

SMU Statement Regarding the Sumners Foundation

In 1968, the Hatton W. Sumners Foundation established a scholarship at SMU Dedman School of Law. The purpose of the scholarship program was defined as developing “lawyers who will not only be equipped to perform skillfully the lawyer’s professional functions, but who will also be imbued with ideals of community and public service.” For more than fifty years, the Sumners scholarship program has brought outstanding students to SMU who have graduated and become leaders in the profession and their communities, and SMU is very grateful to the Foundation for funding the education of so many remarkable law students.

However, SMU has become aware that Congressman Sumners, for whom the Foundation is named, espoused some views that are antithetical to the University’s mission and core values. In certain of his writings and public statements, he publicly espoused views on the subjects of racial injustice and equal protection that were offensive then and totally incomprehensible today. SMU repudiates those statements and the abhorrent values they reflect in the strongest possible terms. As the University’s Board of trustees recently affirmed, we cannot “tolerate any racial injustices or inequities in our University or the communities we serve.” We are committed to fostering a community at SMU where every person is valued, and to ensuring racial equality and opportunity for all SMU constituents.

Accordingly, SMU and the Sumners Foundation are taking the following steps. First the scholarship program will be renamed, so it will now be called the Sumners Scholarship, emphasizing the Foundation’s independent status from Hatton W. Sumners. The scholarship program at SMU was established after the Congressman’s death, and this name change will focus on the Foundation’s longstanding commitment to leadership and public service rather than honoring the Congressman. Second, the Foundation agrees to the participation of SMU Law School Faculty and Sumners Scholars alumni in the recruitment and selection of candidates who will be interviewed by the Sumners Foundation Trustees for scholarships. This will ensure a variety of voices and perspectives are brought to the table in making these important awards. Third, the criteria for Sumners Scholars will continue to include past instances of public and community service. Scholars will also be required to maintain a class ranking in the top 1/3 of each recipient’s class. Fourth, the plaque honoring Congressman Sumners in the Underwood Law Library will be removed, and Congressman Sumners’ photos and effects will be returned to the Foundation and replaced with a plaque recognizing the Foundation, its mission and its role in creating the scholarship program.

We do not undertake these decisions lightly, or out of a desire to erase the past. But a modern and inclusive university, one that is firmly committed to welcoming students of all backgrounds, must have partnerships that celebrate the values of diversity, inclusion and opportunity for all committed to the practice of law and public service. The University reiterates its gratitude for the support from and important work of The Sumners Foundation.