

Civility and Race at the University of Alabama: When “We” Speak, Whose Voice Is Heard?

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Long before “civility” became a buzzword political commentators deploy to gaslight opponents, came the maxim: “to disagree is to be disagreeable.” Or, rendered concisely: “dissent is rude.”

Like contemporary codes of social control, this adage is premised on power. After all, whose positions benefit from this admonition? In the pages to follow, the authors will comment on the Civility Wars’ applicability to college life and the space carved out at the University of Alabama (UA) by New College¹ (NC) faculty and students to engage in critical discussions that inform collegiate learning with the ideals of Liberal Education. In particular, the authors will apply these lessons from Liberal Education to race on campus and to racially-

charged incidents from the Spring 2018 semester.

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In the popular imagination, the South may be synonymous with a genteel form of civility where strangers greet one another in passing, and even small talk is resplendent with “Ma’ams” and “Sirs”. But in reality, like the ubiquitous colloquialism, “Bless your heart,”² that civility can be heavily coded. Consequently, what may look like an innocuous exchange can be an assertion of privilege, a silencing. Accordingly, in this environment—where words can mean things that they do not in fact say—questions of the extent of student empowerment and the limits of civil discourse can be difficult to navigate. Nevertheless, NC seeks to foster environments that reward student autonomy and inculcate community values, like dialog and inclusion, in hopes of avoiding problems that devolve into protracted disagreement or ideological standoffs on campus.

Campus Unrest and Opportunity

Compared to similar programs and institutions invested in Liberal Education, NC has had a less fraught experience in the post-2016 season of political discontent than other campuses. For example, there has been no months-long, sustained media coverage and outraged public re-

¹ New College hosts an undergraduate Interdisciplinary Studies program within UA’s College of Arts & Science. Specifically, we cater to students sufficiently motivated to plan their own majors that combine coursework between departments or across colleges.

² Caroline Rogers, “How to Respond to ‘Bless Your Heart,’” accessed July 5, 2018. <https://www.southernliving.com/culture/bless-your-heart-response>.

sponse to goings-on on campus.³ Nor have courses been routinely disrupted by student groups demanding more inclusive class content.⁴

To be clear, this is not to minimize the crises UA faced during the Spring 2018 semester: racist rants posted by students to social media in January⁵ and March,⁶ and an invitation by a student group to Jared Taylor, an avowed white nationalist, to attack the value of diversity in a speech on campus.⁷ However, in these instances, UA administration quickly responded to these events: expelling the students who posted the videos and eventually quashing Taylor's invitation to campus. To the good, this meant that there were fewer flashpoints to fuel lingering rancor; and further, members of campus communities, including constituencies of color,

saw prompt and decisive action from the University on matters of race.

However, it bears questioning whether the speed with which UA dispatched these incidents might have inadvertently deprived stakeholders of important opportunities to critically engage these racist events as a community. As Glyn Hughes has observed, colleges and universities tend to treat racial bias incidents as isolated events driven by individual bad actors, rather than as symptoms of broader cultures that enable, or at least do not effectively combat, racism.⁸ This tendency, according to Hughes, requires that an institution consciously reckon with "its complicity with racism, specifically in the face of its deep and earnest belief in itself as working against it."⁹

This reckoning is hard work. Not only is it mentally and emotionally taxing, it requires that white administrators, faculty, staff, and students confront what scholars of race and education have described as "the whiteness of university spaces,"¹⁰ or alternately, "white institutional presence."¹¹ That is, white stakeholders must be willing to concede that their conceptions of normalcy are framed by whiteness or buoyed by its privilege—even if it requires dissent on campus to make those conceptions apparent to them.

New College: Equipping Students for Change

⁸ Glyn Hughes, "Racial Justice, Hegemony, and Bias Incidents in U.S. Higher Education," *Multicultural Perspectives* 15, no. 3 (2013), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15210960.2013.809301>.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Joe Feagin, Vera, Hernan, and Imani, Nikitah, *The Agony of Education: Black Students at White Colleges and Universities* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

¹¹ Diane Lynn Gusa, "White Institutional Presence: The Impact of Whiteness on Campus Climate," *Harvard Educational Review* 80, no. 4 (Winter 2010).

³ Unlike, for example, at Hampshire College. For more, see: Staff, "Hampshire College Raises U.S. Flag to Full-Staff after Protests," last modified 12/02/2016, accessed July 5, 2018,

<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/hampshire-college-amherst-raises-us-flag-protests-half-staff/>.

