

ENQUIRY

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Free thought and discourse

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How Hamilton's Leaders Have Failed Their Students

MIKE ADAMO
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Last week, the group of Hamilton College activists known as “the Movement” released a lengthy list of demands to almost universal ridicule. Few Hamilton students respect the Movement’s childish and arrogant calls for public apologies, special attention, and, of course, money. Our college administrators, meanwhile, rushed to validate the protesters’ demands and feelings.

“Fwd: Demands,” read the subject line of the email President Joan Hinde Stewart sent out to the campus, though she referred us benignly to the “attached message” the young scholars of the Movement had so humbly submitted for her consideration. “Certainly,” she wrote, “we always want to do better as a community and encourage discussion.”

College administrators have engaged in a wildly irresponsible whitewashing of the campus political culture.

She could start by learning what a discussion is, because it sure doesn’t involve “demands.”

For two years, the Movement has advocated for censorship and shouted down students who disagreed with their dogma. Not a single administrator has ever spoken out against them. Nor, for that matter, have many professors. Little wonder it escalated to the point where the wider world took notice and realized just what kind of intellectual atmosphere Hamilton administrators are creating.

It’s a shame to say it, but the college deserved the ridicule and embarrassment it received at the hands of national media.

Sure, only a small percentage of students agree with the Movement’s demands. Sure, we don’t want our school to be represented by such a disproportionately shrill cohort. But we should ask ourselves how we allowed a screaming group of petty totalitarians to become the public face of our college.

Who spoke up publicly when protesters teamed up to block local traffic last year? Which administrator commented on the crude and unbecoming ways in which the activists conducted themselves? Did Dean of Students Nancy Thompson

say a single word as she stood by on November 18th while protesters shouted obscenities through a megaphone in front of Buttrick Hall? No.

Our administrators aren’t leaders. They’re bureaucrats. They exist to protect the college brand, and if that means they have to sweep political issues under the rug, they’re more than happy to do it. Above all, they’re afraid of being called racist.

As a result, they’ve engaged in a wildly irresponsible whitewashing of the campus political culture. The most recent example is the hastily published college news story, “Hamilton Student Group Joins National Conversation,” which might be the understatement of the year.

Many are only noticing it now, but the administration’s tolerance for intolerant activism takes place every day. Every day that administrators and professors refused to acknowledge problems with the political scene, they let the problems grow. The only

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Salvaging a Campus Conversation

By **BEN WESLEY**
GUEST CONTRIBUTOR

After the Movement released its demands, the overwhelming majority of students made it clear that they disagreed with the list. And with good reason—the demands were so radical that they could easily have been mistaken for satire.

But despite the fact that a significant amount of the material is over the top and unfeasible, we shouldn’t ignore the entire document. There are points in the demands that, if not overblown, would have been reasonable—namely the racial statistics, appointing a dean of diversity and the health center demands.


As a largely liberal-leaning student body, the vast majority of students here want to make Hamilton a welcoming and inclusive place. One of the ways to achieve that is to consciously work against institutional racism. The problem, however, is that institutional racism is by definition hard to notice since it is built into the fabric of the institution in non-obvious ways. As a result, working to break down pervasive biases requires a certain amount of blind faith that the small corrections that are being made are actually beneficial.

The ability to see how each racial

This Week's News in 140 Characters

EDITORIAL REPORT

 **James Poniewozik** @poniewozik · Dec 1
"And we further protest our own protest against trivialization for trivializing itself!"
"vanishes in puff of smoke"

 **Popehat** @Popehat · Dec 2
Luther needed 95 demands to reform Catholicism. Students say Hamilton College can be reformed with only 83 demands.

 **M.L. Nestel** @mlnestel · Dec 2
One thing missing from the list of demands by Hamilton College students is a modicum of self-awareness.

 **Alyssa** @YR_AlyssaDC · Dec 2
The saddest part of this is Hamilton College admin did not voice out against any of these "demands."

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SALVAGING A CAMPUS CONVERSATION *cont.*

demographic is performing and how well-represented they are in various departments can replace that blind faith with actual data. A potential problem is that the departmental statistics may run afoul of FERPA (the student information privacy laws) in small departments. Even campus wide statistics, however more blunt, will be useful. In addition, monitoring the data will allow for changes to our campus’ strategy in order to figure out what is and isn’t working.

The reason the statistics, instead of a diversity course requirement, should be implemented has to do with the fact that what the campus is combating is woven into society through norms and biases. Building a campus environment that will reveal to (future) students their own biases has to be done slowly and carefully.

