

Clash of Cultures

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It is my pleasure to be here today to share some of my thoughts with you. Though I have had the opportunity to participate in this conference before, I suspect that interest in my comments today may be heightened by circumstances of the past year, beginning on March 13, 2006, in a very small house adjacent to our first-year campus. That day actually passed pretty quietly for most of us. It was the Wednesday of spring break, and I happened to be in Florida, visiting my dad in Fort Lauderdale. My mind, far removed from campus life, was actually focused on the second half of my vacation...a golf outing with friend. . . that was to begin the following day in Naples. And that Wednesday passed without anyone but a group of lacrosse players and a couple of invited dancers knowing what lay ahead.

The following day, I met my buddies, completed a challenging but pleasant round of golf, and as I was changing into my street shoes, I got a call on my cell phone from my Dean of Students. Now, calls from Dean Sue, as many of you know her, fall into one of two categories: either to share some gossip, usually about sports—for example, “Did we win or lose?” “Did someone say or do something interesting?” Or something like that. But calls over breaks are usually less entertaining, as was the case this day. This call fell into the less desirable category, the kind where I cringe in anticipation of a student injury, a racial incident or a situation involving a staff or family member.

On this day, Sue wanted to let me know about that fateful party. I cannot say that I enjoyed my golf outing that week as well as I have others. Though it would be days before the significance of the incident and harm of misinformation would be felt, these kinds of situations involving inappropriate group behavior, alcohol, and everything you all now know to be the disputed and undisputed facts of the case, can’t help but disappoint. And, frankly, my gut said that there was more to come.

I must admit that I once had a very similar gastronomic experience, years earlier in my first year at Penn. I took a call from my boss who told me about an incident there involving a white male student, a group of African American women and two words; Water Buffalo. I was with an old friend that day sitting out on my front step and told him without really understanding why, that I had a feeling that this incident would define my

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work and personal life for the rest of the year. Good call...Sue's call, nearly 14 years later was only the second time that I had ever felt that particular sensation...a prescient one, I guess.

Now, those of you who have been following this story for the past 11 months. . . I am so sorry. Think of what you could have done with that time. But I acknowledge the difficulty of avoiding the overwhelming media interest and pundit analysis. I am sorry to say, however, that I intend not to use this forum for my own review and analysis of the facts, real and perceived, of the incident; the District Attorney's behavior; or of the predicted outcome. For that information, I refer you to the numerous bloggers and commentators, who clearly have far too much time on their hands.

Instead, I want to use this opportunity to share with you my observations and thoughts about college and university culture and what I see as a clash of cultures illuminated by the Duke story. This is a story with unique Duke attributes, but the cultural conditions and manifestations are not unique to Duke, other private institutions, or elite athletic programs, and I trust that this enlightened audience needs no convincing of that fact. I also need to point out that we are about a month too soon for an even more informed conversation about Duke's campus culture. As many of you know, I co-chair our Campus Culture Initiative, one of five groups charged by our president to address issues raised by the lacrosse incident. The CCI, as we fondly know it, will deliver its report to the president later this month and we anticipate it being made public shortly thereafter. Unfortunately, I am obligated to maintain confidentiality concerning its contents, but I am confident that I can share some lessons learned without crossing a line.

But let me begin with a backdrop of cultural conditions at Duke to set the stage for the nature of community interaction and institutional values.

Duke's culture is a complex one, really an interwoven set of cultures with some more visible and dominant than others, and some more interconnected than others. We choose various dates of origin depending on what story is to be told, but for most purposes, Duke's birth year is noted as 1924, the year that J.B. Duke provided 40 million dollars to Trinity College and the trustees subsequently launched Duke University. Again time and attention prevent a detailed history of Duke University, but I have to say that it is a particularly interesting history, especially for those interested in the evolution of a highly selective, internationally renowned and athletically powerful institution in a small, southern city (with its own very interesting history). I can direct you to good books on the subject if you are interested.