⁴ For example, at Reed College: Colleen Flaherty, "'Occupation of Hum 110'," last modified 09/11/2017, accessed July 5, 2018,

<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/09/11/reed-college-course-lectures-canceled-after-student-protesters-interrupt-class>.

⁵ Staff, "University of Alabama Student Leaves School after Video Using Racial Slur Goes Viral," last modified 01/18/2018, accessed July 5, 2018,

<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/harley-barber-alabama-student-racist-instagram/>.

⁶ Anna Beahm, "University of Alabama Expels Student after Video of Racial Slurs," last modified March 22, 2018, accessed July 23, 2018,

https://www.al.com/news/tuscaloosa/index.ssf/2018/03/ua_student_expelled_after_usin.html.

⁷ Jonece Starr Dunigan, "White Nationalist Jared Taylor No Longer Speaking at University of Alabama," last modified April 16, 2018, accessed July 5, 2018,

https://www.al.com/news/birmingham/index.ssf/2018/04/white_nationalist_jared_taylor.html.

NC and other campus stakeholders have worked to begin, and sustain, critical conversations necessary to help address racial bias incidents (and other matters) at UA, as well as to empower students to pursue democratic avenues of engagement.

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In our courses and across our curriculum, NC seeks to equip NC and UA students alike¹² to engage in meaningful and purposive interactions to better the campus community; and in addition, to understand that being uncomfortable while wrestling with a question can be more fruitful than arriving at a discrete or dispositive answer. NC approaches these goals by seeking to establish a culture of inquiry, and by teaching skills to further engaged critique and other democratic practices, particularly through seminar classes and our advising process for majors.

Beginning in our gateway class for all Interdisciplinary Studies students (required of all majors), students are taught the importance of conceiving of education as a dialog between learners and instructors, not the delivery of an end-product to students. This educational experience is extended through interactive seminars

that focus on issues or themes without simple solutions.

Students majoring in Interdisciplinary Studies through New College must take a minimum of five of these seminars across three interdisciplinary clusters: Creativity and Culture; Environment, Sustainability, and Conservation; and Social Problems, Social Change. These courses are specifically geared to encourage students to engage complex ideas through readings, discussions, presentations, and experiential education in democratized, small classroom settings.¹³

Pedagogically, seminars are intended to model interdisciplinary scholarship and integrative thinking to students. But they are also designed to refine and reinforce programmatic values like engagement in civic life, deliberation, and dialog. Further, because seminars are taught every semester by faculty who serve as academic advisors to majors, these layered experiences occur in environments where students have the opportunity to know their classmates as members of intersecting communities and where faculty are not just professors, but also potentially mentors.

By way of example, “Cooperation and Conflict,” a Social Problems, Social Change seminar, fulfills one third of UA’s Social and Behavioral Science requirement. In this course, students explore divisive contemporary issues and learn how to reframe and critically examine them across differing points of view. As part of the course, students complete moderator training provided by the David Mathews Center for Civic Life, whose mission includes teaching “skills, habits, and capacities for more effective civic engagement.”¹⁴ In addition, students use the training to moderate dialogs for the class.

¹² Virtually all NC classes are open to students from all departments and colleges at UA; and most of its lower-level seminars are services courses that fulfill General Education requirements. Accordingly, we teach students from across campus, in addition to students creating baccalaureate degrees in Interdisciplinary Studies.

¹³ "New College Seminars," last modified 08/01/2015, accessed July 5, 2018, <https://nc.as.ua.edu/degree-program/new-college-seminars/>.

¹⁴ "About Us," last modified n/a, accessed July 5, 2018, <https://mathewscenter.org/about/>.

In the immediate to near term, this training benefits students who can use their training to listen to peers, reframe issues, and moderate discussions. Viewed more broadly, the interpersonal communication skills students learn by taking at least five NC seminars as a requirement of the Interdisciplinary Studies major, are a substantial part of how the program, its faculty, and its students seek to contribute to and improve the tenor of campus discussions around race and other important issues. By modeling how authentic, engaged civil discourse can bring together students and faculty as community, NC hopes to teach students in the program (and perhaps even non-majors who take our classes) lessons about how to participate effectively within a democracy.

Complementing these high-touch seminar experiences is the NC academic advising process. By way of explanation, upon admission to New College,¹⁵ each student is assigned a faculty advisor with experience or expertise relevant to the student's proposed "Depth Study," or student-designed major. All NC faculty members serve as academic advisors and meet with advisees at least once per academic term to revise the student's proposed plan of study and choose courses for the upcoming term.

