An Open Letter to Chief of Police Barbara O’Connor:

We write with grave concern about your recent use of the “Illini Alert” text-messaging system on Monday, November 8, 2010 to report the assault in Forbes Hall and to search for the suspect in that incident.

The use of the system in this case was, at best, an overreaction to the incident, and, at worst, a misuse of police power that smacks of racial profiling. To tell every member of the campus community to call 911 if they see a “black male, salt/pepper hair, 40-50 year old, 5’11, 170, med build” does not increase safety on our campus. On the contrary, through such a sweeping announcement, you have in fact put a considerable part of the campus community at risk, placing under suspicion valued colleagues, coworkers, students, and visitors solely on the basis of their race and gender. Given the local history of racial tensions, which seem to have increased dramatically over the past year, this kind of alert only exacerbates the very distrust that has been so corrosive on campus and in local communities. We believe that the use of electronic media such as text-messaging and e-mail to issue crime alerts has been profoundly counterproductive, with the accumulated effect of generating widespread fear and suspicion that all too often gets expressed through racial divisiveness.

The sexual assault of a student is a deeply serious matter and deserves a swift and thorough response by police and campus authorities. We are as concerned as anyone else on this campus for the safety of our students in the dorms and elsewhere. We also believe that it is important that such incidents be handled in ways that do not inspire panic or rely on racial stereotypes, but rather that educate students, faculty, and staff about the most likely scenarios for sexual assault and other crimes on our campus.

We condemn the use of the mass-alert (text message) system to respond to such incidents. While it may be appropriate to use this technology to respond to rare cases of imminent widespread threat, such as a tornado or a bomb scare, the text-alert system was completely inappropriate -- and, indeed, reckless -- in this case. We are extremely troubled that you could issue such an alert, given the appalling history of racial profiling in this country. We understand that the Clery Act requires the University to give timely warnings of crimes on our campus, but we believe that it is possible to meet that requirement via other available media. We expect you, as the police chief of a leading university, to take considerable care and responsibility when making a decision about when or if race should be mentioned in any communication. At a minimum, we urge you to use every opportunity to inform the public of the dangers of stereotyping and to remind us all of the tremendous contributions made by all racial and ethnic groups in our diverse campus community.

While you may have intended to protect students, faculty, and staff, instead you have done serious damage to the racial climate of our campus and local community. We want you to realize that electronic crime alerts, especially last Monday’s text message, undermine the
ongoing and often difficult work that we do in our programs and organizations regarding race, gender, and sexual orientation, along with our daily efforts to make this campus a diverse, safe, and open-minded place to learn and work.

We urge you to immediately revise your policy for issuing such alerts; to apologize to the campus community for this irresponsible use of police power; and to confer in meaningful and sustained ways with those of us who are committed to the pursuit of racial and gender justice and equity on our campus.

Sincerely,

Executive Committee of the Campus Faculty Association
Senate Committee on Equal Opportunity and Inclusion
Professor James Barrett, Chair, Department of History
Professor Merle L. Bowen, Director, Center for African Studies
Professor Jorge Chapa, Director, Center on Democracy in a Multiracial Society
David W. Chih, Director, Asian American Cultural Center
Jennifer DeLuna, Assistant Director, La Casa Cultural Latina
Professor Jennifer Hamer, Faculty Co-Chair, Black Faculty and Academic Professionals Alliance
Whitney Hamilton, President, Women of Color
Professor Dianne Harris, Director, Illinois Program for Research in the Humanities
Professor Ronald L. Jackson, II, Head, Department of African American Studies
Rory G. James, Director, Bruce D. Nesbitt African American Cultural Center
Veronica M. Kann, Assistant Director, La Casa Cultural Latina
Tony Laing, President, Black Graduate Student Association
Professor Isabel Molina, Director, Latina/Latino Studies Program
Pat Morey, Director, Women’s Resources Center
Leslie Morrow, Director, LGBT Resource Center
Professor Chantal Nadeau, Director, Gender and Women’s Studies Program
Professor Lisa Nakamura, Director, Asian American Studies Program
Ben Rothschild, Undergraduate-Graduate Alliance
Stephanie Seawell, Co-President, Graduate Employees Organization
Professor Siobhan Somerville, Co-Chair, LGBT Advisory Committee
Regina Mosley Stevenson, Academic Professional Co-Chair, Black Faculty and Academic Professionals Alliance
Katie Walkiewicz, Co-President, Graduate Employees Organization
Professor Robert Warrior, Director, American Indian Studies Program
Amaziah Zuri, Chair, Students for a United Illinois

cc:
Robert Easter, Chancellor and Provost, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Michael J. Hogan, President, University of Illinois
Joyce Tolliver, Chair, Senate Executive Committee, Academic Senate, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign