

A Response to The Wofford College English Department Faculty Members Who Signed

The June 6, 2020 Letter to English Major Alumni

As former Wofford College English majors and fervent and loyal alumni, we are compelled to respond to your letter. We were initially shocked and angered, and then dismayed, by much of what was said and implied in your letter. You correctly and crucially characterize the horrific murder of George Floyd and the earlier killings of other people of color, and we share your collective outrage and anguish. Moreover, you make essential and valid points about continued racism and economic disparities in our society. However, your statement that there are “systemic, long-term and daily practices that perpetuate white supremacy” at Wofford is offensive and simply not true. You offer no facts or other evidence to support such an accusation, and your language has insulted many alumni.

You are correct that words are “power.” The Bill of Rights, the initial amendments to the U.S. Constitution, are the foundation of the individual liberties guaranteed by our democratic system of government. When the founding fathers began amending the Constitution, they considered free speech the most cherished of the individual liberties. Without free speech, they reasoned, the other liberties were only concepts that could not survive in the real world. The First Amendment is based on the concept of a “marketplace of ideas” to foster free speech. It was premised on the belief that the best test of truth is the power of an idea to be accepted in open dialogue and debate. Through criticism and dissension, the people would recognize the plausible from the implausible. The way to defeat a bad idea was with a better idea---not suppression of the bad idea. This is the bedrock of free speech.

Your statements and insinuations about Wofford’s current systemic racism, as well as your broad-brushing of white people weaponizing their privilege, is hurtful, inflammatory, and seemingly devoid of any critical thinking and search for truth, the underpinnings of a liberal arts education. After calling for “beneficial, equitable, and inclusive relationships” and asking that Wofford “facilitate healing on campus and in our community,” your letter attacks people who use terms such as “looters” and “rioters,” when those people are describing destructive conduct that is obviously occurring. Using those terms, you say, undermines or discredits “the current protest movement without taking into account their histories.” Then you justify that conduct because it was practiced by “white Europeans against Africans” in past centuries, as if that fact supports some moral imperative for violence and destruction. However, to justify looting and rioting is to support anarchy. Such advocacy does not serve “the better angels of our nature.” Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. may have observed that a “riot is the language of the unheard,” but he certainly did not advocate rioting and looting or other forms of violence. As you well know, he preached non-violence and hoped for a time when people would be judged not on the basis of race, but instead, on the “content of their character.”

During our Wofford years we fought for civil rights and against racial injustice. We marched against the Vietnam War in the first moratorium held in Spartanburg. Two of us were founding members of the Wofford Theatre Workshop, and we produced experimental and avant-garde plays meant to challenge prejudicial thinking and inequality. During that time Wofford was led by a progressive administration, which included Paul Hardin, III as its President, Joe Lesesne as the Dean of the College, and Don Welch as the Dean of Students. That administration also included an African-American educator, Bobby C. Leach, as the Assistant Dean of Students. We were part of the first Wofford Interim, in January 1968, and back then the school was in the vanguard of educational liberalism. Many in the Wofford faculty at the time, including Dr. James R. Gross, believed that President Hardin's administration produced a seismic change at Wofford and fostered genuine civil rights reform. In a speech given in later years to honor President Hardin, Dr. Gross quoted Wordsworth's reference to the French Revolution in describing that time: "Bliss it was in that dawn to be alive. But to be young was very heaven."

The times inexorably change, and Wofford today is decidedly different, both culturally and demographically, than it was 50 years ago. Ironically, it is a much more diverse institution today than it was in our time, but you seem to be implying that its racial culture has devolved. As English majors we learned much about the universality of the human condition, and life experience has taught us empirically that common sense is immutable, in spite of the forces that try to convince us that reason is not what we think it is. Although we agree that there are no doubt individual racists on campus today, and racism exists in our society, we cannot accept your premise that systemic racism exists at Wofford. If you have proof to the contrary, let us know specifically what it is. In addition, just because we may disagree with some of the message in your letter, do not brand us as racists because we do so. Others can judge for themselves in this marketplace of ideas whether they accept or reject your views.

Over 40 years ago the ACLU went to court to defend the American Nazi party's right to hold a demonstration in Skokie, a suburban Chicago town densely populated with Holocaust survivors. In a landmark First Amendment case, the U.S. Supreme Court permitted that demonstration, as odious as its message was. As much as that decision was bitterly harmful to many, it championed free speech, which must be robust and alive if our democracy is to survive. Characterizing dissenting opinions as racist, or even banning racist speech, will not end racism. Moreover, forcing innocent people to pay for the sins of their fathers will never promote racial harmony or achieve any real higher educational or societal progress.

So, with respect to your planned future anti-racism seminars, teach-ins, and classes, will you allow for a robust and open dialogue that disagrees with your strident or more militant message for change? For those individuals who agree that racial change is necessary, but who do not agree with your proposed method of change or your view that Wofford harbors white supremacists values, will you allow them an equal voice, without shaming or intimidating them, or making them feel inferior, politically incorrect, or less highly evolved? Will they be allowed the same figurative "safe space" to formulate and articulate their views? If so, then real

potential progress is possible. You have an opportunity to genuinely teach, lead, and promote critical thinking at a crucial time. Now, when the forces of divisiveness attempt to promote chaos, when, to quote Yeats, the potential for “anarchy is loosed upon the world,” so that “things fall apart” and “the centre cannot hold,” you can make a difference and perhaps be part of a Wofford renaissance of civil rights and educational liberalism.

Sincerely,

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