A forced course requirement, especially in an area as politicized as race, would have to be implemented perfectly at the outset. Otherwise the courses will alienate a large group of students, who may have agreed, against the fundamental concepts. Polarizing the idea of inclusion is counterproductive to the campus’s current desire to break down institutional racism.

The unfortunate fact of the matter is that any change to the fabric of Hamilton’s society will happen after the current class of students has graduated. As a result, Hamilton should appoint a college professor as a dean of diversity, separate from the dean of multicultural affairs. A

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Wilson, Root, and Historical Standards

By **PATRICK J. BEDARD**¹⁴
GUEST CONTRIBUTOR

Lafayette College is a small, elite liberal arts institution in Pennsylvania’s Lehigh Valley, well known for its robust academics and picturesque campus. One of Lafayette’s particularly breathtaking buildings is the Kirby Hall of Civil Rights—said to be one of the most expensive buildings per square foot when it was constructed in the 1920s—which boasts a stately Roman-revival exterior, a grand travertine marbled-clad entryway, and an airy, oak paneled-library.

Kirby Hall’s civil rights designation is well suited to Lafayette College, which has a robust history of supporting African Americans that began with the first-ever granting of a college degree to a freed slave. Today, Lafayette College has the distinction of holding top rankings in *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* for percentage of African American faculty (5th) and percentage of black enrollment (12th).

I visited Kirby Hall years ago on my college visit to Lafayette, and I remember the portraits of its trustees, founders, and notable alumni that lined the halls of the building. I remember my tour guide pointing out the portraits as we walked up the grand staircase. As she rattled off the scripted facts about the building that all college tours are wont to

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time an administrator came close to publicly acknowledging it was in Dean Thompson's limp free speech email of February 19. "More speech, not less," she concluded, after several qualifiers.

More is not always better, as the latest tome of demands shows. There are arguments to be had over things like mandatory diversity classes, but they won't get anywhere in the form in which the Movement presents them. Good conversations don't happen through megaphones, they don't happen through demands, and they don't happen through the public spectacle of Facebook fights (take the hint, HamOCC).

Hamilton administrators *could* promote a culture of higher-level discussion in our campus's print publications, but they don't. The administration has co-opted *The Spectator*, which, apologies to my friends there, hasn't been printing the hard-hitting criticisms of the college that it used to. The stellar opinion pieces and editorials in the last issue demonstrate a change. They demonstrate that our students, much more so than our administrators, are interested in leading the way to a better climate for discussion.

Hamilton administrators could do any number of things to send the message that the Movement's way of addressing issues is unproductive and disrespectful.

Their silence is damning.

The Daily Beast asked Hamilton's Assistant Vice President for Communications Mike Debraggio if President Stewart "had any concerns about the nature of the demands, including the restriction of free speech and the discouragement of white faculty from holding certain leadership roles." Debraggio "simply responded that Stewart did not."

No concerns at all? Really? The sheer illiteracy of the demands should stun any administrator who claims to run a school for writing.

I have many reasons to be grateful to Hamilton College, starting with its generous financial aid. But I am not proud to be a Hamilton student right now, and I have little gratitude towards administrators who privilege the blunt force of activism over reasoned discussion. Where are the leaders?

SALVAGING A CAMPUS CONVERSATION *cont.*

dean of diversity will be able to take advantage of the turnover of both students and administrative power to work towards building the culture we want.

The reason a professor should be appointed as a dean of diversity is that the college's career administrators have shown their first and foremost goal is the continuation of the Hamilton College brand. The brand overlaps significantly with the actual Hamilton College experience, but is

distinct from it.

The poor state of our health services (with the exception of HCEMS) is a stark example of this. The Counseling Center sees nearly a quarter of all students, yet is relegated to the attic of the health services building.

Professors, by virtue of their degrees and positions, have demonstrated that they care about student affairs and not just the college brand. A proven example of this is Dean Orvis, who has demonstrated a strong care for students' well-being.

The Movement's list of demands was ludicrous, but there is truth buried in their material. It will be more beneficial for the campus if instead of antagonizing the Movement's members we forgive (but not forget).

As full time students, our job is to learn, and in the process of learning people are going to make mistakes. Most mistakes don't bring unflattering national attention onto the campus, but it would be hypocritical if we called ourselves an inclusive community but alienated the makers of the mistakes.

The fact of the matter is that a group of students felt Hamilton was so pervasively racist that traditional avenues of discourse failed them. However wrong their views may be, they are still part of our community and should still be approached with compassion rather than hostility.

