

# THE GREAT DEBATE

Elon News Network and SGA co-sponsor a town hall meeting on free speech

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Long before Washington Post columnist Kathleen Parker's speech, a growing trend of disconnection emerged at Elon. SGA Executive President senior Kyle Porro recognized this last spring after a heated debate regarding inclusivity towards marginalized students unexpectedly arose at a typical weekly SGA session. Since then, he and the senate have begun to host town hall meetings to encourage more dialogue with students. SGA acts as the bridge between students and the administration and Porro has adamantly said he wants more interaction between senate officers and their constituents—the people they represent.

To solve this problem, SGA and Elon News Network co-sponsored a conversation last Thursday about the issue of free speech. Porro and ENN Executive Director senior Tommy Hamzik had been planning the event for the month, and Hamzik said the timing with Parker's lecture and election season meshed perfectly. Hamzik said the only way to improve this situation was for students to openly discuss their concerns, and with the current events at Elon and in America, he knew there would be students eager to voice their stances.

"Our goal is to have a meaningful dialogue and enact change," Hamzik said. "Kathleen Parker coming has sparked more controversy and flare on our campus than I can ever remember. Everyone on both sides of the spectrum had varying opinions on her and her being here, but I'm happy we were able to have a good constructive dialogue."

## Discussion among peers

Reactions from the 83-person town hall meeting were mixed as numerous students chimed in during the dialogue. Much of the debate focused on Parker and her controversy, and from that spurred discussion about Elon and its social climate towards invited speakers and other issues. Discussed topics included if students should have an increased role in selecting speakers coming to Elon and if the school should step in if a speaker goes to far.



(From left to right) Senior Carlos Andino, junior Spencer Wagner and senior Nick Rhyne engage in a deep discussion during the SGA-ENN town hall Oct. 6.

Senior Stephanie Scro, one of the most spirited participants at the town hall, said she and a group of friends were shunned when they approached the administration to discuss a petition to ban Parker's appearance that was signed by more than 300 people. When Parker delivered Elon's annual Baird Pulitzer Prize lecture last Tuesday, Scro approached the microphone to challenge the columnist on her controversial views on sexual assault. But Scro was unable to finish her questions as Parker continually interrupted her. And with Elon President Leo Lambert present, Scro thought the most powerful man at the university would rush to defend a student.

She thought wrong.

"Leo Lambert was sitting in the audience, and he did not stand up and grab the microphone," Scro said. "He let that woman stand up there and call me 'boring' and belittle an entire community."

Because SGA and the administration work closely together, Porro said it was enlightening to hear directly from the students who feel slighted. SGA sessions are normally only attended by senators and now that students have an avenue to express

their feelings, Porro thinks real change will start.

"One of the greatest responsibilities of student government is that we are representing the students," Porro said. "It's our job to listen to what the students are saying, and now everyone has an open platform to tell us how we can best do that."

Hamzik echoed Porro's statement and said he will do everything in his power as head of student media to keep the conversation going.

"The biggest thing is that these dialogues we're having are important and we need to continue having them," Hamzik said. "We can't just post something on Facebook or just go to the event. It's about figuring out what the issues are that come from this."

## Administration taking notice

While Porro and SGA act as ambassadors, the administration has heard the students' complaints and made a physical effort to show their concerns in student affairs. Dean of Student Health and Wellness Jana Lynn Patterson and Dean of the School of Communications Paul

Parsons, both attended the town hall. Patterson scribbled notes in a notebook during the discourse so she could remember what was being said.

Dean of Students Smith Jackson wrote a letter to the editor in the *Elon News* to "reaffirm we hold student safety as our top priority and are unwavering in our efforts to prevent sexual violence and provide support for survivors," which was one of the criticisms against Parker by Elon students. Patterson said she was proud of the conversation that took place and some points made, such as if a controversial speaker can be harmful to the community were eye-opening. She said even though the administration is willing and able to act, it is powerful to see students proactively up a charge for change. Though this particular event will not fix all of the problems that have occurred, Patterson said these conversations are a great start.

"It was really impressive to see students be passionate but balanced," Patterson said. "It gives me hope — because my generation is not modeling this very well for your generation right now — that I saw folks wanting to listen and be open to the other side."

# Design Thinking encourages different approach to classes

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While many students at Elon University worry about which courses they'll choose during registration each semester, a new program proposes an alternative way to spend a semester. The Design Thinking Studio in Social Innovation gives students the opportunity to forgo the traditional four-class structure and spend the time collaborating with faculty and peers on a problem-solving mission to tackle social issues. Applications for the program are now open.

The program compares itself to a, "social change startup." While descriptions of the Design Thinking Studio — which pilots in spring 2017 — seem somewhat vague, a lot of the program's structure depends on how students shape it.

"It's a really unique and very

new experience," said Rebecca Pope-Ruark, the program's coordinator. "Students joining us for the pilot semester will be true trailblazers. There is nothing out there like our program, so in true design thinking fashion, we'll be learning as we go and seeing what emerges from the work."

Students will get to shape the experience for the next set of students and really help us grow the program."

Elon's program embraces a new style of education formalized at Stanford University. "Design thinking" is described by the program's website as a, "process that can be implemented by anyone to understand complex problems and develop possible solutions, all while deeply caring for the people who are impacted by the problems directly."

The goal of design thinking aims to teach students "soft skills," such as writing, presenting, analyzing data and thinking creative-

ly and collaboratively. The launch of Elon's Design Thinking Studio hopes to give students the opportunity to acquire these skills that are attractive to employers, but rarely directly taught in classrooms.

Junior Alyx Bean, a student participating in the Design Thinking Studio this spring, offered a unique perspective on the program.

"This immersive semester offers a very unique opportunity for students to integrate their academics into real life situations," Bean said. "It is an excellent way to develop proficiency in leadership and critical thinking skills."

The designers of the program see it as a valuable way to put the classroom benefits of a liberal arts education to work in more of a real-life environment.

"One of the most exciting aspects of the program, in my opinion, is that although students are still receiving academic credit, the program will likely feel almost nothing like taking tradi-

## DESIGN THINKING SEMESTER

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tional academic classes," Bean said. "And instead will offer students a glimpse into what it might be like to work in a career after graduation. It is certainly a unique approach for education that focuses more on collaborative and hands-on learning approaches."