But, the pertinent historical mileposts that inform our cultural journey include that relative short age of the school, the isolation of women onto a separate campus from 1940 to 1972, the belated admittance of African-American students in the early 1960s, the long-standing social life dominance by fraternities (and only much later, and to a far lesser degree by sororities), the shift from football prowess to basketball excellence, the prominence of our medical center and health research, maturity of our graduate and professional schools, dramatic improvements in faculty quality, student selectivity, and academic achievement and the diversification of our student body. With regard to that last comment, casual readers of the media depictions of Duke will be surprised to know that our undergraduate student body is approaching half "of color," with 26% Asian-

American, 10% African-American, 7% Latino, 5% international and a smaller percentage of Native American students. These demographics tend to surprise people who have presumed a very different image.

Thus, in these very few paragraphs, I have presented a portrait of a campus where change has been persistent and the notion of a static campus culture genuinely alien. Nonetheless, cultural conditions always exist, and the sheer youth of our campus allows various perceptions of Duke to remain engrained in the perceptions of many local community members who recall as if it were only yesterday that Black admissions were restricted, nearby neighborhood residents who have only weekly disruptive student parties as their image of Duke students, and Durham residents still see Duke as a symbol of affluence, liberalism, isolation, and community disregard.

Of course, these highly negative depictions hardly tell the whole story and deny equally compelling versions of Duke—its faculty, staff and students—as generous community servants, major financial investors (Duke annually pumps more than 3 billion dollars into the local economy), and highly engaged and supportive residents and citizens (15,000 of our more than 30,000 employees live in Durham). The negative versions deny acknowledgement of the diversity of our faculty and students in race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status. But, as we know, all stereotypes begin with a morsel of truth, and Duke's history, not unlike the histories of every institution represented at this conference, certainly contains historical remnants sitting like long, dried kindling available to burst into flames under the right conditions. And our lacrosse incident offered just that opportunity for ignition.

So, I begin my commentary about this clash of cultures by noting that polarized perspectives are offered by those on the one hand, who retain outdated views on the nature of the institution and by those on the other hand, who have been champions of change, diversification, and contemporarization. This is an important dichotomy worth thinking about. It is not just limited to the divergent town-gown viewpoints I have illustrated, but may be more commonly associated with, for example, alumni perspectives on what is right for the institution—as framed by their unique experience—versus current campus community members who will be operating from a very different set of lenses about campus and community needs.

For many years now, campus culture challenges have been focused most intensively on issues of race and gender, and appropriately so. With solid progress to report, we will clearly need to maintain persistent attention to the development of genuinely diverse and interactive campuses. To date, our achievements have been more effective as a numbers game than as deep and effective cultural transformation. Though we have much of which to be proud—and we do need to give ourselves credit for achievement—we have far to go before we can declare the existence of level playing fields for Black, Latino, LGBT, or women students. In fact, the Duke incident revealed how very quickly latent feelings rooted in historical presumptions about race and gender can emerge.

But these cultural challenges transcend skin color and ancestry to include other local and historical conditions.

What are other examples of cultural tensions (which may be a fairer statement than culture clash)? Currently, for example, many campuses are facing charges of

imbalanced political perspectives on our campuses. Faculty are often accused of letting their own personal perspectives influence classroom instruction and criticism of students whose views may differ from their own.

The polarization of campus dialogue and advocacy appear in all institutional quarters. Think, for example, of ongoing and emerging religious tension as we welcome increasing numbers of Muslim, Hindu, and other religious communities though we still struggle to recognize and balance the needs of Jews, Christians, and the non-religious.

I do not propose to offer an exhaustive list of all the cultural tensions that exist on and near our campuses, but a few illustrations may help convey the complex nature of our current cultural climate. I have touched on some of the challenges we face with student demographics and characteristics. There are, of course, many others including growing international influences. The international landscape is not limited to the growing presence of what we used to call “foreign” students, though the shifting profile of countries of origin alone offers interesting fodder for examination of international culture tensions. I suspect that many here today can share stories of conflicts, misbehaviors, and crises derived from the consequences of varying cultural and values systems intersecting on our campuses.

The international dimension now transcends the challenge of accommodating the occasional international student. Our domestic students are studying abroad in record numbers yet often choose locations for all the wrong reasons—favoring optimal social and entertainment venues over better educational options. Our students are often ill equipped to interact with host families and work hard to transport American cultural conditions abroad rather than engage with and learn from their international experience.

