

Why Washington and Lee Needs Viewpoint Diversity

25 July 2022

In the summer of 2020, following the Board announcement to consider changing the name of the university, the faculty voted by about 80% to 20% to change the name. The Law School vote was unanimous for a change. The faculty are certainly entitled to their point of view on this or any other issue, but their vote is an indication of the increasingly left-wing perspective of the W&L faculty.

Let us contrast this with the views of the students at the university. Recently, the website, MyPlan.com, did a ranking of over 500 colleges and universities based on political affiliation from most to least liberal. Washington and Lee students ranked 498 in this list. Perhaps more important, the website, Unigo, recently conducted a survey of W&L students and asked them to describe their fellow students. There were 85 student responses, and they overwhelmingly described the students as moderate to conservative in their political and cultural views. The same is true for a significant percentage of parents and alumni. It is clear that there is a gap in perspective between the faculty, on the one hand, and the students, parents, and alumni on the other on political and cultural issues.

Washington and Lee had adopted the University of Chicago Principles of Free Speech and Expression, and President Dudley has stated that these principles represent a "gold standard." However, there can be no real freedom of speech and expression unless more than one point of view is allowed to exist. On October 18, 2021, Pamela Parensky, Ph.D. in psychology and visiting professor at the University of Chicago, wrote an article in *Psychology Today* entitled "Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion: Commitment or Cult." She stated that the increasingly illiberal attitude among faculty and staff at many colleges and universities has led to a "cultish monoculture in which dissent is blasphemy and heresies must be excommunicated." We know from our own conversations with moderate to conservative faculty members at W&L that they are sometimes afraid to express their points of view for fear that they will be labelled in a negative manner or that their views will be stifled. We have also attempted to establish a dialogue with

some liberal faculty members in the hopes of promoting viewpoint diversity on campus, but so far this effort has produced no results.

It is clear that we cannot expect any recognition of the need for viewpoint diversity and certainly no promotion of such diversity from the vast majority of the current faculty. This seems almost counter-intuitive in light of the fact that the consideration and discussion of a broad range of ideas and viewpoints should be the hallmark of a broad, liberal arts education. But such is the growth of "group think" among many academics, even at Washington and Lee, that conflicting ideas can send paroxysms of fear, anxiety, and anger surging through the faculty and a smaller percentage of the student body. These folks need "safe spaces" and protection against the "micro-aggressions" which opposing ideas represent.

Since the faculty is unlikely to promote viewpoint diversity, this leaves President Dudley and the administration with that responsibility. So far, the results in this respect have been disappointing. During the school year, 2020-21 and continuing into this year, The Generals Redoubt and individual alumni have made numerous attempts to open a dialogue with the administration regarding promoting viewpoint diversity on campus. By this, we do not mean a monolithic, conservative ideology but an exchange of ideas between conservatives and liberals on a variety of political, historical, and cultural issues, particularly as they relate to Washington and Lee.

We have been in contact with the Director of Institutional History, the Director of Alumni Engagement, The Vice President of Institutional Advancement, the Provost (although to a lesser extent), and the President. I have personally been in contact with each of these individuals, excepting the Provost, on more than one occasion. We have suggested numerous ways in which viewpoint diversity might be advanced. For example, TGR has produced numerous articles on historical topics such as Robert E. Lee's legacy, the evolution of the honor system at the school, etc. In 2021, we even produced a video by two graduates of the university with Ph.D.'s in history who countered some of the anti-Lee broadsides from W&L faculty members and graduates. We offered to help set up and participate in debates, panel discussions, workshops, etc. on these topics with faculty members and others with an interest in such issues. We asked that our articles and videos be

allowed to appear on W&L websites, in *The Alumni Magazine* or other publications. We were rebuked at every turn.

The responses from the President and other members of the administration followed a similar pattern:

1) "This is not my/our responsibility," "It is beyond my pay grade," "Why don't you take it up with someone else." It was particularly disappointing when the President took such a position on several occasions. If the President is not going to exercise imagination, take bold and creative steps and lead the university, who is?

2) "This particular issue falls under the purview of the faculty." On this point, the President and the administration are correct that many crucial decisions seem to be in the hands of the faculty. But should they be? As long as all programming, curricular, and hiring decisions are totally controlled by an increasingly left-leaning faculty, we will not see greater viewpoint diversity any time soon, if ever.