In addition, academic advisors conduct a junior-level review in anticipation of the student's senior year in NC. For this review, the student invites an outside expert with knowledge germane to the student's Depth Study to meet with the student and faculty ad-

visor for an extended advising session.¹⁶ In this session, students obtain guidance on how to round-out their individualized studies. Plus, students articulate and obtain feedback on an initial proposal for a senior project that reflects or embodies the student's Depth Study and post-collegiate plans. And finally, as students begin NC's capstone senior project course, students must get one last approval from their advisors on an updated senior project proposal.

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Done right, relationships between NC students and faculty constitute something more than instruction and more than advising—what advising scholar Eric White calls "developmental advising."¹⁷ As White describes it, developmental advising gives students "the chance to craft their own educations, understand the paths they have chosen, and use the skills and knowledge obtained, within work, civic, and personal arenas for the rest of their lives."¹⁸ As a program founded on the idea of student choice and of student agency, NC uses instruc-

¹⁵ Students are admitted to NC through an admissions process that, among other things, requires students to articulate why their academic goals cannot be met through another program on campus and how (in general terms, to start) they envision combining resources from different colleges and departments to formulate their individualized course of study.

¹⁶ Experts can be faculty members from other programs on campus, community leaders, entrepreneurs—someone with academic or lived experience relevant to the student's Depth Study and proposed final project.

¹⁷ Eric R. White, "Academic Advising in Higher Education: A Place at the Core," *Journal of General Education* 64, no. 4 (2015).

¹⁸ Ibid.

tion and advising to produce environments in and beyond the classroom where students come to understand what it means to be self-directed and yet part of a community (or series of communities), and therefore, what it means to owe a duty to something beyond themselves.

Set against the backdrop of UA, an institution with an inescapable racially charged past, NC students learn how to work within the campus's entrenched history. Although laudable strides have been made in equity and inclusion at UA, in some ways the physical space of campus itself serves as a reminder of these issues, offering both the subtle and not-so-subtle evidence of white dominance. For example, the buildings of the University's main quadrangle evoke the Greek Revival architecture of the antebellum period. And like other college campuses, buildings named for alumni with execrable legacies on matters of race have not been renamed or contextualized to reflect contemporary campus values.¹⁹

Nevertheless, NC works to provide examples of where UA is going and how to get there. It is within NC that students have the opportunity to engage in important conversations, like those about race on campus, in open and democratic environments afforded both in and beyond the classroom.

Race at UA after the 2016 Elections

¹⁹ For more, see: Kate Sinclair, "Klansmen Survive Campus Upheavals," *New York Times*, August 4, 2017, accessed July 23, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/04/education/edlife/ku-klan-college-campuses.html>. In addition, despite the fact that he neither attended nor taught at UA, one building bears the name of Josiah Nott, a leader in the racist polygenist movement of the 19th Century.

In the post-2016-election era, UA's campus culture has shifted, rendering complicity in institutional racism increasingly visible.

Student groups and organizations including "We Are Done" and "Bama Sits," have successfully demonstrated opportunities for UA students to engage in both dissent and civil discourse on campus. We Are Done, "a coalition of students and faculty concerned about racism and discrimination on campus," emerged on campus in 2016 with a platform of three marquis demands: UA create a center for diversity, remove the names of white supremacists from university buildings, and lastly, increase funding initiatives focused on making the campus more inclusive.

As of writing this essay, all but one of these demands has been met; the building names remain.²⁰ Following We Are Done, and the actions of San Francisco 49ers quarterback, Colin Kaepernick, a coalition of students who dubbed themselves Bama Sits began a silent protest "against how our country perceives and treats marginalized groups,"²¹ by sitting during the singing of the National Anthem at UA's college football games.

Both of these groups demonstrate students' active steps to combat complacency and inaction, to visibly and audibly dissent within the framework of civility. The work these groups have accomplished has provided opportunities that have engaged the larger campus community in critical conversations surrounding race. Unfortunately, despite opportunities for dis-

²⁰ Elizabeth Elkin, "We Are Done Demands Equality on Campus," *Crimson White*, 11/18/2015, accessed 07/31/2018, <http://www.cw.ua.edu/article/2015/11/we-are-done-demands-equality-on-campus>.