Socio-economic difference has long been of concern to many who have advocated for increased financial aid and more restraint on the increased cost of college attendance. At the student-to-student level, we can often see the real consequences of material differences on day one as some students arrive with car loads of electronic gadgetry—and by the way, I have yet to figure out how all that stuff fits into a residence hall room. Student social groups and networks often correspond to financial capacity, and socio-economic stratification emerges not long after the flat screen TV is installed.

Cultural conflict and competition are not limited to the student population. I have already commented on the political climate affecting academic freedom and allegations of classroom bias. More locally, we find quite significant distinctions between and among the academic disciplines. Just spend a little time talking with a humanities professor and it will not take long before issues of privilege emerge. Have you visited the typical English department suite and compared it to what you would find in the hard sciences? What about among the professional schools? This may be an exception, but I suspect that most business and law schools offer slightly better facilities than do schools of education and social work.

But have I described conditions that are substantially different from the past? In some respects, I have probably not. Culture clashes and differences in access and privilege are as old as is higher education itself, but there are troubling characteristics of a ‘new norm’ that are worth examining.

The new norm suggests that the rules of engagement among competitors have changed. Dialogue and debate seem to have been sacrificed for competitive volume and

no-holds-barred defense of one's own position. To drown the opposition appears to have more value than to test one's own position against the potential legitimacy of another. Opinions and positions are formed less of reason and analysis and more of dogmatic alignment—here are the two polar positions on the consequences of stem cell research—I choose this one. Thus, your position is invalid. . . game, set and match point!

The new norm is strongly reinforced by the new world of instant, immediate, and immersive communications—an internet-powered, worldwide explosion of data transmission giving communications and advocacy power to anyone willing to blog, blitz, and blather. Much good has come from this new norm. Information is ubiquitous and increasingly accessible even to the most remote corners of the world. I can network virtually through any number of online outlets and engage in the marketplaces of products and ideas with but modest technology and a half-brained idea.

But the new norm has troubling characteristics as well. My own experiences with two events in the last two years serve to highlight these concerns. When a group of Duke students issued an invitation to host the annual Palestine Solidarity Movement conference, we discovered what extremist manipulation of these communications channels could create. At first a trickle and then thousands of emails from all over the country and beyond arrived in short order—some offering thoughtful arguments against our decision to allow the conference to take place on the campus. Most, though, were filled with venom and hate and promised to bring irreparable harm to the institution.

Quickly, this moved from seemingly random noise to an eerily coordinated campaign. Key online leaders mobilized the challenge and helped launch a petition signed by over 100,000 people (by the way, does anyone find the notion of signing a petition online from the comfort of a living room couch just a bit disconcerting?). The campaign eroded to one of insult and harangue with anyone offering a public comment excoriated as a supporter of terrorists and Jew hater. Tough for me to take as a child of Holocaust survivors.

And, by now, I need not dwell on the media and online assault we have experienced in the lacrosse situation—well beyond anything I or anyone could have imagined. I will not belabor the details of the assault. I will leave that for the numerous books and made-for-TV movies yet to follow....but it is important to understand how chilling the experience has been on the prospect of any legitimate dialogue.

The current barrage, by the way, is focused on a group of faculty who characterized the incident as a “social disaster.” This is not the time or place to review the opinions of these faculty—the group of 88 as others have labeled them. What is of note today is how fast and how hard others both from within the campus community but even more from outside our world, have hammered these faculty. A subsequent editorial written by one very thoughtful former dean attempted to find balance among the competing forces only to find herself the latest target for blog and email nuking. Just yesterday, one group calling itself “Friends of Duke University” published a full page ad in our student newspaper demanding that these faculty explain their motivations and positions regarding student athletes, women, and the justification for their original and subsequent statements. It is tough to express an opinion—and I assure you that within minutes of this speech's public appearance, I will receive hundreds of emails and be the subject of detailed blog analysis—very little of it flattering, I might add.

So this is the reality of the new norm. As our Provost Peter Lange commented at a recent meeting of our Arts and Sciences Council:

When the events of the spring unfolded we witnessed an unimagined intensity of vituperative language and distasteful and deeply hurtful caricatures of Duke students, our campus and its culture, our Durham community and our relationship to our neighbors in the city. The wave of attacks lasted for weeks in the media, on the emails and in the blogs. It was deeply disturbing, in many ways for our students, faculty and whole community. It inflamed and polarized rhetoric on our campus as well.

