

Struggle in the Hills

Walking around Clemson campus, it is apparent that white students outnumber non-white students drastically. The plantation that once existed where we study, sleep, and eat, has affected our current campus in so many different ways, but for non-white students, it may have had an even more dramatic impact. Clemson University, although not as extreme in racism as in the early 1800's, and is "working to morph into a more accepting space" remains, along with many other schools, a primarily white institute with prejudice and bigotry towards non-white students. The changes that have been sought have been done so not at the hand of University Administrations but of students. Students are the ones leading the way for change not only at Clemson, but at universities around the country. They write, call, protest and ask for more action than just words from their colleges. Clemson's recent additions to diversity and inclusion around campus have followed this trend and been student led.

Clemson University's history plays a strong role in the current atmosphere on campus. Student's advocate for a more thorough acknowledgment and retelling of the pain and anguish caused in the very house that thousands tour through every year. Clemson University was originally founded on the Calhoun family property in South Carolina. The property, Fort Hill, which still stands in the middle of Clemson Campus today and opens its doors all year long to tourists, was once a plantation, which over the mid to late 1800's shared three owners and a countless number of slaves. In 1889, South Carolina Governor, John Peter Richardson, accepted Thomas Clemson's bequest to found an agricultural school on the Calhoun family property, and in 1893, the school opened its doors for the first freshman class. In 1955, the college became

coed, but it wasn't until 1963, the year before it became a university, that Clemson desegregated to allow its first black student, Harvey Gantt. Clemson university was built on top of slavery, some of the most brutal racism in history, and it paved the road for a difficult adjustment to diversity on campus. One, that today, is still apparent among student demographics and culture among students.

In 2008, Clemson began releasing a yearly "Fact Sheet", an analysis stating the demographic makeup of Clemson in terms of size, age, race, gender, major etc. The sheet proves clearly that over the past 12 years, the university has increased its size by over 5,000 students, but the ratio of white to non-white has remained the same, with white students consistently being an upper 70% of the student population. The little room left for non-white students(6.8% black) have left many feeling out of place, uncomfortable and not at home on this majority white campus. This sense of unease and unacceptance has led to many complaints, petitions and protests on campus in the last decade. In 2016, student leaders organized a non-violent protest against university administration that would come to be known as the Sike's Sit-In. This Sit-In involved students sitting on the steps of the administration building for 9 days and nights, protesting against Clemson's history of racist behavior and current lack of resolves for the issues. In their protest the "students wanted the construction of a new building to provide a ""safe space for students from underrepresented groups,". They also demanded the names of Tillman Hall and Calhoun Honors College be changed", both buildings being named after prominent slavery supporters (Logue).

Although some progress was made in wake of the Sike's Sit-In, most requests were not adhered. Students were verbal that they felt as if the changes that were made, were done for

the public image of the university rather than for student needs. Student activist and Sike's Sit-In organizer, A.D. Carson believed that "the reason [Clemson Administration] responded this time is because it was an ongoing PR debacle from their side," he said. "I don't think it was for a genuine concern for the student body. If it was, then nobody would have had to sleep outside for nine days" (Logue). Although this was one of the most publicized and verbal student protests, this was not the first time in which students have felt that the university was not adjusting and listening to students needs.

As of March 2020, Clemson University's demographic is 76% white, with 6% black students. White students outnumber black students 12:1, and the unease felt by non-white students is reflected in the campus aura (Clemson 2019 Fact Sheet). The past decade has been plagued by protests, petitions and anger against the administrative staff for their values of diversity on campus. In late 2017, after white supremacy posters were plastered around campus, university administration did not comment for four days. Faculty and students began a petition for the university to denounce hate speech and racism on campus, the petition was posted online and got hundreds of signatures from faculty and students. When the university finally did respond they merely identified that they had seen the flyers and that the police were looking into it, leaving students and faculty disappointed. Clemson Administration did not address the main concern of the students and faculty, which was the overall racism being expressed in the flyers (2017 Silvarole). In this instance, student leadership and requests were not supported, leaving an anger and frustration towards administration not unique to Clemson University alone.

Clemson, although prominent with their extreme history of racism and southern geographic location, is not the only university struggling with diversity on campus. Other universities, other

southern universities especially, such as Duke and University of Virginia have had students engage in protests, debates and petitions surrounding their own campus diversity struggles. At the University of Virginia, non-white law students felt that a professor was making inappropriately racist comments in class, yet the white professor and other white students in the class said they couldn't find anything offensive in what he said. The university handled the issue by having the students meet with administration and a brief apology. No further action was taken to protect the students or this incident from happening in the future, even as the students were being denied publicly by the newspaper and social media around campus (Brown).

