

US universities investigating their own process of decolonisation

By Kyle Adams

Kyle Adams is currently an undergraduate at Wake Forest University in North Carolina, US. He recently visited South Africa and was an intern at IFAA for two months. During his visit, he observed the course of the debate on decolonising the University of Cape Town (UCT).



The author writes of the decolonisation efforts taking place at his university in the US, drawing comparison to that of UCT. He introduces the situation of his school and then compares it to the pioneering work done at Brown University, a prestigious Ivy League

university in the US. Finally, he concludes with notes on the vital role of students in effecting positive change.

As an American undergraduate student who attends a predominantly white institution in the southeastern region of the United States, I am quite familiar with the situation of a university grappling with its own troubled history, particularly with issues of racism, slavery and white privilege. I recently completed my second year studying at Wake Forest University, a small liberal arts university located in the state of North Carolina.

In February 2019, the governor of my home state, Virginia, was found to be wearing blackface in a yearbook photo from 1984.¹ This discovery prompted many American universities to search their own yearbooks for racist iconography, including Wake Forest. Later that month, Wake Forest made national headlines when our Dean of Admissions, a Wake Forest alumna,

was discovered posing in front of a Confederate flag, a common white supremacist symbol, in a yearbook photo from 1982.² An Associate Dean of Admissions was also found posing in a similar picture. Both pictures were taken in affiliation with a university-chartered fraternity, the Kappa Alpha Order.

This discovery caused uproar amongst much of the Wake Forest student body, and the Vice President for Diversity and Inclusion responded by hosting a public forum for the campus to engage in conversation about the situation. The forum lasted over three hours, and students, primarily those affiliated with the Wake Forest Anti-Racism Coalition (similar to the #RhodesMustFall movement), poured out their emotions for the panel of administrators to hear. The students demanded change, and the panel of administrators seemed perplexed with how to respond.

This forum was followed by various virtual and physical protests in which students of colour vented their fatigue and frustration with the university's sluggish pace of change. Our university president and several other >>

“

Wake Forest made national headlines when our Dean of Admissions, a Wake Forest alumna, was discovered posing in front of a Confederate flag, a common white supremacist symbol...

administrators attended the physical protests, and they listened to the many recollections of discrimination that students of colour (particularly black students) experience on campus. But this listening has largely failed to translate into anti-racist policymaking. Rather, the recurring response is a plan for continued evaluation.

In May, towards the end of the semester, it came to light that Wake Forest was in fact founded on a repugnant decision. The university's first Board of Trustees raised the funds for Wake Forest's initial endowment through the sale of 17 enslaved people. Joseph Soares, a sociology professor who led the fact-finding mission with his undergraduate students, hosted a sombre remembrance ceremony for the 17 enslaved people. However, there was minimal awareness of the event outside of top university administrators and select faculty members. I was fortunate to have crossed paths with a Vice President who suggested that I attend, just 10 minutes before the event began.

The majority of the campus community understands that Wake Forest has an unfortunate history with race, but barely anyone realises that the very foundation of the institution was



derived from direct involvement in the transatlantic slave trade.

Fortunately, Wake Forest's president, Nathan Hatch, has begun to respond to students' calls for investigation and change. In May 2019, President Hatch announced the creation of a Presidential Commission on Race, Equity and Community to assess the university's situation. There are 30 campus members (equally divided among students, staff and faculty) serving on the Commission, including myself. The Commission will be supplemented by the Wake Forest Slavery, Race and Memory Project as well as the Committee on the Intersection of Bias, Conduct and Free Expression. President Hatch has requested for the Commission to produce a comprehensive report by the end of the academic year (May 2020).

To confront the issues of race at Wake Forest, I've found that the first and most important step is to show up and listen – everywhere. It's crucial to listen to the full range of grievances that pervade the campus, and to observe the ways in which certain groups interact (or how they don't interact at all). In addition to absorbing the emotions and ideas of students, I spent time individually with faculty and administrators to debrief about the campus climate. One of my chief aspirations was to earn the trust of the

many stake-holding groups at Wake Forest; I wanted to be seen as a listener and a translator to all.

