

MIZZOU MISSTEPS: PIVOTAL MOMENTS OF FALL 2015

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Abstract

By denying that issues of bias and mistreatment exist and then confronting such issues with disdain, some white Americans enable injustice and abet systems of oppression. Black students at the University of Missouri in fall 2015 saw this narrative ring true several times. The resulting events, including protests, a hunger strike, and several administrator resignations, cast light on the experience of black students at Mizzou through nationwide media coverage. This case study examines three opportunities turned missteps of administrators that exacerbated an already charged, contentious environment: the president's refusal to acknowledge protestors at a homecoming parade, a too-little-too-late meeting with stakeholders, and the impacts of the football team's involvement. In a country whose everyday population growth is 90 percent non-white, a greater awareness of the racial inclusion work needed on college campuses today is necessary.

Introduction

The price of ignorance to racism is too high in the United States today. This sentiment is weaved boldly through *The 2015 University of Missouri Protests and their lessons for Higher Education Policy and Administration*, a forthcoming article by University of Missouri's (Mizzou) Ben Trachtenberg (forthcoming). The existence of “hypersegregated” areas, like those in Missouri, help to cultivate white majorities who believe we live in a post-racial society. Many of these same people have never interacted with someone outside their own race (Tatum, 2017). By denying that issues of bias and mistreatment exist and then confronting such issues with disdain, some white Americans enable injustice and abet systems of oppression. In fall 2015, black students at the Mizzou saw this narrative ring true several times on their campus. The resulting events, including protests, a hunger strike, and several resignations, cast light on the experience of black students at Mizzou through nationwide media coverage.

The pivotal moments in the case of Mizzou in 2015 are not defined by the definitive action of a university, but by the inaction of a governance structure that is designed by nature to orchestrate a chorus of voices on campus. Through the unwillingness to engage during a protest, administrators missed a chance to negotiate and collaborate with disenfranchised students. When a meeting was finally arranged between protestors and the administration, the university chose to send a leader who was unprepared for conversations regarding racial equity—the person allegedly not knowing what the term “systematic oppression” meant (Pearson, 2015). Lastly, the involvement of the football team elevated the demands of protestors beyond the reach of the administration and its governance. At many times, shared governance could have served administrators well, but too many times, slow responses and misinformation made it a hindrance when trying to navigate the mass of events, demands, and stakeholders.

A Parade Faux Pas

The first pivotal moment in the fall 2015 events was the student protest on October 10th that blocked University System President Tim Wolfe's car from proceeding down its homecoming parade route. It escalated the unrest and set the stage for Mizzou to react in a prompt and informed manner—or not. The incident marked the inaugural appearance of the student group Concerned Student 1950 and was the first event in a series to garner national media attention (Trachtenberg, 2018). Students not only disrupted the parade, but managed to block it from proceeding for nearly fifteen

minutes, before being removed by police. President Tim Wolfe did not engage with protestors though he was riding in an open-air convertible just feet from those protestors, who were demanding answers. Reports state Wolfe did not utter a word during the entire ordeal or even acknowledge the mass of student protestors (Serven & Reese, 2015). Wolfe did not make a public comment about the events that occurred until nearly a month later, on November 6th, when he issued a half-hearted apology (Trachtenberg, 2018).

The best action a president can take is to engage with the political challenges of the job, or those challenges will come to define and control their presidency (Rome, 2018). While the actions of Wolfe at the parade looked exceedingly bad, the real tragedy of that moment was that it stands as yet another missed opportunity to engage with political matters, which overtook Wolfe's presidency and foreshadowed his demise. Of their many responsibilities, two charges should remain prominent in a president's work: Their actions personify the university more than the actions of any other single person in the system, and they need to advance the institution's effectiveness (Bastedo, Altbach, Gumport, 2016). When students see that the face of the university is, according to photos, smiling and ignoring their plea for action against racism on campus, students can feel more marginalized than before they acted (Serven & Reese, 2015). When the everyday operations of a university are interrupted because of an urgent need, like steps towards equality on campus, the effectiveness of the university (and the ability of students to learn) is disrupted. The job of a president in this scenario is to engage with students face-to-face, not only to appease media but to genuinely learn more about the needs of the institution and its constituents.

