To the More Privileged Members of the SSA Community,

Allyship is about humility and unconditionality. If your acts of accountability cause harm to someone you were seeking to help, you are not being an ally and you have not helped. Allies are not self-appointed. Most importantly, they should not be seeking praise or comfort from those they are attempting to help or acting in any way that decenters the needs of those who are at the most risk of harm. They are people doing the work to educate themselves so that, when called on to act, they are prepared to serve unconditionally.

Everyone must acknowledge that we are at SSA to undergo the self-education that potential allies must prioritize and to cultivate humility so that we are not harming people when it is our turn to act with them. Not enough members of the SSA community entered with those essential goals, and these same SSA community members have failed to recognize that everyone in this community does not exist within it equally. This is why SSA has not been treated as a place where social work can and should be happening internally. Most administrators, faculty, and students whose identities converge in largely privileged ways have done little to show they acknowledge that there are marginalized students at SSA and that these students are being victimized by this institution’s structural oppression and related microaggressions everyday. Acknowledging and moving to rectify this harm would require more thoughtfulness than Dean Guterman or any other SSA leaders with privileged identities have shown they are willing or able to muster. As this truth continues to be ignored, the most vulnerable members of this community – who have little more than a financial aid refund check separating them from the conditions our profession is supposed to be abolishing – have been traumatized, called on to do the work of administrators and professors without pay, and made to feel like less than full members of this institution.

Last week’s community forum featured beautiful action from SSA students across programs who identify as Black, as trans, as people of color, as queer, as Latinx, as women, as youth, as first generation college and graduate students – essentially all of the identities that are most at risk of harm from intentional bigotry and well-meaning helpers who have not self-examined enough to prevent the injury they cause everyday. We chose to self-advocate loudly and to abandon people’s notions of what respectable grievance should look like, putting ourselves at risk of the same kind of harm we endure daily, because we believe that the newest members of our community deserve to hear the truth from and about their leadership. We will continue to assert truth, transparency, and the values of social work actually rooted in transformative change.

If you are someone earnestly seeking to boost the voices of students doing this work, there are practical ways to do that. You will not be rewarded for them, but you should find solace in knowing that you are furthering the solution to real problems within your institution. Here’s what you should do:

- When people with marginalized identities give testimony about their experiences, do not respond defensively, cry at them, or otherwise draw attention to yourself and away from the person actually being hurt.
- Ask yourself why you are so in awe of marginalized people’s ability to self-advocate unapologetically. When showing solidarity after they’ve self-advocated, do not romanticize them doing what they must do because no one reliably speaks up for or with them. Instead, come with commitments for what you will do so that they do not have to keep risking themselves so profoundly. The point is to make it so the same people do not always have to be so resilient.
- Do not try to characterize or generalize about our actions. Use the words we have used, as they were said intentionally.
- Read what we have said about what we want. We are not acting frivolously (though that would be ok, too, given our experiences of trauma at SSA) and you should take every opportunity to acknowledge that.
• Organize other privileged people once you have heard from us what we want. It is enough to have to come up with demands, sit in hostile meetings and classes, do the same load of schoolwork and fieldwork you have, and exist in a society that seeks to destroy us. You lessen this load by doing the work to change other privileged people’s hearts and minds.

• Call things out. Someone who is being victimized should not have to feel that victimization and put themselves at further risk by standing up to it right away. If you see microaggressions/manifestations of structural oppression, hold the person/people in the wrong accountable in that moment.

As we head into another week at SSA and the second community forum to discuss what the institution is and is not doing, be thoughtful and intentional about how you can act on the above strategies.

Looking forward,

Jasmine Atwell

2nd year, full-time day student
To the SSA Community,

Below are reflections written by Silenced Students from the second community forum that took place last week on Tuesday December 1st, 2015. Best of luck during finals week.

Silenced Students’ Reflections on the Second Community Forum

To the SSA Community,

At the second community forum we taped our mouths shut and sat at the center of the room wearing all black. We were comprised of nine Black and of color students. We did this to call attention to the ways in which our voices have been silenced and labeled as aggressive, impatient, and disrespectful. We did this to highlight the disparity in the way that white voices are valued and ours are not. We did this, because this was the only way we could get people to “listen.”

During the forum, several traumatic acts of violence against Black and of color students occurred that exemplified the reasons why we began organizing to transform SSA. We write to share with you what we could not share with you then. We write to share the grief and righteous anger about the forum’s events. We write - taking the time from our academic duties during finals week - to urge you all to truly listen to student suffering, internalize it, and to use it to transform yourselves and this institution with us.

