

The Past We Are Creating:
A History of Organizing for Racial Equity at Warren Wilson College in the 21st Century

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In March 2000, *The Echo*, a student newspaper at Warren Wilson College, published a piece titled “Did Anyone Notice Black History Month?” Written by Junior Steven Davis, this op-ed reflects on the exclusion of Black history from many aspects of his college experience and the impact that not recognizing a peoples’ past has on their present. He goes on to write, “As important as this is, there is another aspect of the past that we normally don’t think of. This is the past we are creating as you read this.”¹

Throughout the history of the United States, higher education has existed as a privilege. From a time that its access was only granted to connected White families up until now, when attendance has created the largest national consortium of debt in history. While accessibility to educational institutions has slowly grown each decade, the idea of a college education, still, is not viewed as a resource to be provided universally. Within these institutions, hierarchies based on class, race, and ethnicity exist both overtly, such as scholarship and admission preferences given to relations of alumni, and covertly, such as institutions providing more access to European studies than studies of Africa, Latin America, or Asia. This has resulted in a disproportionately White, university going population across the nation.² Warren Wilson College is no exception; while it was originally developed as a school for poor Appalachians, access to the institution was not granted to non-White students. Today, the college hosts a student body that is over representative of the White population nationally.

From this racial disenfranchisement within institutions comes a history of American college students rallying for racial equity, specifically, for changes within their institution that

1. Steven Davis. “Did anyone notice Black History Month?” March 15, 2000.

2. Harper, Shaun R. Patton, Lori D. and Wooden, Ontario S. “Access and Equity for African American Students in Higher Education: A Critical Race Historical Analysis of Policy Efforts” *Taylor & Francis, Ltd.* 2009.

reflect the needs of Black and Brown students in areas such as curriculum, housing, and student life. From Black organizing for the development of HBCU's in the end of the nineteenth century to the efforts to desegregate in the 1960's, college campuses and the pursuit of college have fostered the activism around issues of race for generations.³ Warren Wilson College is a part of this history as well. In the early part of the 1940's, Warren Wilson was one of only a handful of colleges that offered enrollment to Japanese-American students as a means of shelter from internment camps on the West coast.⁴ Today, students continue to demand racial equality and organize their campus for equal access and treatment.

Over the last two decades, students at Warren Wilson have attempted to recognize the past and take hold of the future of their institution through organizing and demanding. Within this history is a shared obstacle of disconnection from past campus organizing, stemming from the short period of time students, the leaders of these movements, spend at their universities and the subsequent control that college administrations, traditionally the opposition to these movements, have over the narrative of student demands from past movements on campus. While much has changed over the last twenty years at Warren Wilson, from the addition of student support offices that work in issues of race to the change in hiring practices with the goal of expanding diversity within faculty, many of the issues expressed by students as far back as the turn of the century are being demanded to this day. In the summer of 2020, Warren Wilson's Black Student Union released an in-depth list of demands along with a call to action. With this, the BSU articulated the long history of issues facing students of color, particularly Black

3. Ibram H. Rogers *The Black Campus Movement: Black Students and the Racial Reconstitution of Higher Education, 1965-1972* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.)

4. Mark Banker. *Warren Wilson College: From Mountain Mission to Multicultural Community* (Presbyterian Historical Society 1995.)

students at Warren Wilson, as well as their organization's belief that demands of the past had not been met by the college. They wrote in a student wide email on June 19th, 2020, "Complacency and silence at Warren Wilson College have existed for far too long, resulting in allowing countless black community members to be subjected to traumatic experiences... We will not stop seeking and demanding justice until this struggle, which has been waging for far too long, is over. Will you?"⁵

In this paper the history of student organizing on campus around issues of racial equity and equality at Warren Wilson College in the twenty-first century will be documented and contextualized with the college's origins and current affairs as well as the history of broader collegiate organizing for racial equality. In order to understand the movements that Warren Wilson has made over the last two decades, the history and development of student demands on issues of race will be analyzed and compared to institutional action. This study compiles sources from the last twenty years using records of college emails, student news, meeting minutes, and oral history.