Many alternative actions could have better resolved the homecoming parade moment. From getting out of the car to greet the students to, frankly, not hitting one of them with the car. It seems as though endless possibilities could have served as an improvement upon what actually occurred (Serven & Reese, 2015). One example of a student protest that was handled well is the post-presidential election protest of 2016 at the University of Central Missouri (UCM), just 100 miles west of Mizzou. In the days following the election of Donald Trump, peaceful protests took place on campuses around the country. At the UCM protest, a small group of pro-Trump supporters drove pick-up trucks recklessly through a group of 200 peaceful protestors and threw lit fireworks into the crowd (University of Central Missouri Facebook page, 2016). Within an hour of the disruption, an emergency town hall with university president Chuck Ambrose was called. At the town hall, students were able to speak directly to Ambrose and express concerns for their safety on campus. Hundreds of students were in attendance, and more watched as the university broadcast live on social media. As a result of the town hall, Ambrose was able to set goals with students that culminated in

plans for a stakeholder summit on campus safety (University of Central Missouri Facebook Page, 2016).

The students at UCM needed direct contact with leadership as the effectiveness of the university as an education epicenter had been disrupted for many students. The leadership displayed at UCM in November 2016 is a great example of what could have resulted from the 2015 homecoming parade moment at Mizzou. Instead, Wolfe continued to stonewall students, and enrage students even more (Trachtenberg, 2018). Concerned Student 1950 also needed validation but was denied publicly. Some could argue that a town hall would not work at such a large institution, but considering the small number of black students enrolled—only about 2,000 of 27,500 students—a meeting of this sort could have been very effective.

A Mediocre Meeting at Best

The second pivotal moment in the events of the fall of 2015 was the disastrous meeting between Wolfe and a group of black students on October 26, 2015 (Trachtenberg, 2018). Few details about this meeting are available, but the impact on student leaders, cited by many sources, is enough to know that tensions were heightened yet again in the wake of the meeting. One student went in with hopes of reaching common ground and emerged with the conviction that he would not rest until Wolfe had been fired from the post of system president. Wolfe's attitude was characterized by students as "transparent disrespect," (Trachtenberg, 2018). The meeting yielded no positive outcomes (Pearson, 2015). On November 6, 2015, Wolfe would again embarrass himself by giving a flustered, incorrect definition of the term "systematic oppression" when asked by protestors on the University of Missouri – Kansas City campus (Pearson, 2015).

A benefit of shared governance is its ability to, under the guise of advancing a larger mission, involve many stakeholders in problem solving (Bastedo, Altbach, Gumport, 2016). Why, then, did Wolfe attend this meeting alone when it seemed as if his tactics and gut instincts were repeatedly wrong throughout the events of the fall of 2015? Though the lack of diversity-focused faculty and a deputy chancellor is well-documented, there surely was someone else that could have supplemented Wolfe's presence and offered more insight on diversity issues. This, again, is an area where shared governance of the university could have served as a strong ally for students, but instead was suffocated by the seemingly ignorant university leadership. Some sources say then-retired Michael Middleton, a past deputy chancellor, should have stepped in (Trachtenberg, 2018). "For a prominent black university administrator, regardless of

one's formal title or primary duties, helping the campus avoid embarrassing events that highlight the institution's racial injustice is part of the job," Trachtenberg states, though he acknowledges this role is unfair (Trachtenberg, 2018).

Diversity is not a foreign language that those in the white majority cannot speak. It is inappropriate and tokenizing to assign duties regarding racial equality solely to people of color because of their identity. If university administrators at Mizzou, of any race, had taken time to build goodwill with students on campus instead of quarrelling amongst themselves, they would see that a team of skilled, empathetic administrators would have done just as well in the meeting as sending in a person of color, whose job is unrelated to the matter, simply because they are black.

To avoid placing extra responsibility on people of color, a wide expectation of cultural competency should be placed on all university administrators in an intentional way, regardless of title or duty. Colgate University has done just that. A small committee produced a document in fall 2018 that outlines just how freedom of expression can coexist with and even enrich a college education. It goes as far to state discourse is necessary for a holistic education. The report cites freedom of expression as a necessary means for social advancement throughout the course of the nation's history, and contributes to their pursuit of "rigorous academic discourse" (Colgate University, 2018). This document, in combination with an existing 21-point action plan that focuses on making their university a "place for all people," Colgate is wrapping up how to handle future incidents in a nice package for all university stakeholders (Colgate University, n.d.). Though the University of Missouri attempted to satisfy protestors with mandated diversity training, it did so poorly, neglecting to acknowledge the original idea was created and advanced by students (Trachtenberg, 2018).