After I felt confident about my grasp of the campus climate, I began to compile evidence to present. I collected stories, statistics and my own observations. I constructed a timeline of the various events linked to racial discrimination and inequity on campus. From there, I proposed actionable solutions for the school's administration and governing board to pursue, many of which were inspired by efforts from other universities. Although many of these solutions are difficult for administrators and board members to hear, I believe that my groundwork of building relationships and compiling research helped my ideas hold credibility.

On the topic of decolonising a university's curriculum, there is little precedent in the global sphere of higher education, at least publicly. However, there are several institutions that have attempted to address their campuses' histories pertaining to colonialism and racism outside of curriculum change. In 2014, the University of Virginia's President's Commission on Slavery and the University decided to create the Universities Studying Slavery (USS) consortium. The aim of this consortium, which now has over 50



member institutions worldwide, is to cultivate a collaborative effort to examine the “original sin” of slavery and its entanglement with the academy.

This effort for a university to investigate its own history was first pioneered in 2006 by Brown University, an Ivy League school located in Rhode Island. Ruth Simmons, Brown’s president from 2001-2012, appointed a Steering Committee on Slavery and Justice in 2003 to probe the university’s involvement in the transatlantic slave trade, looking especially at the Brown family for whom the university is named. It’s probably stunning to read that such an effort was made over a decade ago. It should be even more surprising to know that this pioneering effort is still considered the most successful effort to date, as Brown’s report is revered as the “gold standard” for American universities.

Brown’s trailblazing effort was likely the result of appointing a trailblazer as its president. Dr Simmons was in fact the first black American to serve as a president for an Ivy League university. Before Brown, she was the president of Smith University, making her the first black female in American history to be a university president. Thus, Dr Simmons was accustomed to breaking the normative culture of higher education. Another contributing factor is that Dr Simmons is a descendant of slaves in both her maternal and paternal lineages. Unfortunately, the vast majority of university administrators in the United States and South Africa are old, heterosexual white males. This contributes significantly to higher education’s slothful pace of reform.

However, after various student protests, several American universities (eg Georgetown University, the College of William & Mary, Furman University) have taken a newfound interest in Brown’s early precedent. When Georgetown University president, John DeGioia, decided to create a Working Group on Slavery, Memory

“

To confront the issues of race at Wake Forest, I’ve found that the first and most important step is to show up and listen – everywhere.

and Reconciliation in 2015, the Working Group chairperson, Rev David Collins, noted in an interview that “reading Brown’s report was one of the first things [he] did”.³

The chief value of Brown’s report is derived from its intellectual humility and transparency. From the outset of the document, the Steering Committee emphasises their mission, under president Simmons’s charge, to “examine the University’s historical entanglement with slavery and the slave trade and to report our findings openly and truthfully”.⁴ After an introduction of the Committee’s initial goals and subsequent activities, the report delves into the history of the transatlantic slave trade at the international, national, and local scales (ie the involvement of the Brown family in their university). This includes the disturbing details that 30 members of the Brown Corporation are confirmed to have owned or captained slave ships.

On campus, there is evidence that reveals that University Hall, the school’s oldest building, was built by four slaves. And the Committee affirms that the University’s construction and growth was undoubtedly a product of slavery and the slave trade. The Brown family members were scrupulous record keepers, so the Steering Committee presents many of their conclusions with direct evidence from the University’s

founders themselves. Throughout the report, the Committee reminds readers that these gruesome details were previously erased from the accounts of Brown’s history, and forgotten, as is the case at many American institutions.

Most universities are likely to conclude such a report after these admissions of wrongdoing. However, Brown’s Steering Committee wrote this monumental document to not only admit wrongdoing, but to cultivate a holistic national dialogue about transatlantic slavery, crimes against humanity and the concept of retrospective justice (ie reparations). The report is especially successful because of how it weaves the chronological specifics of Brown’s history with their historical contexts.

Yet, the report also never excuses the school’s wrongdoings as “products of the time”. Rather, the Committee writes that such history must be confronted, condemned and taught publicly. There isn’t any obscure academic theory; instead, the Committee uses ample statistical evidence and documented human experiences to establish credibility and convey its message.