The First Decade

In the first decade, 2000 to 2010, of this twenty-year period of Warren Wilson history, students' calls for changes in areas of racial equity and inclusion were less vocal and held less direct power with the administration. Much of this silence could be accounted for by the lower population of students of color. During this first decade there was a greater population of students overall when compared to the most recent completed school year of 2019/2020. However, the number of students that identified as something other than "White," at the time,

5. Black Student Union email correspondence. June 19, 2020. Student 1 online drive.

was almost half what it is in the 2019/2020 school year.⁶ Furthermore, as seen in many colleges across the nation, attention is seldom given to student movements without the support of the White student body. Throughout this twenty-year period, broad student attention seems directly connected to broader social upheaval around issues of race. This is reflected in the second decade, 2011 to 2020, when each incident of organized student demands corresponded with national civil unrest in response to a racially motivated killing. While this points to the fact that there was likely less ongoing organizing around issues of race compared to the second decade, it is important to emphasize that most student movement in this issue area was seldom recorded or recognized. Institutions like the Black Student Union and the Indigenous Student Association, both of which have organized demands, did not exist and in their place were less focused conversations and initiatives.

Often, during this period, issues of race were characterized within the broader term of “diversity.” Dr. Siti Kusujarti, a professor of Sociology and Gender Studies, has been a part of the Warren Wilson faculty since 2000; she was appointed to a committee centered around issues of racial equity and diversity under all four presidents over the last 20 years. She points out that in the early years of her time at Warren Wilson, the institutional structure around issues of racial justice were interconnected with international student affairs. Specifically, she says that “in the past, the task-forces I was involved in, they tend to define diversity more broadly.”⁷ This claim is reflected by Cathey Kramer, the Vice President of Applied Learning, who recalls the diversity task-force she was a part of when she first arrived at Warren Wilson in the 2005/2006 school year. She reports that “At that point, we were still having lots of conversations about defining

6. “Warren Wilson College,” National Center for Education Statistics, Accessed November 29 2020.

7. Siti Kusujarti, Interview with Author, September 29, 2020. “

diversity ... before I got here the committee spent an entire year trying to define diversity.”⁸ In the years following, the diversity task-force solidified its definition, stating in a committee proposal in 2008 that “Diversity is defined as those issues... related to identity such as race, class, gender, sexual orientation, religion, ethnicity, disability, etc. It does not encompass diversity issues related to choice such as political affiliation.”⁹

These committees also exist as the first records of an organization within this twenty-year period to demand an institutional change around issues of race. In 2007, the task-force sent an open letter to college president Sandy Pfeiffer asking that Warren Wilson hire a consultant to assist with increasing the diversity of the applicant pools in faculty and staff searches that year with the goal of increasing the racial and ethnic diversity of employees.¹⁰ This demand eventually developed into a changed hiring practice, but a consultant for this particular use was never hired. In 2008, the committee recommended that for the purpose of expanding the diversity of Warren Wilson, the college should commit to scholarships that help provide extensibility to certain underrepresented groups. In an official statement, the task-force expressed that they “feel that the scholarship dollars need to be used on those issues of under-representation related to race, ethnicity, and socio-economic background.”¹¹ Since then, more financial aid was made available, however there is no evidence of a direct correlation between this task-force demand and the increase. Kusujarti claims that some of the first committees she was on began advocating for a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Initiative leader within the

8. Cathy Kramer, Interview with author. October 15, 2020.

9. “Diversity committee proposal - 2.” November 4, 2008. Diversity (Old Files) online drive.

10. “Task Force Recommendation” March 21, 2007. Diversity (Old Files) online drive.

11. “Scholarship notes.” March 27, 2008. Diversity (Old Files) online drive.

administration, a position that many student-organized demands ask for throughout the decade following these initial task-forces.

While records of student-organized responses and initiatives are not often seen within this period, some conversation around racial sensitivity and inclusivity are documented through student lead news. In a 2001 article in *The Echo* titled “The Fifth Element and Diversity” a student writes about the idea of a racially diversifying nation and campus through the presence of non-White characters in the French movie *The Fifth Element*. This writing provides a glimpse of the language used to speak on issues of race as well as the attitude some Warren Wilson students had towards the concept of a more racially diverse world and, by extension, campus at that time. In the piece the student writes that “Diversity should challenge, enrich, shock, and occasionally piss you off. It should force you to think beyond what is comfortable... We are a long way from this goal at Warren Wilson, and I don’t have any solutions. I don’t know what changes would bring about diversity. Most of time, I don’t know if people here even want diversity.”¹² She goes on to write that in conversation with White students there is a defensive attitude toward the notion that Warren Wilson is not diverse. She accounts one incident where a student responded to the criticism of a homogeneous campus by beginning to name Black students at the college. In response, she writes: “Honey, if you can name them all, it’s not diversity.”

