

Students should awaken to the year of diversity

This year's theme should provoke discussion.

Students, faculty and administrators can rarely describe this university as a collectivity without recourse to the word "community." Despite the ease with which we use this phrase, I suspect that few of us have significantly reflected upon what may constitute the substance, the shared beliefs, of this "University Community."

As the university continues to shed its sometimes-ennobling and sometimes-shameful Southern skin in

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exchange for the many-colored cloak of a multicultural national university, that which constitutes our community, our same-ness, will become increasingly difficult to identify. I hope to initiate in this editorial what I hope will become a yearlong, broadly inclusive dialogue that examines who we are as an institution, whether who we are is who we want to be and, if not, who we shall become?

From my friends and various other students I have heard several observations about the substance of our university community.

The most frequently cited candidate is very unflattering: that we, the students on this campus, are concerned about academic affairs only insofar as we get a good grade and get our diploma (which will allow us to get a good job, earn a lot of money, and buy ...). Though I agree that this may characterize a small segment of the university's population, the majority of students would prefer not to be included within any community professing materialism and the disdain of academic affairs as their highest ideals.

I'm sure that the members of Huffman House and the poets and editors of our campus literary magazines (to mention only a few) would be resistant to being described as unconcerned about academic matters outside of the classroom. A community means that all of its members share particular beliefs about what is worthwhile and right. We have found dissidents; materialism, therefore, is not the substance of our community.

There is yet another seemingly plausible, readily available candidate for our highest ideal: that we, the students and faculty of this university, are united in our pursuit of higher education. This statement, however, is completely vacuous. What one person considers an intrinsic part of her education the next

person is likely to consider pure ignorance.

For instance, I distinctly remember an appearance of one of our fellow students on a Wake TV program during which he recited from one of his textbooks "proof" of the immorality of homosexuality. Evidently, then, there are students and at least one professor here at the university for whom a belief in the immorality of homosexuality is a legitimate part of one's education.

In my opinion, however, homosexuality has the same moral status as heterosexuality, and I would certainly want my education here to embody this belief.

I do not wish to re-ignite this contentious argument — my point here is only that we cannot have such significant disagreements about the content of higher education and then also assert that the pursuit of higher education binds us as a community.

In last semester's edition of *The Wake Forest Review*, its editor, in generally denouncing the Year of Globalization and Diversity, urged all of us to stop conceiving of ourselves as African-Americans, Euro-Americans, Asian-Americans, etc., and to start conceiving of ourselves solely as human beings. One of the most severe flaws with this kind of statement is that what has historically been called human or universal has actually been the culturally particular product of the Western tradition.

Take, for instance, the curriculum of many of the university's departments. One would suppose that a department given the name "Religion" would offer a significant number of courses examining at least the major Eastern religions and Islam — yet it does not.

One would also suppose that departments given the names "Art," "Philosophy" and "Psychology" would offer more courses of non-Western content — yet they do not.

My point here is that our university, by labeling these departments Religion, Art, etc., purports to examine adequately the entire range of human achievement within these fields, yet what it actually offers are courses whose contents are mostly Western.

To respond directly to the editor of *The Wake Forest Review's* statement, we must explore the full range of human achievement, non-Western and Western, before we can discern between our humanness and our particularity — to label universal what is actually partial and particular is a fundamentally ethnocentric act.

In addition to other important reasons, then, we must retain our various identities because "becoming human," as the editor of *The Wake Forest Review* essentially suggests, does not currently mean that one is becoming "more natural." "Becoming human" currently means assimilating into Euro-American culture.

I hope that I have established two things in the

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preceding paragraph: a provisional justification for the necessity of cultural identity and an explanation for the necessity of a diverse curriculum.

Fortunately, I think that I have also misrepresented the university's more inclusive direction regarding the curriculum, especially given the near-inevitable addition of a multicultural divisional.

In addition, with the continuing strength of Black Student Alliance and Asian Student Interests Association and the recent renaissance of Gay-Straight Alliance, the university's eventual evolution into a truly multicultural university seems assured.