He went on to say:

If the Campus Culture Initiative, where discussions of substance and quality have been going on since June, is to produce a successful report this spring, we must renew our ability to speak to each other with candor and respect about the issues of importance to our community. To regain it, we will need to recapture the values that sustain and enrich speaking freely and listening attentively and respectfully that have served us so well in the past. When we hear things we don't like, even things with which we strongly disagree, we need to judge the substance and not the person, assume the better rather than the worse of intentions.

So this brings me somewhere near the end of my talk. I could end here, lament one more time the denigration of reasoned and productive discourse and the growing polarization of campus culture, and call it a day. Actually, that sounds pretty good.

Let me try to suggest some things we might do to counter the harmful and unproductive cultural conditions I have described. These are in no particular order but reflect my own formula for response and survival.

First, as a matter of principle, I would hope that we can agree to challenge this new norm. The more extremist and polarizing the reactions and responses, the more balanced, nuanced, and reasoned we must be. Counter-extremism serves no purpose other than to assuage our revulsion and add volume to the fray, and God knows that we have far too much volume to contend with already!

Our approaches to reasoned conversation will be different than those used by the bloggers and emailers. Our classrooms, residence halls, and student centers remain our best venues for face-to-face exchanges, but we have hard work to do to bring disparate perspectives together to engage in the dialogue. But there are novel approaches that can work. For example, one program at Duke that I am particularly proud of is called "Duke Conversations." This program came out of a discussion I had with my president who was wishing that our students could engage more often in small group conversations with interesting people. I told him that if he would pay, we would find a way to make it happen.

Basically, what we have done is announce to all our students that any small group—a recognized organization, a floor or hall of residents, or just a bunch of friends—can invite anyone they want from anywhere in the world, to come have dinner

and conversation. The only limitation is that the invited guest cannot charge an honorarium. If the person accepts the students' invitation, we pay for the whole thing: the flight, the hotel, and the meal. That is it—no other strings. This started out slowly last year, and now, thanks to good marketing by our student activities staff and thanks to a few entrepreneurial students who really jumped on this, we have visitors every week and we will break the bank on this program soon.

Now, I know that this is not an affordable option for every school, but I share it as an example of something simple but powerful. We will need many more new and creative ideas to get students in conversations with peers, faculty, alumni, and others who will represent various perspectives and positions on the many critical issues of the day.

It is also important to target conditions that sustain cultural tensions and inequities. Are student fee dollars equally available to student clubs and organizations? Do residence hall assignment policies favor any particular groups? Can aided students afford to study abroad or take summer internships? By leveling the playing field as best we can, we remove some conditions that reinforce inequitable privileges and fuel cultural tensions.

In the last couple of weeks, we have read of similar incidents throughout the country. My colleague at Clemson, for example, is dealing with a fraternity party featuring a racially inappropriate theme. I am aware of a major hazing scandal on another campus and there are more yet to hit the newspapers. Unfortunately, all of these incidents reveal the need for intelligent responses, but the new norm requires that they also incorporate sound media training, and professional assistance in managing communications with parents, alumni, students, faculty, and the public. This is not inexpensive, but is unfortunately increasingly essential.

It is also important that we take care of ourselves and each other when we are targeted by these extremists. It may be cliché, but a thick skin is essential to our work these days. I could share some of the emails I received when my letter reinstating our lacrosse students was released, but frankly, the language was so offensive that I would prefer to spare you. So, we do need the strength to weather disgusting verbal attacks and personal characterizations that are simply beyond reason.

We also need to maintain our sense of balance and humor. I cannot speak highly enough of the essential nature of collegiality, comfort, and humor to get through these situations. Anyone who knows me, knows that laughter serves as palliative for much of my stress—that and regular exercise and an occasional cabernet. But seriously, it really is important to care for one another when faced with the increasing number of situations drawing public attention and criticism

Thanks for giving me these few minutes to speak without worrying about sound bites and media variations of my words. I look forward to hearing your reactions and answering any questions you may have.
