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# Alumni Reflect on Wofford's Racial Reckoning

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*A shot from 1971 shows students — Black and White — congregated on the steps of Old Main. today, the men on these steps have varying opinions of the way Wofford is handling issues of race. Photo from the "Bohemian," vol. 64.*



Written by Jacob Hollifield



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The most recent climax of the Black Lives Matter movement over the summer sparked outrage and placed the country under a microscope. Suddenly, institutions of all standings found themselves in front of a mirror asking *what about us?* The division in the Wofford bubble came when thousands of Terriers stepped away from the mirror after forming their own opinions, only to find others' scattered across a spectrum.

Like clockwork, each modern generation is caught in a cycle of demonstrations for racial equality; our grandparents had the 60s, our parents witnessed the beating of Rodney King in the 90s, and now, some 30 odd years later it's our turn. However, one markedly noticeable difference every three decades is the way in which one views the other movements — old or new — and those involved. George Brandt '71, John Burbage '70, Carroll Player '60 and Hunter Quick '71 agree that the efforts for racial reconciliation today are different from during their time at Wofford.

Wofford students of the 60s and 70s spent their fair share of time protesting. "All of these things," Burbage said in reference to debates, protests, flag burnings and occupying administration buildings, "were very much in vogue."

However, Burbage confessed that despite how exhilarating it was to attempt to invoke change, it was oftentimes destructive and unhelpful to the bigger, administrative conversations taking place around the issue. "But at the same time" he said, "we all learned how powerful protests can be for good and for evil."

Wofford, they agree, has always been ahead of the curve being the first private college in the state to integrate and one of the first in the country to implement the 4-1-4 schedule. They believe that Wofford's ability to forecast success and adjust accordingly has been one of the college's greatest strengths.

Their views on the Civil Rights Movement and the integration of the college influenced their reaction to the course that Wofford turned onto over the summer. When the English Department emailed a statement to majors and alumni on Jun. 5 that described Wofford as having a "complicated relationship with Spartanburg," professing that "Wofford cannot achieve beneficial, equitable, and inclusive relationships without publicly acknowledging that racial inequity is [its] immediate reality, not simply [its] historical past" and that Wofford must address, on its campus, "systemic, long-term and daily practices that perpetuate white supremacy," the men were shocked that the college, so progressive in



The statement led them to meet with President Samhat, his cabinet and the chairman of the board of trustees where they asked for proof showing that there was systemic racism

and active white supremacy on campus. "They all agreed that they had no proof and they all agreed what the English Department said was not the official Wofford position on it," Burbage said.

As the summer burned on, WARC took root, a large number of anti-racism training and programs were initiated and JEDI was formed; the men began to worry about the image that such programs portrayed — especially those that promoted ideas that everyone is subconsciously racist.

Based on comments made by Player, it is the concern of a number of alumni that "anti-racism rhetoric" — as he put it — is disproportionate with the issue in place and is therefore excessive. While there may be racism speckled about the student body, he believes that Wofford's "woke" efforts take undue blame for a small minority of opinions.

Player stressed the importance of moving away from a negative approach to racial equality that places blame on a group and instead towards one that takes a positive stance of unity. The college has come a long way, Player believes, and that each Terrier should be proud.

One memory that is shared among the men is the goal of the Civil Rights Movement. "There was more clarity about what we were demonstrating for..." Quick said, "it was equal laws — equality — because there had not been equality."

One critique they present of the modern movement's hold at Wofford is its focus on systemic racism — an entity that often exists in obscurity. If in fact Wofford is home to practices of systemic racism, they ask what a Wofford without it would look like.

After talking with different students, Burbage, Brandt, Player and Quick were certain that the cornerstone of the liberal arts' search for truth was being chipped away at by the stance of the administration and students who exercised cancel culture. With professors pledging to include anti-racism education in their teaching, other students confided in the men that they felt silenced. They each believe that the basis of a liberal arts education is being taught how to think, not what to think — a criticism that has led some alumni to coin the term "Woke-O" in reference to Wofford's method of addressing organizations such as WARC and entities such as @blackatwofford.

Brandt has discussed Wofford's present with students who he says are scared to speak out



swirling downward to a refusal to not only critically think but also a refusal to search for the truth.”

In addition to present Wofford students, concerned alumni also worry about the future student body. The men argued that the current freshman class — one they labeled as probably the most race-tolerant and diverse class to come through the college — enrolled prior to Wofford’s newfound programs and heightened equity and inclusion efforts. They fear that rising high school juniors and seniors will be less likely to choose Wofford based on its current skewed image.

Some alumni, however, are in full support of Wofford’s undertaking while acknowledging that there are differing views from their former peers. In a letter of support signed by a number of older alumni — one of them being Doug Jones, Wofford’s first Black graduate — signees agreed on two things: 1.) anyone that is passionate about issues of race on campus inarguably loves Wofford. 2.) one should “fight fire with a fire break instead of more fire.”

These men, regardless of ‘side’ believe that, since the 60s and 70s, Wofford has changed for the better — and that that success should not be forgotten.

As Terriers of yesterday and students on the cycle of racial reckoning continue to criticize across these aged lines, and JEDI inches closer to its May report, there are a number of people anxious about the future of the college for various reasons. The dissonance between alumni, students and administrators continues to widen as the cycle continues to rotate away from this movement and towards the future of civil rights.

“[Humans] are going to maintain their personal preferences,” Burbage said, “and the only way we can deal with it, the only responsible way, is to set a good example— each of us.”

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