Our continuing evolution into a multicultural university may seem, however, to preclude the development of any semblance of community. To wit, an institution values diversity when it permits and encourages the establishment of various groups that hold different conceptions of what is worthwhile and right; an institution is also a community if all of its members share particular beliefs about what is worthwhile and right.

The university of just two decades ago, in its enforcement of the morality of the Southern Baptist religion, preferred the maintenance of community to the encouragement of diversity.

The dilemma of the old university under the guidance of the Southern Baptist religion was, as I conceive it, how to impose sameness upon an increasingly diverse student population.

A return to this state of affairs or to a similar one is both extraordinarily unlikely and undesirable. The dilemma of the new university is very different: that is, how to encourage diversity within the student populace and the curriculum while retaining some unifying sense of purpose.

It is my opinion that the "ivory tower" metaphor no longer accurately describes our academic experiences — given the mutually exclusive truths of various religions, sciences and philosophies, we inhabit an academic world with a dense and growing skyline, a world of ivory towers.

What binds us as a community, then, cannot be the content or beliefs of one particular religion or the writings of a particular author.

The only thing that can both integrate us as a

multicultural university and serve as the substance of our community is, then, an enlightened learning process.

In a pluralistic world, we will necessarily encounter both in our studies and among our fellow students basic propositions about the nature of the world — e.g., nirvana, selflessness, is the highest spiritual achievement, or the world and our bodies and minds are machines governed by knowable laws — that are contrary to our own. In such a world, the optimal learning process is one of suspending one's prejudices and preconceptions in hopes of attaining a sympathetic engagement with difference.

Sympathetically engaging with difference precludes discounting a particular author's or religion's worldview as "false" without first sincerely exploring its merits. This does not mean, of course, that nothing can be discounted, nor that one must necessarily alter one's own beliefs.

What it does preclude, however, is actions of the type of those people who call into such Wake TV shows as *Politics Unplugged* and, more recently, *The Struggle*, only to ridicule guests — such actions, obviously, do not reflect a sincere exploration of another person's perspective.

It would also preclude the maintenance of any unfavorable preconceived opinion of any particular group — prejudice in any of its varieties prohibits real learning. A student in one of my classes this semester, upon observing that the vast majority of people in the class are white males, made the disturbing comment that minorities and women were most likely taking "easier" courses within the Women's Studies Department or our various ethnic studies departments. Such an openly racist and sexist remark would not be tolerated at a university whose students sympathetically engage with both their fellow students and with the ideas of diverse cultures and time periods.

Not since Omaar Hena's April 3, 1997 editorial "Big Kahuna celebration degrades women, cultures" has our university's relative inability to respectfully and sincerely engage with difference been severely tested.

It is my sincerest hope that the programs and activities associated with the Year of Globalization and Diversity will provide a similar challenge.

To paraphrase Socrates, a thoroughbred horse, so big that it is a bit slow and heavy, needs a nagging gadfly to wake it up. (Socrates does not here confuse sleep with apathy, for once the horse is awake he is rarely in a pleasant mood.) If the Year of Globalization and Diversity fails to provoke discussion and debate, if it fails to "awaken the horse," we will have missed a prime opportunity to begin to forge the new University Community, a university founded upon the idea of respectfully and sympathetically engaging diverse conceptions of the world.

Columbus wasn't the problem

Columbus Day stimulates a myriad of thoughts on the sailor.

Get ready for it, because it's popular to say. Everyone will be spouting their holier-than-thou opinions today. Are you ready? Here it comes. "Columbus is no hero!"

Mike Hudson

U-WIRE

From the rock on Farm Lane to section 2314 of Integrated studies in Arts and Humanities 201, who else wants to second-guess history?

Christopher Columbus is a target these days. He represents everything that's wrong with the United States and white Europeans. He also takes the blame for numerous other undeserved responsibilities. Not bad for a drunken sailor.

