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# We Know Better: Shed Image of Racist, Bigoted Community

Christia Spears Brown

University of Kentucky, [christia.brown@uky.edu](mailto:christia.brown@uky.edu)

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## We know better: Shed image of racist, bigoted community

BY CHRISTIA BROWN, PH.D.

August 2017

Following Mayor Jim Gray's announcement about relocating the Confederate statues at Cheapside, Lexington received the attention of national news organizations, and the attention of several racist, xenophobic and anti-Semitic hate groups.

As we brace for their negative attention as they prepare to descend upon our city, it is important to clarify what the issues really are. It is unfortunate that the goals of respect and equality for all have become politicized. Unambiguously rejecting hate groups, and their symbols, is not a political issue. It is actually a moral, educational, and economic issue.

It is immoral to celebrate historical figures who fought to treat one group of people as property to be bought, sold, beaten and lynched. Yes, this is a part of American history. A dark and shameful part of our history. The best equivalent would be a celebratory statue of Hitler at the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial in Germany. It is a part of their history — one to be remembered, not celebrated.

Treating human beings as property is immoral. Period. Celebrating those who fought to preserve that way of life is immoral. Period. As Maya Angelou said, "When you know better, you do better." In 2017, we know better.

This issue is also educational. At the University of Kentucky, we strive to ensure our core values of diversity and inclusion. We know we are better as an academic institution when our students hear a variety of voices — from different backgrounds, life experiences, and points of view. Research has shown that all students, across all racial and ethnic groups, benefit from attending a diverse school. They literally learn more academic information, plus they enter the workforce better equipped to interact with people different from themselves.

We also need to protect our students who come to our campus under the assumption that they will be treated

according to the gray matter in their brains and not the melanin in their skin.

While they attend our school, at a critical time in their young lives, they live in this town. They need to know that UK, the city of Lexington, and the commonwealth of Kentucky respect and value them. They need to know that they have worth and that we wholeheartedly reject a system that ever told them differently. Only when they feel accepted and respected can they truly learn.

Teaching and caring for all of our students is our responsibility. Publicly rejecting these groups and their symbols is the bare minimum we can do to ensure their educational success.

Finally, this issue is economic. If we want to attract businesses and employers to Lexington, we must shed this image of a racist, bigoted community.

Symbols matter. Words matter. We know Lexington is much more than these symbols, but they shape others' perceptions of what we represent. We are already seeing this happen, such as when California announced that it would not fund any travel to Kentucky because of the lack of protections for LGBTQ rights.

At UK, we struggle to recruit diverse faculty because of this perception of our community. Walking a potential employee (and potential taxpayer) by the old courthouse and trying to explain away these symbols of a racist past is an unnecessary hurdle in the hiring process.

We urge all members of the Lexington community to recognize this is about rejecting hate, regardless of political beliefs. Removing these symbols tells our citizens that they are valued — that the wrongs of the past belong squarely in the past. That type of change is good for all of us.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**Dr. Christia Brown** is a Professor of Developmental and Social Psychology at the University of Kentucky, where her research focuses on race and gender stereotypes from a developmental perspective. She is the founder and director of the Center for Equality and Social Justice at the University of Kentucky.

She has published widely in top scientific journals on issues related to children's and adolescents' perceptions of gender and racial/ethnic discrimination, the development of gender and racial/ethnic identity, the development of social group stereotypes, and how children understand social inequality and politics.

Dr. Brown earned her Ph.D. in 2003 at the University of Texas at Austin. She also has two daughters, Maya and Grace; a husband, Kris; and a dog, Coco.

For more about Dr. Brown, visit <https://psychology.as.uky.edu/users/csbrow6>.

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For more about the CESJ and its members, visit <https://www.as.uky.edu/cesj>.



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Kastle Hall  
University of Kentucky  
Lexington, KY  
40506

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