

Herald Times

Are we all in this together?

This guest column was written by Mark Fraley, associate director of PACE at IU; Lisa-Marie Napoli, director of PACE at IU; and Doug Bauder, founder of IU's LGBTQ+ Cultural Center, all of Bloomington.

“We are all in this together.”

This familiar refrain has been plastered on billboards, adopted as a hashtag, and inserted into speeches and public notices. The slogan is a catchy means of reminding residents to maintain safe practices during a global pandemic. But the phrase implies something deeper than an appeal to wash our hands and to swap dinner parties for Zoom happy hours. It is an invocation of our shared obligation to look out for each other in times of crisis.

The current situation invites us to reflect on how resolute our commitment is to our mutual flourishing and consider where we hope to find ourselves after we have effectively managed this virus. Indiana University's Political and Civic Engagement Program (PACE) raised these considerations earlier this month in an online conversation with community residents, social service workers, elected officials and university personnel. The discussion was organized as part of the National Conversation Project's initiative to weave community in midst of a pandemic. The ideas expressed were wide-ranging, but consensus converged on at least one central point. We do not need or want a return to the old normal. We can and must do better.

The spread of COVID-19 and subsequent economic shut down has brought to light several intersecting social ills that have long simmered under surface of our social fabric. These include economic inequality, racial disparities, domestic violence, unequal health care access, technological divide and epidemics of loneliness, depression, anxiety and substance use.

These and other deeply rooted social problems have been tragically magnified in the past couple months. They are widely apparent in the daily death tolls, unemployment numbers, reports of racial disparities and demand for mental health services. They are present in zoom classrooms and teleconferences where some have speedy internet service and others struggle to keep pace. They are noticeable in the cries to reopen economies as well as the calls for continued caution.

So, while we may be treading the same troubled waters, we occupy very different boats. Our commitment to being in this together will rest on our capacity to turn the current crisis into an opportunity for civic reconstruction — to foster a climate of cohesion that serves as the foundation for a healthy democracy.

This is not an easy task. Modern media and communication tools have successfully propagated themselves by appealing to our darkest impulses. Yet, when we look around, we see the selfless service of residents forming mutual aid organizations, giving generously to charity, and building particle board pantries alongside little neighborhood libraries. While our social media feeds are often filled with crass conspiracies and images of hoarders, our neighborhoods are filled with community custodians carrying out their days with redemptive grace.

Our charge is to channel that compassion towards a new project of civic renewal. This requires us to locate our humanity not only during a pandemic. It means that we must think beyond our narrow interests and establish democratic norms yielding greater inclusion and broader understanding. We will need solutions to the economic devastation and national trauma associated with the virus as well as the deeper social maladies made visible by it. That project will require us to be truly in this together.

We invite anyone, regardless of political or social background, who is interested in being part of future conversations and efforts to build a better democracy to contact us at pace@indiana.edu. #WeavingCommunity.