In 2009, Bell Hooks, a feminist author and social critic, visited Warren Wilson and was interviewed in a November issue of *The Echo*. She was asked about Warren Wilson’s status as a predominantly White institution that claims to be committed to being open-minded and fostering a community for all. She responded by explaining that Warren Wilson students needed to make

12. Angelina-Elisabeth Price. “The Fifth Element of Diversity.” March 8, 2001. The Echo student paper.

sure they are “not, on the one hand, saying they care about justice and not really doing the work of justice.”¹³ A similar sentiment was presented by civil rights leader and Georgia Congressman John Lewis when he visited campus just eight years before Bell Hooks in 2001. In an April issue of *The Echo* Congressman Lewis was interviewed and asked how to best bring diversity to the Warren Wilson campus. He responded saying “We need to do what we can as individuals, as participants in organizations, whether it’s academic engagement, or religious engagement, or business engagement, to get other people to come in, people who do not necessarily look like us, may not be our own race, our own religion or whatever. I think we need to not just talk about it, but we have to live it.”¹⁴

Much of what sparked a conversation on race at the college that would later be articulated into demands were incidents that many students and faculty called out as racist. In March 2010, a student-organized dorm party at the Sage building was titled “Thug Life” and encouraged students that attend to come “busting out a pimp outfit and breaking in a street accent.” following criticism, a string of opinion pieces was published in *The Echo* containing a back and forth on the legitimacy of the claim that this party was racist. This included a defense of the party where a White student claimed the event was only “with the intent of some non-violent body shaking fun”¹⁵ and that her experience living for a summer in a neighborhood where she was “the only White girl on my block” gave her an understanding that this community would not care about the stereotypes on display. This opinion was quickly rebutted by a guest writer and professor who

13. Charlotte Mitchell. “Q&A with bell hooks.” November 20, 2009. The Echo student paper.

14. Ben Seymour. “An Evening with Civil Rights Leader John Lewis” April 9, 2001. The Echo student paper.

15. Alexandria Uchniat. “An open response to ‘Thug Life.’” April 2, 2010. The Echo student paper.

explained that “To assert that college students acting out their notion of ‘thugs’ is merely all in good fun is to ignore the real and egregious harms advanced in a society in which such stereotypes persist.”¹⁶

The Second Decade

In the second decade, 2011 to 2020, of this twenty-year period of Warren Wilson history, calls for institutional change around issues of race were more student led and presented more tension between the administration and student organizers. The early part of this decade began to see a decline in student enrollment overall that was also reflected in the falling enrollment of students of color. This decade saw a higher administration turnover rate that included three separate college presidents within just a ten-year period. Downsizing in the earlier half of this decade was met with growth in the latter half. In 2018, Warren Wilson saw its largest incoming class in the last twenty years accompanied by growth in the racial diversity of the student body. This rapidly changing period made way for student organizing and direct action for racial justice and equality. However, it also featured abbreviated efforts by both students and administration ended by their short-lived time at the college. Many of these periods of student demands were directly connected with national social unrest around a racially motivated killing, acting as a catalyst for student movement on these issues.

For the most part, student organizing has taken the shape of demands made by the student body, usually led by an organization, followed by a rally, usually a strike or public march.

