combination of anxiety and empathy, fear and resolve. One student eloquently described Fred Winn’s “strong moral anchor,” wondering whether her own moral anchor would have been heavy enough to keep her grounded and committed to the cause at hand.

We also challenged you to imagine yourself in the same time and place and to reflect on whether you would have made the same decisions. While many of you emphasized the importance of acting in the face of injustice of any kind, many more of you wrote that the volunteers’ action reflected in *Freedom Summer*—action taken at such a pivotal moment, in light of certain violence, and in the face of deep resistance—seemed too intense to imagine today. Freedom Summer required independence and immense courage. Since social change is often
incremental and even impossible to see in the heat of the moment, what would be worth such personal sacrifice today? “We were raised to believe that we can do whatever we put our minds to,” one student wrote. “But now I understand that the world is a hostile and complicated place.” Under such circumstances, not acting can seem like the only option. When you feel overwhelmed like this, remember these historical figures you were drawn to and why. We believe there is great potential for action in the face of injustice in each one of you.

In writing about the Freedom Schools, many of you were led to express how grateful you are for what your educational experience has offered you. At the same time, reading *Freedom Summer* led you to see that it also prevented you, at times, from having deep, transformative experiences. One of you reflected with something like envy on how these young lives were forever changed in Mississippi: “That’s all I want in this world, something to change me.” This sentiment is striking in its profound sense of readiness, but it also reflects a certain passivity. Is your college education something that happens to you, or will you pursue it with intentionality?

When reflecting on how the values and goals that mark the Freedom School curriculum differ from the values and goals that defined your own education, many of you wrote about how different the education experienced in the Freedom Schools seems to be from the education you’ve received. You noted that Freedom Schools were unique in American history because of their direct connection to the Civil Rights Movement. Even though you noted some similarities between the focus of Freedom Schools and your own education (a focus on leadership, for example), for many of you the goals seemed quite different: the Freedom Schools “sought to align political and academic learning into one program,” as one student put it; Freedom Schools “were more culturally relevant,” according to another. A common refrain in your essays was that schools today are concerned more with preparing students for college and careers than for political engagement: “Our focus was on getting good grades so we could go to a college of our choice,” according to one writer. Another wrote about how “My educational goals were to get good grades and do as well as possible in order to get a good job and succeed.”

Yet you also indicated that the Freedom Schools pushed you to think more deeply about your expectations as a student at the College of Charleston, which echoes that sense of openness to change noted above. “I want to be open to change and be an advocate for… social equality,” one of you wrote. Many of you expressed a desire to expand educational goals while in college and to take advantage of out-of-class learning opportunities. “My outlook on my four years at the College of Charleston has changed drastically” after reading *Freedom Summer*, one student wrote. “Taking notes and finishing homework aren’t enough; it’s the experiences outside of the classroom that do the teaching.” Considering the model of education the Freedom Schools offered, another observed, “I hope to accomplish a new perspective on thinking where I can always be curious.” That charged curiosity and openness is what education is all about.

Finally, you had the opportunity to rethink the epilogue of the book and to reflect on whether you share the author’s optimism about race in America. You have been engaged with recent events that have brought issues of racism and the unequal treatment of African Americans back to the forefront of national consciousness. While the murders at Emanuel AME were a focal point for
many of you, places like Ferguson, Baltimore, and North Charleston appeared often in your essays, as did Michael Brown, Trayvon Martin, and Eric Garner. You recognize that there are still many challenges to be faced, but that solutions to many of them are not as obvious as they appeared to be for the students of *Freedom Summer*.

As one student wrote, “the old clumsy and violent version of racism cannot thankfully survive today, but its covert offspring thrives in its absence.” He continued, “Racism has grown into a much more subtle creature. One that most are not fully aware that they carry inside of them. Even those who believe that they are championing inequality can hold it.” Despite this, many of you are still optimistic as your generation moves forward to work on these issues in your own way. When talking about the challenges of dealing with the less visible aspects of racism, a student wrote, “I don’t expect everybody to admit it immediately, it takes much more than a two-page paper to help somebody with that. However, I do wish that everybody could be open to understanding it, that way we can start here. It will take generations on end to complete this mission. But, it is always better to start late rather than never, and now rather than tomorrow.”

There are monumental problems in the world and in our Charleston community in particular that require reflective awareness and dedicated action. And we can’t always wait until those problems compel action like some unavoidable historical imperative; rather, we must ourselves identify injustice and inequality, learn its causes and consequences through formal and informal education, and then seek out ways we might bring about change in our worlds. We ourselves might be changed in such action, made anew in a world we have done some small thing to improve. Where might you begin?

We encourage you to take advantage of resources on campus that connect students to the community, such as the Center for Civic Engagement or faith-based student organizations. To learn more about the ways in which the issues that consumed the summer of 1964 continue to resonate today, attend author Bruce Watson’s public lecture on Monday, November 9 at 7:00pm in Sottile Theatre. Bring a friend so that you can continue the dialogue with someone close to you. Register to vote. Visit the Freedom Summer display in the atrium of Addlestone Library and watch for events related to the [Race and Social Justice Initiative](https://raceandsocialjusticeinitiative.org). Another valuable resource is the [#Charlestonsyllabus](https://twitter.com/hashtag/Charlestonsyllabus), a crowdsourced bibliography on race and racism in the United States that was started by Chad Williams on Twitter shortly after the Emanuel AME shooting. And [The College Reads! website](https://college-reads.org) will continue to serve as a repository for resources related to *Freedom Summer* and books highlighted throughout the spring semester.

Thank you for taking seriously the challenge of reading deeply and engaging in serious reflective writing about *Freedom Summer*, and for your commitment to the shared ideals embodied in the liberal arts and sciences. We are so glad you are here at the College of Charleston!

Sincerely,

Your Faculty