The argument goes that Americans have no place remembering Columbus as a hero because he was a bad man. This has gained widespread acceptance because Americans feel the need to apologize for themselves.

Let me say simply and plainly that Columbus was an incredibly important historical figure, and that gains him a place in history. Those who disagree give Columbus a little more credit than he is due. They blame him for destroying an entire culture, as though he had conjured an amazing plan of search and destroy for the continent.

History buffs spend an inordinate amount of time attempting to decipher the intentions of Columbus and creating theories on what would have happened if he were never born. Nothing concrete can be concluded, but this discussion has elevated Columbus beyond his life.

"How can you call a takeover a discovery?" These types of statements speak to this point.

Suddenly, Columbus gains the notoriety of the entire Spanish empire and its exploits in the Western Hemisphere. This man was hardly to blame for this, but it's easier to blame a dead guy.

For a moment, look into the past. Visualize Europe in the 1400s. People weren't living as long as they do now, disease erupted into plagues, food was not plentiful and life for the common man was not much to look at. Now, travel in your mind to the port cities. Picture the massive ships in port. Huge sails made of cloth and sterns formed of wood. Take a whiff. They stink of the sea and the men on board.

Say hello to the first "old salt" who happens by. Perhaps he is a well-dressed sailor, seasoned in naval technique by the Queen's fleet. But also consider that he might be a hardened criminal, as many of the crew on ships in those days were desperate men. Now, assemble a few hundred of these men. Settle them down and announce your voyage plans. "I'm sailing out to the middle of the Atlantic! C'mon!"

Oops. You let that one slip. Maybe you forgot that ships, up until 1492, did not travel more than a day's sail from land.

So, you blew it. Cue Christopher Columbus, a sailor from Portugal who had determined the trip to the Indies could be made by heading west instead of east. He got the royals in Spain to buy his idea by playing their need for trade routes against the monopoly on eastern routes by the Ottoman Empire. What a politician.

And you think that was impressive? Consider that he assembled a crew for three ships, which consisted mostly of pardoned criminals. Columbus managed to keep this crew heading west and with no deaths. It has been said that the academic world knew the earth was spherical, but sailors weren't a part of the most educated segment of society. He kept the voyage on track and battled the sea, but he made it.

How could you blow that off?

Columbus went from concept to success and the results changed the world forever. This voyage was heroic. Columbus' effort was heroic. But in his heart, he was still a sailor. He died penniless in jail. It's doubtful that Columbus knew the effects his voyages would have on history or the changes many societies would experience afterward.

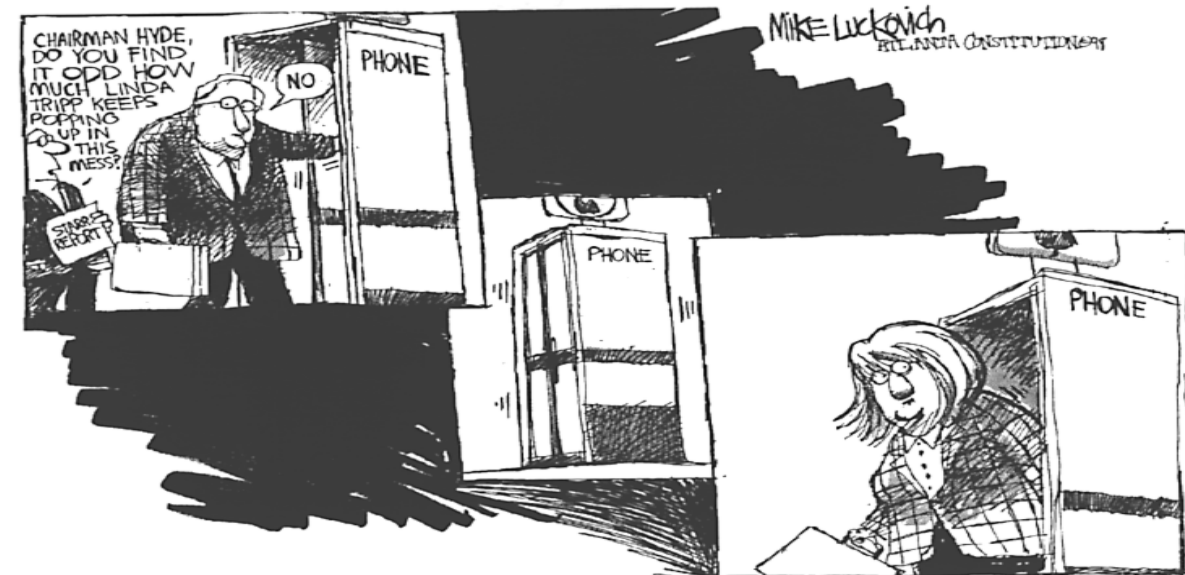
Of all the exploring nations, Spain was the most ruthless. It was mainly concerned with obtaining treasure. The English and French were more interested in working with the land, trading with the native peoples and developing settlements. But Columbus takes the heat from many for all of these nations' actions. He found it, and little else, so stop picking on him.