First, the shaming of student efforts for transparency through recording the forums was belittling and functioned as a means to divert attention from the issues at SSA, in order to frame student action as the problem. It suggested student leaders were irresponsibly silencing and harming vulnerable folks in our community - such as survivors of stalking or domestic violence, undocumented students, or folks transitioning - through public videos of the forum. This opening statement served as a manipulative tactic to devalue our movement and shift attention away from those in power who are allowed to inflict and dismiss student pain without accountability. It was dishonest to frame the current climate at SSA as, at all, the fault of students. We are largely the dependent variables until we put ourselves at risk by deciding not just passively accept what’s happening. For instance, right now we have to defend our actions to record the forums. We were mindful of the risks and thus placed posters advising folks to let us know if they would not like to be on camera, no questions asked. Instead of highlighting intentional efforts, the forum began by creating a hostile environment to student leaders. Student organizers should not be blamed for helping to alleviate the distrust created and fostered by the SSA administration.

Second, what does it mean when a white adjunct professor blatantly attacks a student of color for speaking her truth and challenging Guterman’s privileged identities? That act of violence both implicitly and explicitly aimed to further silence targeted populations at SSA. Not once did a white administrator or professor publicly hold this professor accountable. Not once did a white person publicly humiliate one of the numerous white students who interrupted and challenged Guterman. Not once were white students accused of “microagressing” Guterman. While white students stepped in when the aforementioned white adjunct professor aggressed the student of color, this is not representative of how the majority of white students at SSA react when targeted students are violated at this institution. Let us not forget that it was not until a professor of color directly pointed out that Black and of color students taped our mouths shut, unable to verbally contribute to the forum and using our white peers to speak for us, that we were finally acknowledged. This moment also revealed that many students and faculty in solidarity with us did not know how to support us at the forum - whether they wanted to or not - based on not having the skills or know how to do so. In the end, the same students, the ones with tapes across our mouths, are harmed.

Third, what does it mean when a professor of color suggested that we should be "appreciative” of the opportunity to speak? We understood this professor wanted to remind
people that folks in countries from around the world are not often able to voice their truths without persecution. However, Black and of color folks in the U.S. – such as in Chicago and at UChicago, – still face state-sanctioned repression when demanding justice and freedom. Furthermore, these forums were made possible in the first place because targeted students demanded them. Therefore, no, students should not simply be “grateful” for being allowed to speak at SSA. Justice does not end at being allowed to speak. We have all been told at SSA that we grow through discomfort, so nobody grows by “ending on a positive note.” Even though this professor’s comments were well-intentioned, it nonetheless devalued the actions of students expressing and attempting to heal unacknowledged pain.

Lastly, we are very well aware that communities of color at SSA are made up of different races, ethnicities, nationalities, and intersecting target identities. With the current climate at SSA, it is essential these groups are not self-divided into smaller factions. The reality is that each community has its own unique narratives and struggles due to the same oppressive regimes that dehumanize us. However, it is vital that we, as students with various intersecting target and racial identities, accept that our liberation depends on Black liberation. It is crucial for our targeted communities to recognize that the U.S. and all communities of color thrive and benefit from anti-Blackness. Ignoring this reality impedes the process of radical transformation and liberation that we - as leaders, social workers, and agents of systemic change - are working to achieve, especially at SSA.

The forum was a replica of the daily traumatic and institutionally-sanctioned aggressions, isolation, and dehumanization Black, of color, and further minoritized students endure at SSA. We left the forum without knowledge of what our administration and professors are doing to understand their own privilege identities, to deepen their critical self-reflection. We left having our suffering and intentional actions gas lighted. We left feeling ashamed of the school that is supposed to teach us how to value and practice social justice and human rights. **We write not to seek apologies. Instead, we write to help heal from the pain we endured; to hold our school and leadership accountable and to provide us with the social justice education we deserve; and to compel the privileged members of SSA to truly listen, critically reflect on the suffering inflicted upon minoritized people for over five centuries, and transform along with this institution.**

Resiliently,

Dominique Mikell, Olivia Blocker, Michelle Brown, Brianna Lawrence, Aliza Hirani, Najah Bhatti, Sonya Chaudhry, Diana Ali, Alisa de los Reyes, and Fátima Avellán