

Draft letter in support of students against institutional racism at Wake Forest University

14 March 2019

As students of the classics know all too well, the past does not rest quietly. No matter how remote it seems, history has its grip on the present. Without careful scrutiny and concerted forms of redress, mistakes of the past will continue to inflict damage. The ancient Greeks believed that the future lay behind them, since it is unseen. The past, by contrast, always lay before them. On this conception, the past is something that needs to be confronted head-on, and we, the undersigned members of the Department of Classics, urge the Wake Forest community and administration to engage honestly and critically with its past.

The photos that have surfaced in recent weeks of current members of the administration posing in front of a confederate flag are part of a constellation of inequity at Wake Forest. These photos reflect the broader history and legacy of racism at our university, a history that deserves a reckoning. Given that some of these photos featured members of the administration who are involved in student-focused positions, these images throw into sharp relief the fact that the experience of Black students and other students of color at Wake Forest is different from that of whites. Even now, students of color face prejudices and discriminations large and small during their time here.

Moreover, these incidents must be considered within their regional context, occurring as they did in a southern state that practiced segregation well beyond its being declared unconstitutional, and at a school just down the road from where Black college students staged the nation's first sit-in protesting whites-only lunch counters. The past, and not just its legacy, can and does harm our students, our community, and ourselves in the present.

We acknowledge the apologies of university leaders (it is not our, or the administration's, place to accept them), but they are not enough. We urge the campus community to view these incidents as a stimulus to further action. We propose the following as possible steps forward for our own department as well as for the entire Wake Forest community:

Examine your own practices, both professional and personal. Is the Wake Forest student body as it is currently composed something to be proud of, or something that needs a renewed and more thoroughly antiracist commitment to the hard work of creating an inclusive campus community? What can we do as individuals and as departments to foster an environment of inclusivity and equity among students as well as faculty and staff?

Acknowledge and confront the potentially chilling message conveyed by the photos in question to young persons of color and young antiracists. Bygones, in this case, cannot be bygones, especially for prospective students weighing whether Wake Forest could be the right place for them.

Commit to pushing the university, and particularly its administration, to do better. The racial inequities, discriminatory practices, and racist aspects of Wake Forest are not new and not in the past. As recently as five years ago, a university-commissioned investigation by Developmental Associates found that non-white students are arrested at disproportionately higher rates than white students, and that there is a racial pattern to how the university administration treats Black and white fraternities — a pattern that no doubt has become more pronounced in the aftermath of the Barn shooting last year.

Wake Forest needs comprehensive and extensive reform — to structures, to activities, to personnel, and to personal perspectives — in order to right the continuing wrongs we are witnessing. And it needs a commitment from its leadership, including Deans, Provost, President, and Trustees, to remake the campus into a truly equitable and welcoming academic environment.

Signed,
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