Reconciliation is, of course, contingent on the Movement not repeating this mistake again. If the Movement continues to radically co-opt the campus's views, their willingness to participate in this community should be severely questioned.

WILSON, ROOT, AND HISTORICAL STANDARDS *cont.*

include, she said—with an attitude that managed to be both haughty and causal—that "you all don't need to pay any attention to these pictures of old, dead white men—we're gonna get them all replaced with real, relevant people of color by the time you guys start here, assuming you can get in."

I remember being rather put off by her statement at the time, but it was my parents who were truly affronted by the callousness of it all. Maybe it was their status as first-generation college graduates that made my parents feel a particular appreciation for Lafayette's founders, trustees, and alumni. The notion of sending their child to an institution that cultivated such an unappreciative attitude could also have been off-putting.

In any case, Lafayette seems to have escaped the latest thought-purge being conducted by progressive young college activists. It would seem, for now at least, that Gilbert du Motier, Marquis de Lafayette, is safe on his pedestal, despite his status as a dead, white, rich, title-holding European. Woodrow Wilson has not

been so lucky.

I watched Wilson's fall from grace at Princeton University with a mixture curiosity and revulsion. The ousting of John C. Calhoun from his place of honor at Yale was to be expected, given his Southern legacy. But Woodrow Wilson, the Progressive icon?

We live in strange times indeed, I thought to myself as I read about the goings on at Princeton. Is Hamilton College at risk of such Orwellian attempts at historical erasure, I wondered? "the Movement" is certainly prone to radical acts of attention seeking, but even they would be daft to go after Alexander Hamilton himself, a man fresh off of a \$10 bill and enjoying a Broadway-musical-induced popularity kick.

Little did I suspect that Elihu Root, a man Hamilton students associate more with the Farmhouse that with foreign policy, would instead be the chosen victim.

To be sure, Root was a man of his time, a Progressive from the time when Progressivism meant forcibly modernizing the world via more heavy-handed means than the Obama administration's current policy of unrestricted cash gifts to corrupt foreign governments.

Still, Root was an original supporter of the income tax, a fighter of patronage (although a beneficiary of the revolving door), and a promoter of unskilled immigration and friendly relations with Latin America and China. Root's crime, of course, was that he thought and acted like nearly every other member of government in America and Europe did during (and beyond) his generation, with a strong sense of paternalism towards the underdeveloped world.

The Movement's call to remove Root's name from campus illustrates the crux of the problem regarding the assessment of historical figures without the use of a historical lens. It is a problem so blaringly obvious to me that I am ill equipped to explain it to those who fail to see it, akin to trying to explain to Donald Trump supporters why a hypocritical,

intellectually inconsistent, and bombastic real estate heir is a poor choice for the role of leader of the free world.

Reading the Movement's list of 83 demands, one can comprehend a dozen or so progressive standards (isms) to which historical figures could be improperly held, including racism, sexism, heterosexism, cisgenderism, elitism, and colonialism (I never fulfilled my diversity course requirement, so I'm probably missing a few). Elihu Root obviously falls flat when viewed under any number of these lenses.

But what about someone like Alexander Hamilton? He was an ardent abolitionist and a man of the most modest of roots, but he was also the original "Wall Street insider" and an ardent nationalist. Frederick Douglass famously told Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony that women should wait their turn for the vote. The great Mahatma Gandhi was both anti-black and anti-semitic. Even Martin Luther King was a homophobic man of his time, and both Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama believed in a "traditional definition of marriage" when they took their respective oaths of office.

The simple fact of the matter is this: history judges people harshly enough even when applying the social and philosophical norms of their own time. The advantage of hindsight in historical assessment is a powerful force in and of itself.

The Movement's aims and standards are controversial and divisive even on an ultraliberal campus like Hamilton College. To hold a man like Elihu Root, who lived and died nearly a century ago, to a set of standards we cannot agree upon in the present day is folly.

I stand in ardent support of full civil rights via legal and constitutional means for all Americans regardless of race, gender, gender identity, and sexual orientation, but I am utterly unwilling to strike men from the historical record for failing to live up to standards that did not then exist. It's as simple as that.

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Mike Adamo
Editor-in-Chief

Michael Levy
Layout and Design

STAFF WRITERS

Alex Klosner
Will Swett
Ryan Glenn
Elizabeth Barry

Amy Elinski
Phil Parkes
Will Utzschneider
Sam Benevelli

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Enquiry accepts articles of 500 to 800 words at madamo@hamilton.edu. Please be aware that we do not accept anonymous submissions.