At its heart, the opposition to Columbus is based in a basic contention with the European invasion that came well after him. (Jamestown was attempted in 1607. The Pilgrims and Thanksgiving were in 1620.) Blaming Columbus for these occurrences is unfair. People are simply singling him out because Spain, France and England are just too foreign to people. These folks should take their argument straight to the source and attack American imperialism head-on. Don't blame Columbus.

Problems with America's history are interesting to discuss. The arrival and expansion of European settlements were legitimate as the Western Hemisphere was becoming a part of the world. But that's another column worth writing.

No one gains anything from tarnishing the heroics of Columbus by heaping unearned responsibilities on his shoulders. However, it's much easier to blame a lone man by painting a rock or complaining in class than it is to actually debate a controversy on its merits. And it's certainly easier than sailing a ship in the 1400s.

Mike Hudson writes for the State News, the student newspaper of Michigan State University.



Attack against gay student calls for societal change

The beating of a college student distresses his peers.

A crowd of 15,000 Wyoming Cowboys fans at War Memorial Stadium stood silently for 20 seconds Saturday afternoon as they sent their thoughts and prayers to the Poudre Valley Hospital bed where Matthew Shepard lay in a coma.

The Equality State is outraged. Though the state has made tremendous progress in the last few years, there are still a significant number of racists, sexists, homophobics who always seem to get their views

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broadcast on the nightly news. I was horrified to see a national news broadcast in which a drunk bigot commented something like, "that's what you get if you're gay in Wyoming." when asked about the beating.

In the Homecoming parade in Laramie, a huge group of people held signs and banners pledging their support for Matthew Shepard and his right to be who he is. I spoke with dozens of old friends and acquaintances over the weekend, and every one of them was sickened by the beating.

The very idea that anyone could consciously tie someone to a fence and beat them so savagely that their victim is found more than 12 hours later with dents up to two inches deep in his skull is appalling.

And if the attack was indeed precipitated only by the victim's being gay, this incident is horrifying.

Wyoming has long been characterized as a conservative state — possibly the most conservative in the nation.

But there is a huge difference between being conservative and being prejudiced.

Though some may disagree, it is acceptable to feel that homosexuality is unnatural or wrong. But if you discriminate against someone on this basis, it becomes prejudice. And if you attack someone because they are gay, you are a heartless, spineless, thoughtless bigot.

Wyoming is not the only state with problems in this regard. To some extent, every state in this nation has prejudiced populations.

Though the incident outside of Laramie may seem isolated, it is not.

This was a warning. Every person in this country must see this as a problem we all must face. Don't condemn Wyoming for failing to pass a hate crime law; blame human nature for feeling threatened by difference.

I don't believe we should start with more legislation, even though I think we need it; I believe we should start with each person in this country accepting everyone else as they are.

If the moment of silence at War Memorial Stadium meant anything to those in the stands, they had a chance to not only hope for Matthew Shepard to pull through, but also to pledge to never let this happen again.

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