

George S. Tyson '72, MD '78 (Duke)

I am writing in response to the recent letter from the English faculty and others regarding the George Floyd murder, other killings, and violence toward Black people in general. The faculty group is correct in calling on all of us to continue the work necessary to increase equality of opportunity and to address racism wherever it may be found. However, the authors pivot effortlessly and seamlessly to an indictment of Wofford as an institution whose “complex racial history” must somehow automatically make it a racist institution today, imbued with white supremacy.

I was saddened because of the overall tone of hostility toward Wofford. I do not understand the source of this anger. But clearly Wofford is not the enemy.

I was perplexed because I think a significant opportunity may have been lost by alienating many people in the Wofford community. Support for Black Lives Matter has been increasing dramatically.

Many, who might have become active supporters, may now turn away because of the vituperative attacks on an institution they hold dear.

So, I feel compelled to respond. I wish to point out major inaccuracies, complete the historical record by highlighting Wofford's positive achievements, and try to find a way forward for us together.

First, Wofford is not a bastion of White Supremacy. This is a major theme of the letter, offered without evidence. It simply is not true. Second, the letter perpetuates the urban myth of the “thriving, vibrant community of color” where part of Wofford's campus now stands, implying the destruction of this idyllic community by a rapacious, expansionist institution. This is a misreading of the actual history, a racist accusation itself, and is not true. Third, the selective use of words and historical facts is not becoming to such an accomplished group of academicians. For example, the origins of the act of looting by raiders and conquerors is lost in the mists and myths of human history.

The Vikings certainly developed quite a reputation, well before white Europeans had any interaction with Africa. The looting of Euro-Celtic civilizations by the Romans did not justify “Looting...practiced by white Europeans against Africans for Centuries.”

Nor does it justify the looting and destruction of (often African-American owned) businesses to honor the memory of George Floyd.

Slavery was an abomination of history, the ramifications of which permeate every facet of our society and culture today. Yes, Old Main was built using slave labor. Wofford does not hide from that fact. Prospective student-athletes, touring campus when recruited, are told the story; they also are told of the classes they may take about the history and the cultural and economic legacies of slavery.

Not content with simply the accusation of using slave labor, the letter goes on to accuse Wofford of every possible racial sin of omission and commission of the twentieth century with no

acknowledgement that the College may ever have had a single positive effect. Wofford actually has a great deal of which to be proud in its history of race relations.

Highlights include:

Wofford students participated in sit-ins, marches, and other acts of civil disobedience.

The first independent college in SC to integrate,
and the first to have an African-American member of the Board of Trustees.

A major focus of the Vietnam War Teach-in held on campus in Spring, 1971, was the racist nature of the war and the disproportionate burden borne by young Black men.

Supported the founding of Africa University in Zimbabwe by the United Methodist Church;
faculty given extra sabbatical time to teach there.

Most economically diverse college in SC (70th nationally)—New York Times.

Two Wofford alumni each made significant contributions—one the single largest gift—to
the International African-American Museum in Charleston.

The Northside project will bring Wofford directly into the Spartanburg community.

The leadership of Paul Hardin III and Joe Lesesne and their administrations cannot be overstated. They led the College through difficult times, but also quietly provided leadership for the broader community as well. Current efforts to increase the diversity of the student body are based on a foundation they built and will be the legacy of Dr. Samhat's presidency.

A half century ago, the battle for free speech on the American campus was fought. The result at Wofford was a campus open to speakers with widely divergent points of view as well as a faculty and student body that engaged in vigorous discussion within the classroom and beyond.

This atmosphere has extended to the present day and must be preserved.

A curriculum driven single-mindedly by the precepts described in the English faculty group letter, is typical of academic Progressives elsewhere, and has the potential to become antithetical to true freedom of speech. Moreover, I am concerned that individual faculty members are being pressured into signing various statements. Others may be afraid to voice an opinion which differs from the prevailing orthodoxy. If this "cancel culture" arises, it will threaten the essence of true liberal arts education, society's best hope for dealing with our current problems. This must not be allowed to occur at Wofford.

Our country is at a difficult point and Black Americans are in crisis. I have listened and tried to understand as best I can their situation. But, as Wofford's own Eric Breitenstein pointed out most eloquently upon his recent acceptance into the Southern Conference Hall of Fame, as a white man I can never truly understand the Black experience. Still I believe it is incumbent upon me to listen and to try to understand.

Things appear different this time. Despite incidents of violence and attempts by radical groups from the left and right to hijack the protests for their own purposes, there remain at the core legitimate demands for change. Police reform is necessary, but will not be sufficient. How does that affect me?

How does that affect Wofford College and the larger Wofford community?

There are three statements which are not mutually exclusive; they all can be true simultaneously. In fact, I believe them all to be true, both at Wofford and in the larger world.

Much progress has been made.

Much work remains to be done.

The time for gradual change is past;

real, fundamental reform must occur now.

Various participants in this dialogue want to focus on one of the statements above to the exclusion of the others. Again, I believe that each is valid and can help in the search for solutions to our current problems as we move forward.

Thus:

1) We must acknowledge the contributions of preceding generations of Wofford alumni who went out into the world and tried their best in their business or profession to treat all people equally.

Indeed, Wofford, South Carolina, and the world are better for them.

2) However, we must recognize that it has not been enough, either at Wofford or in the outer world.

3) Finally, we must listen carefully to those protesting and, where appropriate, accept the validity of demands for real reform.

The President's office has been inundated with phone calls and letters with a range of expressions from dismay to outrage. I believe that a response is planned by the English faculty group to one or more of the letters.

I greatly respect the English faculty; they are not the enemy either. This rift in the Wofford community saddens me because it is so unnecessary. Rather than degenerate further into an epistolary dialogue, I ask that the College convene a symposium, town hall, or panel discussion with participation by faculty, students, administration, and alumni to discuss thoroughly the topic of racism as well as related issues arising from reaction to the English faculty letter. The costs should be minimal; and the Tyson Family will provide any funding necessary.

I believe that we should be able to find common ground. I believe that the alumni perspective has value. I know that alumni would benefit from direct interaction with both students and faculty.

We must maintain the College as an open marketplace of ideas. We need to preserve and enhance our sense of true community.

Sincerely,

George S. Tyson, MD '72

1972 graduate of Wofford

English major

Member of the 1970 Wofford Terrier football team that played for the Nat'l Championship

Along with Dr JR Gross, one of four student-founders of the Wofford College Theater Workshop

First Wofford student accepted to the Duke University School of Medicine

Stayed at Duke for ten post-graduate years for a combined residency/fellowship in general, thoracic, and cardiovascular surgery.

Mentors pre-med students and established a group of alumni physicians to conduct Mock Interview sessions for Wofford pre-med students, preparing them for their med school interviews

Served four years on the Alumni Executive Committee.

Served ten years on the Investment Advisory Committee, managing the Wofford Endowment.