Many suspect that President Dudley shares the leftward tilt of the faculty and is actually encouraging it. Others are not quite sure what to think. One thing is certain-President Dudley has been reluctant to take a strong, public position on real freedom of speech and viewpoint diversity. For example, last September, there was a dust up on campus when the College Republicans were not allowed to display literature supporting Glen Youngkin's candidacy for Governor of Virginia. This was a clear violation of free speech rights and example of censorship. Yet it took the university four months to announce very quietly that the policy had changed. Even then, President Dudley did not offer an apology to the College Republicans for the university's precipitous action and did not make a strong statement in support of free political speech.

President Dudley's non-action or tepid response in such matters contrast with that of some other colleges and their presidents. Here are some examples:

The James Madison Program in American Ideals and Institutions at Princeton, established and led by Professor Robbie George, promotes a balanced approach to American History and values. The Generals Redoubt has

indicated that it would help in the establishment of such a program at W&L.

Arizona State University has established The School of Civic and Economic Thought and Leadership, which is similar to the Madison program. They also have a free, interactive platform called Open Mind, and a student organization, Bridge ASU, which promoted dialogue among students with different viewpoints.

Claremont McKenna College, a school which is often compared to W&L, has seen a strong commitment to open inquiry by their President and Dean, including support for ideologically diverse speakers. They have encouraged many of their professors to join the Heterodox Academy, a group of academics which supports viewpoint diversity. They also have a program called the Open Academy Initiative which promotes the hiring of more conservative faculty. As a result, they have a liberal to conservative faculty ratio of approximately 3:1.

Kenyon College, another comparable institution, has the Kenyon Listens Series supporting speaker viewpoint diversity, BridgeKenyon, similar to the student group at Arizona State, and the Center for the Study of American Democracy, similar to the Madison program.

The president of Purdue University, Mitch Daniels, and the president of nearby University of Richmond, Ron Crutcher, have taken strong stands supporting viewpoint diversity. At Richmond, Crutcher helped found the Sharp Viewpoint Series.

Note that none of the colleges and universities above could be considered "right wing" institutions. Many are quite liberal, and they are all academic institutions which are comparable to W&L. They all have presidents who are prepared to take a strong stand for viewpoint diversity.

So, what can or should President Dudley do? First of all, it is not too late to make some changes. Second, we have some suggestions of changes which might make a difference. We recognize that not all of them can or, perhaps, should be implemented at one time, but here they are:

Along with the Board, the President should raise money for a program or initiative which will promote on campus viewpoint diversity-speakers, debates, panel discussions, workshops, conferences, visiting professors, etc. There are several excellent models for this as we have mentioned. The faculty should have input into this program but should not have sole responsibility.

Establish a committee of faculty, administrators, the Board, and alumni with academic backgrounds to review the curriculum on a regular basis and ensure that there is a "core curriculum" based on Western civilization and the Judeo-Christian tradition. This does not mean that other topics, cultures, and civilizations should not be taught but that such emphases should complement the "core." An excessive focus on issues of identity-race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual preferences- should be avoided. Examples of such programs include the University of Chicago and St. John's College.

The President and administration should make a concerted effort to hire a more ideologically diverse faculty. This means that final authority for hiring should reside in the administration, and particularly in the President, and that the administration should seek out more faculty of a moderate to conservative bent. This will not be easy as the academic profession, as a whole, is dominated by left-leaning professors. The vote on the W&L name change indicates that the Liberal to Moderate/Conservative ratio among the faculty is about 5:1 or more. A goal of, say, 3:1 , as is estimated at Claremont, might be attainable.

In recruiting students, consider not only ethnic and gender diversity, but also religious diversity, economic diversity regardless of race, and viewpoint diversity. In attracting both faculty and students, pursue talent, character, and competence across all demographic groups.

If we are taking positive steps to promote diversity and inclusion on campus, should not viewpoint diversity be a key part of this effort? We realize that President Dudley and the university will receive some criticism, especially from the faculty and the media, if they embark on such an effort, but we think it is worth

it in order to promote real education, not indoctrination. We also believe such a course of action, if pursued long term, would set Washington and Lee apart from ideologically conservative schools such as Hillsdale or ideologically liberal ones, such as Williams, and make it almost unique among American colleges and universities in promoting a balanced, moderating perspective on a variety of issues. What student would not want to attend such a university? What professor would not want to teach there? Only the most radical of right and left would disparage such a place. This leaves a pretty large pool of folks who would love to be associated with our university. Finally, we recognize that in light of President Dudley's previous reluctance to take on this challenge directly, we may not hear anything directly from him. However, we still have hope. What say you, President Dudley?

Neely Young, *Director Emeritus*

The Generals Redoubt