

OPINIONS

What happens behind closed doors: Calling on faculty and administration to dismantle violent structures

By *TYLER TSAY*

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Over and over, I hear it from the professors of color who mentor me. I hear about their mistreatment at the hands of their colleagues. Their scholarship ridiculed, their voices silenced, their bodies attacked. On a basic level, I am terrified, perhaps because I can see myself in their shoes suffering the same fate. But much more frequently, I am furious. The mentors I have found on this campus have, from day one, been some of the only people in this place I can call my family. They have supported me without question. They have devoted years to fight loudly for myself and other students of color despite a world that wants to erase us (and them).

Consider what I and many students are carrying on a daily basis. Consider what it is to be so vastly unable to help, to know every day that those who have loved you are in pain, that you are individually unable to stop it, impossibly reliant on an institution that does not hear you.

I have always wanted to love Williams. Not just because I worked tirelessly to get here, but also because of the people – the people I hope to call my friends and mentors for decades after we leave. They are the heart of the College, not the institution. When the institution tears down faculty of color, it destroys the very core of Williams.

But who is the institution? As students, it often feels like our only recourse is to criticize the administration. The president, the dean of faculty, the office of institutional diversity and equity; they roll off the tongue. They are easier to pinpoint as the source of the problem, rather than the dozens of unknown, negligent and/or abusive professors that are also the perpetrators of institutional violence. Of course, I am not excusing the administration. Their demands on faculty of color to continually prove their pain are, in a word, exhausting. They can better support the scholarship of faculty of color and grant additional staffing positions for ethnic studies programs (read: Native American studies, Asian American studies). They can more adequately address the detriments of living in Williamstown as a person of color.

And yet, these steps do not address the larger issue: Most often, prejudice is baseless. Prejudice is rooted in an implicit acceptance of the status quo that no amount of discussion or “free speech” debates will correct. Workshops, anti-bias training, committee reports, etc. are useless if the faculty have no real incentive to care about the wellbeing of the community. The permanence of tenure has allowed professors to feel secure that their discriminatory practices, no matter how egregious, will remain unpunished. Additionally, untenured faculty of color are discouraged from decrying acts of discrimination, fearful of workplace repercussions.

To put it more directly, there are tenured professors on this campus that will never respect the pain or work of faculty of color. These professors exist, whether they are visible to us or not. They sit through the teach-ins and perform their support, but away from our eyes, they act in another manner entirely.

For instance, think about the tenure review process, conducted fully in secret. Behind closed doors, do professors fight for the livelihoods of people of color? Or is it more likely they fight for a legacy of violence to be maintained?

The protective veil of anonymity has provided professors who view diversity as a forced imposition the perfect opportunity to lash out at faculty of color and jeopardize careers. Those that are deemed oppositional to a rigid vision of the College's values are expunged from the institution. Moreover, tenure review often hinges upon recognition from the canon (e.g. number of citational references), privileging the scholarship of white applicants over that of interdisciplinary, radical and critical race scholars. Through this process, tenured professors hand down negative judgments onto faculty of color without giving them the chance to defend themselves.

Students are largely excluded from the gears of academic processes. The labor of correcting the faults of the College falls instead on the faculty who uphold its structures, not the students or faculty of color that suffer by it.

In light of this, I write to those that are behind the closed doors.

To the administration: Stop with the discussion groups, workshops or committees. Accept the grievances of faculty of color without question. Fight for their best interests, not your own. Improve your hiring practices. Do not repeat old mistakes (see the Faculty-Staff Initiative of 2009 and Coalition Against Racist Education in the 1990s). Expand the "just causes" for firing tenured faculty to include discrimination and abuse. Reprimand and remove faculty that contribute to the problem. When there are cases of discrimination, support legal recourse instead of burying it.

To the faculty: Do not tout diversity to your students, then sit idly by during discussions of hiring, tenure, resource allocation, etc. Support more fellowships for faculty of color. Actively push your colleagues to diversify your curricula, rather than waiting for others to do it for you. Interrogate methodologies that exclude large sects of our community. Critique the tenure review process. Approach the scholarship of professorial applicants of color with deference, not derision.

And specifically to tenured professors, utilize your power. Stand against professors who seek to tarnish the name of the College. Report them. Hold them accountable, once and for all.

It is because I love Williams that I criticize the institution. I urge faculty that also love this place to remove those that seek to threaten it.

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