16. Laura Vance. “Response to ‘Thug Life’ party.” April 2, 2010. WWC Archives, The Echo student paper.

Looking at this decade as a whole, many of the demands and efforts seem repetitive. Kramer comments on this by noting that “the good news is that we have been engaged, the bad news is we haven’t made more progress.” In 2014, students began demanding that the college do better in its work to create both a more diverse campus as well as one that respects and, in particular, protects students of color, specifically Black and Indigenous students. In April flyers anonymously posted around campus stated that “We members of the Warren Wilson Community” were demanding that the administration “make mandatory training for faculty and staff regarding cultural competence ... incorporate diverse course material into core curriculum ... for a safe space of learning and living, together, celebrating our differences.”¹⁷ The flyer ends with a call to action asking students to meet outside of Gladfelter dining hall to discuss this movement. While tensions had been building over many issues, one incident that was widely discussed during this period of demands was the KKK tree carving. In November 2013, a tree outside of Gladfelter was vandalized with the acronym KKK, most likely in reference to the Ku Klux Klan. While the vandals were never identified, many expressed that the incident was a sign of danger for students of color and that the administrative response was not serious enough. The wounds from this hate crime were deep, so much so that even a year later Obie Ford, the first director of Wilson Inclusion, Diversity, and Equity, hosted a discussion on the “one-year anniversary of the KKK tree carvings on our campus.”¹⁸ On the day that the carving was found students hosted a rally that essentially shut down normal campus life spurring discussions and articulating anger. This incident would be a starting point for much of the further organizing in this period of demands.

17. Strike Tuesday email correspondence. November 2, 2020. Student I online drive.

18. Obie Ford email correspondence. November 20, 2014. Student I online drive.

Later that year, the Ferguson, Missouri unrest sparked by the racially motivated killing of Michael Brown inspired further student organizing around campus issues and issues outside of the college community. Shortly after the killing in November and then again after the court ruling in December 2014, Rima Vesely-Flad, a professor of religion took a group of students to Ferguson where they participated in protests. Vesely-Flad says that after returning “The students who came on one or both of the trips did bring strategies back, I know that they led a rally on campus.”¹⁹ This event is detailed in an email by Ford where he explains that “We are calling this event the "This Stops Today March". We will have a speaker to initiate the event, hold 4.5 minutes of silence to represent the 4.5 hours that Michael Brown was left in the street. We will then march through our campus, raise our voices in chants and songs.” Vesely-Flad also recalls a “report back” event where issues of racism and how they exist on campus were discussed. She accounts that there was a high turnout of students and strong interest.

In 2016, students organizing for racial equity and inclusion picked up momentum after another set of demands was published. This time, organized by the newly formed Black Student Union, a list of demands asks for institutional change to help protect Black students, providing a safe space to learn and live. The establishment of the Black Student Union and subsequent demands made were preceded by a series of hate crimes committed against Black and Indigenous students on campus presumably by other students at Warren Wilson.²⁰ These incidents came during the tense 2016 election and many had aspects directly tied to the election and candidates.

19. Rima Vesely-Flad, Interview with author. October 20, 2020.

20. Julie Ball. “Possible Hate Crimes Reported at Warren Wilson.” The Asheville Citizen Times. The Citizen-Times, December 8, 2016.

First, a computer was stolen from a student of color and left outside the campus Public Safety office in a plastic bag. In another incident, a tote bag was stolen from a restroom. The bag contained a final senior project and belonged to another student of color. The project was later found torn into pieces inside a shopping bag and riddled with racial slurs. Finally, there was an incident involving a paper left in a Native American student's room where the word "Trump" and the words "back to the rez" were written. Students criticized the administration's handling of the incidents, particularly the decision by Buncombe County Sheriff's office to not classify these attacks as hate crimes. In December, the Black Student Union sent a student-wide email in which they explained that "One of the most difficult things to overcome is your feeling of safety being taken away. It is so hard ... But, unfortunately one of the most unhealthy ways to live is to live a life in fear."²¹ Soon after, a group of Black students walked into Gladfelter with signs that said "Am I Next?"

Another catalyst to organizing on campus was social upheaval in Charlotte, North Carolina as a response to the racially motivated killing of Keith Lemont Scott by Charlotte city police. In September 2016, just months before the 2016 student demands were published, protests began in Charlotte and their impact made its way on to campus. On September 22nd, a local news station came to campus and captured an anonymous Black student's fear and frustration in a classroom discussion about the killing in Charlotte. The student says from behind the camera, "We talk about it, we talk about it! ... We sit and discuss, and we know these things,

21. Black Student Union email correspondence. December 5, 2016. Student I online drive.

and we have these discussions but what is happening? Why does it keep happening?"²² After the emotional outburst in her classroom, Vesely-Flad committed to traveling with students to Charlotte to take part in the protests. Vesely-Flad says after the incident in class, "A big chunk of the class went and they mobilized their friends." In total over 22 students made the trip and took part in the protests.