²¹ Isabella Garrison, "Bama Sits Members Discuss Effectiveness, Future Goals," *Crimson White*, 12/01/2016, <http://www.cw.ua.edu/article/2016/12/bama-sits-members-discuss-effectiveness-future-goals>.

course modeled by We Are Done and Bama Sits, deeper and sustained conversations have yet to take hold, further demonstrating how complacency or inaction become the de facto solution to campus problems surrounding race.

It should be noted, however, that this kind of inaction is likely to be challenged more and more at UA—both by student groups and by institutional programs. Since 2013, UA Crossroads, an initiative of UA's Division of Community Affairs, has played an active role in creating respectful and inclusive spaces for students, staff, and faculty to engage in conversations surrounding issues of race on campus. Its activities have included hosting student dialogs after racial bias incidents, as well as co-sponsoring workshops on inclusive classroom practices with UA's Office of Academic Affairs. Further, since Dr. G. Christine Taylor joined UA in the Fall 2017 term as Vice President and Associate Provost for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, her office has overseen efforts to formulate and implement programs for inclusion and belongingness following a university-wide diversity mapping exercise.

For its part, NC urges students to think critically about how racially charged incidents on campus are regarded in seminar classes and in out-of-class discussions with faculty. Our faculty encourage students to think about how the campus operates and how to evaluate their individual impact on UA's campus culture and environment—as well as their capability to effect change in that environment.

NC's approach differs from a campus culture that emphasizes a more utilitarian approach, encouraging students to act in ways that are best for the University as a whole, rather than in terms of the student body's various constituencies. Although using language that encourages and promotes a sense of community can be beneficial to unify groups, it can also be problematic. In this context, addressing

complex issue of race on campus, while appealing to institutional values, can drown out the concerns of minority groups most directly affected by racial bias incidents.²² This collectivist impulse often takes precedence over the needs of historically marginalized student groups. For students of color and other historically marginalized constituencies, it is difficult to feel adequately represented within that institutional “we.”

... this collective “we” often suppresses the opportunity to address or critique events

For students at the margins of this institutional “we,” official communications about the values of the university in response to racial bias incidents can be simultaneously heartening and disheartening. This was the case with opening phrase of a January 2018, campus-wide email from UA President Stuart Bell: “In light of the racist and disturbing videos . . .”²³ These words set the tone for the Spring 2018 semester at UA after a student video, brimming with racial slurs, surfaced on the heels of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Day holiday. Unfortunately, this would be the first of three racially charged incidents in 2018 that would necessitate UA's President to address matters of race in messages to the student body.

As noted above, the collectivist language in each email was a welcome reminder of the role students of color play as participants in a democracy. But for those same students, this collective “we” often suppresses the opportunity to address or critique events that target or impact them. Despite the assertion that these ac-

²² Hughes.

²³“Letter from President Stuart Bell,” accessed July 27, 2018. <https://emailtemplates.ua.edu/president/message-from-the-president-15/>.

tions are not reflective of the campus community or the student body as a whole, the reality is that these events take place as a result of cultures evident both in the state and in the current national political climate. Though the language in each email indicated both deep personal and institutional concern, these condolences could not root out the problem, which has proven itself to be deeply rooted in UA's historical conventions, which privilege tradition over progress. There is a fine line to be acknowledged by UA students on the campus: the difficulty of meaningfully contributing to the story of race on campus when, whether or not they realize it, students bump up against larger systemic issues apparent on, and beyond, campus.

The email responding to the first incident was surprisingly frank, using phrases like, "I want to express my personal disgust and disappointment,"²⁴ to describe the student's racist King-Day rant. Although this emotionally charged language was welcome, as was its attribution to the President of the University, the message did not engage the student populations most directly affected. Further, the offering of additional resources—"if you have been impacted"²⁵—did not erase the words on the videos from memory, nor could it provide comfort to students trying to find a way to go to class without feeling ashamed of their own skin—or wondering who, among their peers, supported them.

The reality is there is no "if." The video should have had an impact on all viewers, and this was an opportunity to open broad discussions about issues of race and their impact on marginalized populations on campus. Instead, the matter was assigned a discrete answer, as if an isolated incident. No apology can take away

the feeling of not belonging on the basis of something that cannot be changed, but fostering an honest conversation could at least alleviate some of the discomfort.

NC seeks to equip students to have these honest conversations themselves by providing approaches and tools necessary to discuss complex issues while avoiding the ideological standoffs. As described above, seminar learning and sustained advising relationships help to create environments in and beyond formal classroom settings where students are free to express concerns and feelings in authentic and deliberate ways. Whether class members are Interdisciplinary Studies majors or UA students, all have the opportunity to learn the skills needed to discuss issues that collectivist approaches to racial bias incidents tend not to fully address.