The final and arguably most valuable component of the report is the Committee’s set of recommendations addressed to the university administration and governing board. In the final pages of the document, the Committee charges the University to do the following: “acknowledge and apologise for Brown’s entanglement with slavery; tell the truth in all its complexity; memorialise the University’s painful history with slavery to invite reflection; create a center for continuing research on slavery and justice; maintain high ethical standards in regard to university investments and gifts; expand opportunities at Brown for those disadvantaged by the legacies of slavery; use University resources to help ensure a quality education for the children of Rhode Island; and appoint a committee to ➤

“

Although I am familiar with how racism can undergird a university's existence, I am quite unfamiliar with a university explicitly addressing the protests of its student body in the manner that UCT did.



monitor the implementation of these recommendations”.

Brown's report is exemplary in its specificity and practicality. The Steering Committee makes clear what issues have historically plagued and continue to afflict the University, and it then provides logical action for the University to take. The higher education world would benefit greatly if more institutions emulated the candid, thorough and courageous approach that Brown forged in 2006. In the words of Brown's Steering Committee:

Brown is a university. Universities are dedicated to the discovery and dissemination of knowledge. They are conservators of humanity's past. They cherish their own pasts,

honoring forbears with statues and portraits and in the names of buildings. To study or teach at a place like Brown is to be a member of a community that exists across time, a participant in a procession that began centuries ago and that will continue long after we are gone. If an institution professing these principles cannot squarely face its own history, it is hard to imagine how any other institution, let alone our nation, might do so.

I hope that other universities can reckon with their traumatic pasts in a similar vein.

UCT and Wake Forest are on the cusp of enacting change, but the individual universities must tailor the processes to their specific situations. Both schools can look to Brown's example for how to investigate their own histories and how to write an all-encompassing report. At UCT, the effort will centre on reimagining curricula and fields of study so that they are more accessible to all of UCT's students and faculty. UCT must also seek to dismantle the silent structures of apartheid segregation that continue to pervade the university's tradition and culture. Wake Forest, on the contrary, must focus more on proactively engaging its history with the transatlantic slave trade and ensuing anti-black discrimination (eg Jim Crow), as well as discerning how the mechanisms of the university and its social life operate to exclude people of colour on campus. The changes of UCT and Wake Forest will be different, but the end goal should be the same: to foster a university culture in which all campus members can proudly claim ownership and belonging.

For proper institutional change to occur at any school, it's vital that students help lead and construct the

change itself. After all, this change should foremost serve students. Students must therefore transcend their role as consumers of their education and instead become agents of it. This involves coalition among student groups, and it also requires collaboration with the faculty and administrators at one's university. The vision must come from students, but the execution has to be seen through by the campus members who are not limited to the 3-4-year graduation cycle. Although Brown's report is exemplary, the follow-through on the Steering Committee's recommendations has been lacklustre, and the campus community's knowledge of the Committee's herculean effort from 2003-06 is relatively nonexistent today.⁵

The effort required to do this work is gruelling, no matter who you are. As students, fixing our universities is not in the job description. But if we don't, nobody will – or at least not properly. This is important work, and it's a tremendous opportunity to help redirect the trajectories of these major institutions, whether it's Wake Forest, UCT, Brown, or any other university. It's through such action that we can make history, rather than fall victim to it.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Alan Blinder and Jonathan Martin, "Governor Admits He Was in Racist Yearbook Photo," *The New York Times*, February 1, 2019, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/01/us/politics/ralph-northam-yearbook-blackface.html>.
- 2 Scott Jaschik, "Yearbook Review Finds Dean With Confederate Flag," *Inside Higher Ed*, February 25, 2019, <https://www.insidehighered.com/admissions/article/2019/02/25/wake-forest-searched-its-yearbooks-photos-linked-racism-and-found-its>.
- 3 Gillian Kiley, "For Brown's Slavery and Justice Center, a Legacy of Scholarship at the Five-Year Mark," *Brown University*, January 10, 2019, <https://www.brown.edu/news/2019-01-10/cssj>.
- 4 James Campbell et al., "Slavery and Justice Report" (*Brown University*, 2006), https://www.brown.edu/Research/Slavery_Justice/report/.
- 5 Sydney Ember, "The Forgotten Report," *Brown Daily Herald*, May 24, 2012, <http://www.browndailyherald.com/2012/05/24/the-forgotten-report/>.