Organizing around these issues never stopped for many students. However, in the summer of 2020, social unrest across the nation in response to the racially motivated killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis, Minnesota city police sparked another period of student demand, led by the Black Student Union, the newly formed Alma Shippy Coalition, as well as other affinity groups on campus. The movement was initiated on the celebration of Juneteenth with a multimedia advertisement of Black student demands written and distributed by students. These sixteen demands included the development of scholarship funds, change in curriculum, and the development of partnerships and community for Black Warren Wilson students. Administration and other organizations on campus quickly responded with statements and plans to meet the demands. In July 2020, the position, director of Diversity Equity and Inclusion initiatives was established. In September 2020, it was announced that the George Floyd Memorial Scholarship would be established to help provide recognition and financial assistance to Black student leaders. However, student organizers continue to argue that the college has a long way to go before truly reconciling with the oppression of Black and Indigenous students of color. On September 11, students organized an event titled "Justice in the Gardens" to protest and

22. John Le. "Student's Emotional Outburst about Unrest in Charlotte Brings Classmates to Tears," September 22, 2016.

recognize the long road ahead in their movement. In an Instagram post by the Black Student Union, they write “After many years of broken promises, lackluster appeasements, and outright disrespect we as fed up members of the WWC are calling out to our immediate and greater community to force concrete change.”²³

Contextualization

To many, the history of organizing for racial equity on the Warren Wilson campus may seem to have lower stakes than other histories in the movement for equality in education. However, it is important to understand the context that students at Warren Wilson are operating under. Incidents like the “KKK tree carving” happened in a region where a White supremacist organization like the Ku Klux Klan have operated in large numbers in the past and continue to hold a presence in some areas today. While Warren Wilson was one of the first colleges in the south to integrate, doing so before it was federally mandated, it is not possible to overstate the harm that fifty-eight years of denying Black people the right to attend a college can do to that institution and subsequently the student body. As a result, during this twenty-year period of time, the student population itself has never been racially representative of either North Carolina or American demographics broadly. To this day, the percentage of Black, Native American, and Latino students at Warren Wilson is less than half of the national percentage each group makes up while Asian students only make up a fifth of their national presence.

Stagnation in racial equity exists not only in demographics but institutional response to organizing as well. Over these two decades, lots of work was done by students to demand this campus better represents them. While much was accomplished over this period of time, many of

23. @Bsuwwc Instagram post. September 8, 2020

the demands recognized earlier in this twenty-year period were still not met by 2020. Of the nine demands published in 2016, seven are directly mirrored in the demands published in 2020.

Incidents of racist practices in the classroom have continued to be reported by students in a similar fashion over the twenty-year period. In Steven Davis's 2000 piece in *The Echo* he reports on an incident where a picture of European colonialists in Africa was referred to by a history professor as an example of "How Europeans tamed the savages." Similarly, in October of 2020, an indigenous student reported that after approaching a professor about the insensitive language and text used in their classroom regarding Native American heritage, they were ignored and dismissed.²⁴

Practices of student organizers have also evolved around a similar line through this history. In 2013, when the KKK tree carving was found, students organized a strike that forced the attention of the administration and furthered the work around that issue. Similarly, in 2020, after the incident of insensitive language regarding Native American heritage, students organized a strike on November 3rd with the hope of pushing the administration to properly respond to this and other incidences. In January of 2016, the Theater Department preformed a play entitled "Sharing our Stories: Voices of WWC on Race and Class."²⁵ In this play, students compiled accounts of discrimination and personal stories of life on campus for students of color before performing to the student body on Martin Luther King Jr Day of Remembrance. Similarly, in July 2020, the Instagram page "dearwwc" was launched as a means to keep anonymous records

24. Jay Roberts email correspondence. October 16, 2020. Student 1 online drive.

25. "Sharing our Stories: Voices of WWC on Race and Class." A written play and performance by students and faculty of Warren Wilson. January 19, 2016.

on accounts of discrimination and personal stories of life on campus for students of color to be seen by all.

History is often referred to as a tool, and for organizing at Warren Wilson around issues of race, it is one seldom made available. Over the last two decades, students and faculty have discussed, organized, and demanded but often without context of the work and obstacles that came before. However, patterns in how issues of race have arisen and how organizing has worked to solve them exist in this history. More importantly, it articulates how these issues have continued to exist. If there is a “past we are creating as you read this” then its best use is as a tool for the future.

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