Other large universities, not even solely primarily white institutes, have also struggled with diversity and student discomfort on campus. A black student at a major state university was interviewed after incidents of racial harassment and violence on campus stating that "White students say 'that university is great; it's awesome', but I just want to get my education and get out of here. This is their place, not mine" (Brown). This sense of not belonging, of feeling out of place, uncomfortable, is a theme that many universities around the country, not just in the south, not just primarily white, are also finding the need to address. The students advocating for change at these universities are not only vocal in support of reform at their own colleges, but universally. This has led to certain touching instances of shared frustration and encouragement. During their Sikes Sit-In, Clemson students received advocacy and support from another sit-in, at Duke University. Duke students encouraged Clemson students to join, endorse and assist the sit-in and even sent a "love letter" addressing their admiration for Clemson students and joint frustration of university administration (Logue). Racism and

struggles with diversity on campus are not unique to Clemson University and as university administrations begin to slowly acknowledge this issue, students are bannin together to lead the change.

In the past few years, due to the increased awareness of the school after multiple Football National Championship wins, Clemson Administration has been forced to more publicly address issues of race on campus. Ellen Granberg, associate provost for faculty affairs, believes that “one option to deal with that attention is to shrink away from it, [I] take this as an opportunity to face it head on...We have a diversity of perspectives among students, faculty and staff, and we are all in the middle of an important board of trustee-led process that will help us tell the full history of Clemson University... One of the most powerful ways we can capitalize on these strengths is to encourage widespread discussion and interaction around these important issues” (Stanton and Granberg). Granberg, focusing on solutions through interaction and discussion, also leads Clemson Forward, a long-term guide that works to encourage “honest conversation and constructive dialogue” with students and faculty surrounding diversity on campus (Staton). This is just one of the many groups that have been established in the past few years surrounding diversity. Clemson students created a branch of the University Student Government to include a Senate Inclusion and Equity Committee, as well as a Council of Diversity affairs, with the goals to incorporate more diverse opinions and events on campus. One program they led in early March 2020, was titled ““Unearthing the history of Clemson” an event discussing significant historical events that make up Clemson university, with an emphasis on student movements and student advocacy” (Abdeladl). Although administration adjusts to more eyes watching by supporting these new initiatives, these steps

were founded solely on the efforts of university students and are paving the way to a new future of diversity and inclusion on campus.

Some of these student-led events are able to not only address the needs and issues of diversity on campus, but to understand the history of Clemson and where it comes into play with the current culture on campus. These events and advocations have slowly encouraged university administration as well, to follow student lead, "At the beginning of the year, [they] spoke out against President Trump's executive order restricting travel from seven Muslim-majority countries and held several information sessions to answer questions and provide guidance for affected students. Clemson also held its first Men of Color National Summit in April and created the Tiger Alliance." (Silvarole). These events are attempting to unify diversity and non-white students on campus, by creating groups to recognize and celebrate diversity. According to Clemson's annual "Fact Sheet", the white student population is at the lowest it has been in the last 12 years, at 76% current white student population, which although is still a large percentage is projecting downward. These organizations, events and statistics are not going to fix the issues surrounding diversity on campus overnight, but they are active steps towards a better campus for everyone. Student change, led the way but university administration is beginning to follow.

Clemson university was literally built on the foundations of bigotry, racism, and pain. The actions of the Calhoun and Clemson families left many families broken, and the plastage of their names around campus serve as a constant reminder of the horror caused. However, Clemson university administration has taken steps to acknowledge, confront and build over this pain, with new hope, understanding and acceptance for the community. Clemson University is

not the only college struggling to adapt to their students wants and needs, in attempting to make the campus a more welcoming and accepting environment. Universities around the country are struggling with the challenge of diversity and students are making their voices heard, whether on social media, letters to administration or protests. Clemson students are leading the way in change, understanding the needs of the university, asking for adaptation, and setting in place that plan for change. And although slow, university administration is beginning to follow. Despite struggling now, and in the past, Clemson's administration has verbalized their goals to adhere to student requests for the future and to make Clemson University truly a home for all. Clemson students, and university students all around the country have made it clear that they will settle only for real change. They are leading the way in this discussion and future for all campuses, now we must wait to see if university administrations walk, or run after them.

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