While Trachtenberg slights the idea of strategic free speech and diversity documents produced by committees in a chapter he wrote for *Leading Colleges and Universities* in 2018, the idea deserves to be explored (Trachtenberg, Kauvar, & Gee, 2018). Mizzou would benefit from producing documents similar to Colgate, weaved together to create conversation between free speech regulation and inclusion. While action plans and specific goals may be a stretch for a university recovering from such communication problems, statements of intent and the creation of committees would go far to repair the goodwill between students of color and the university. In summary, the meeting Wolfe attended was a test of how negotiating would proceed, especially considering the university's written commitments to diversity were few and far between. Put best by Trachtenberg (2018), "Wolfe failed the test, and he paid with an ignominious exit from his office," (p. 27).

Athletic Influence at the End

The last course-altering moment in the series of events in the fall of 2015 at Mizzou is the support of the protestors and student organization Concerned Student 1950 by the university football team, announced on November 7, 2015 (Trachtenberg, 2018). The football team released a statement stating the entire team would not participate in football-related activities until Wolfe resigned or was fired. The team had a scheduled game within a week of their announcement. On November 8th, the football coach publicly supported the team's alignment with protestors via Twitter (Trachtenberg, 2018). The team was partially made up of students of color—60 of 124 players were students of color—and they stood united in their support (Tatum, 2017).

However convoluted and controversial the clout of collegiate athletics, the fact remains that it is a force on campus to be reckoned with. David Frohnmayer, president emeritus of the University of Oregon, likens administrative meddling in college athletics to embezzlement, when it comes to its level of seriousness: College sports “can get a president's administration into trouble faster than almost anything except having their hand in the till” (Schroeder, 2013). This is likely because collegiate sports have the ability to unite stakeholders on and off campus, including alumni and donors, with the mission of the school (Mitchell & King, 2018). With the big budget of athletics teams, namely the football team, combined with its ability to link stakeholders and its high nationwide visibility, a perfect storm was created the day the football team took a stance. The racial protests were no longer an issue that could be feasibly contained by the administration. It seems apparent that Wolfe knew this to be true, as he resigned shortly after the football team announced their stance (Trachtenberg, 2018).

There is more to consider than just the sheer power of the football team pushing the protests to finally be successful, as some believe (Bass, 2015). Since their inception in the 1850s, collegiate sports have become just as integral to the fabric of the American college experience as midterms or graduation at some schools, including Mizzou. In 2010, the SEC, or Southeastern Conference, earned over \$1 billion in sports revenue alone, with some coaches making as much as \$10 million annually (Mitchell & King, 2018). While university athletics rarely break even, their role in the American consciousness, the visibility of their games, and, in this case, their causes are unmatched in the collegiate world by any other group. Though this was a lucky alliance for Concerned Student 1950, collegiate sports are not a stranger to civil rights causes. It has been historically proven that the platform of college athletics is an effective means of social advancement (Bass, 2015). By letting student unrest escalate to the national stage of athletics, Wolfe's fate was all but sealed when the football team announced its support in favor of the students.

Conclusion

In a country where the population grows everyday by around 8,000 and 90% of those new additions are people of color, the racial issues experienced at Mizzou have not been and will not be isolated incidents (Phillips, 2016). Universities must learn from the inaction of the Mizzou administration and do better. As Trachtenberg states, “the grievances raised at Mizzou could have been aired at nearly any university,” highlighting the fact that racial exclusion is not a problem on just one campus (Trachtenberg, 2018). Unfortunately, the racial climate at Mizzou is not radically different from most American universities today, but Mizzou’s navigation of such climates, in this instance, was uncoordinated and reactive at best. There has been some progress at Mizzou since that fateful fall. For example, a committee comprised of students, faculty, and community stakeholders was founded to focus on protests and free expression. A statement affirming the commitment of the university to free expression was also released in May 2016 (Trachtenberg, Kauvar & Gee, 2018). The events of fall 2015 at the University of Missouri do not need to set a precedent; they can serve as a lesson to all campuses on how to better navigate issues of race.

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