Through its curriculum and advising process, NC works to deliver on the promise of inclusive and agentic learning environments where students can make themselves a part of the collective "we," and constitute a visible presence and audible voice on campus that sincerely represents the goal of reckoning with issues that marginalize members of the UA community.

In Her Own Words: Becoming a Voice

Speaking from my²⁶ experience as a UA student, in the Fall of 2016, I had the opportunity to use the tools NC provides to students for the first of many times.

After the 2016 presidential election, feelings that I had not recognized surfaced, and much-needed discussions about my role as a black

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ In addition to my contributions throughout, my co-author and I thought it important that I provide my personal narrative to conclude this essay.

student on campus began. In the days following the election, Dr. Julia Cherry, a NC professor, asked students who needed to talk to stay after class in our Introduction to Interdisciplinary Studies. I was hesitant, but this would be the moment I was inspired to become an active voice on campus for students of color.

During the conversation, there were moments I felt I could not adequately convey my message, could not articulate the feelings of deep concern regarding my future as a black student. I walked away feeling that the words I had hoped would influence others' thoughts were lost. I knew that there was something more that needed to be said. In that discussion, I learned how difficult it could be to articulate the sometimes uncomfortable feelings surrounding race. I also learned that despite the difficulty, and, at times, the lack of words, these attempts at deep personal expression were worthwhile and are a necessary part of civil discourse.

This would be the first time I had taken the time to honestly evaluate the aspects of race that have impacted my personal identity, and experience as a student, at a predominantly white institution. Having grown up in predominantly white areas, I was cultured to shoulder the burden of my race. And it would be as a student at UA that I would comprehend how deeply the many verbal slights and jabs that went along with that burden—what I since have learned to recognize as microaggressions—had affected me. From the time I stepped on campus, to that after-class conversation, I had internalized it all. The political climate and the environment it produced on campus forced me to recognize there were aspects of my life that I had not addressed. It was then that I realized there was more to be discussed, misconceptions to be challenged, and that I had the agency and ability to do both.

Since this moment of realization, participating in NC seminars like Cooperation and Conflict, and subsequently Social Issues and Ethics, helped me learn to take these issues head on. These courses did more than demonstrate how to prepare for challenging discussions—they also provided lessons in how and when to listen, and how and when to respond. Taking these classes, while bringing my own experiences and interests to them, helped pushed me to establish myself as an active participant in conversations around race—to find ways not only to engage, but also provide my own critical takeaways. Advising sessions with faculty from these seminars helped me to find ways to apply classroom experiences to other areas of my life on campus, such as service leadership. From the vantage point of my senior year, I can see that the skills NC courses and advising teach are transferable and have informed both how I approach discussions in non-NC classes as well as conversations outside of academic settings.

While the pillars that frame so many UA buildings stand as monuments to what came before, programs like NC mark where we are going.

As a student of color, walking into UA classrooms and lecture halls is bittersweet. There is a constant reminder of the many barriers that have kept, and still keep, students like me from entering. And then there is the physical space, with its architecture reminiscent of the so-called “peculiar institution.” While the pillars that frame so many UA buildings stand as monuments to what came before, programs like NC mark where we are going.

Being a part of NC and the after-class discussion in 2016 motivated me to seek opportu-

nities to co-author the story of black students on UA's campus. The Black Faculty and Staff Association Black Scholars Program ("BFSA Program") was the first group I joined. Like NC, it has become a pivotal part of my journey as a black student. While the BFSA Program does not work directly with campus organizations or movements, it fosters an environment that motivates black students to seek out spaces on campus that have not traditionally been viewed as inclusive, as well as to pursue opportunities for scholarship and leadership. The BFSA Program provides a space for black students to find not only ways to excel academically, but also to avail themselves of resources and opportunities for students of color on campus that are not always well advertised.

NC and the BFSA Program have been vital both to my personal development and to my understanding of what it means to be a black student on UA's campus. Through these programs, I have used my ability to think critically to help address issues on campus. I have learned to use the tools of civil discourse and dissent, so students like me can increasingly be heard and seen—and so that we can stake our claim to the collective "we"-voice of the UA student body.

And at the same time I found my voice, I found a home.

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chapbook Heat Lightning was published by Paper Nautilus Press in 2017. His poem from that collection, "Calculations from the Moral Arc," was nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

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