

EXAMINING ELON'S SOCIAL CLIMATE: A THREE-PART SERIES



DIEGO PINEDA | Photo Editor

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TRES MCMICHAEL
SOPHOMORE



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KENNETH BROWN
SOPHOMORE



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“I'VE HAD A GREAT OVERALL ELON EXPERIENCE... I'VE LEARNED SO MUCH, BUT I THINK THERE'S A LOT OF THINGS THAT WE ARE WORKING ON AS WELL.

RACHEL HOBBS
JUNIOR

INCLUSIVITY from cover

McMichael views this challenge as an opportunity to offer something new to each group.

“Sometimes me being in a theater production or me being in the performing arts or me being in a fraternity can spark up a different idea or a different conversation in another space that wouldn't have existed had someone not been a part of either one of those groups,” he said.

Tony Crider, associate professor of physics, is working to find out how Elon can improve its social climate so more students can have diverse experiences like McMichael.

Though he is pleased with students' levels of engagement and involvement on campus, Crider is concerned some are closing themselves off from new experiences.

“We like to be part of small groups where you have something in common with the people there,” Crider said. “But that means that you've maybe shut people out from that group.

“Inclusivity is the opposite of that where you allow everyone in, but then you might not have that thing in common where you can make that a meaningful group in the first place.”

Examining inclusivity

Crider is co-chairing a 10-member team implementing a comprehensive social climate task force report released in April 2016.

The report provides 42 recommendations on a host of topics ranging from improving students' college transitions to reviewing and revising university policies. Conclusions were

drawn based on data from a combination of group interviews, campus surveys, town hall forums, campus ecology experiences and idea walls.

Though a substantial portion of data was not available in the report itself, much information was provided through the release of executive summaries in the student and faculty/staff surveys.

“We were certainly fairly transparent in putting that data out there and letting people know where this came from,” said Jon Dooley, assistant vice president for student life and co-chair of the Presidential Task Force on Social Climate and Out-of-Class Engagement.

Themes of inclusivity and belonging consistently emerged in the report.

Of the nearly 900 student respondents, 17 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed that they belonged at Elon and 23 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed that the social climate was very welcoming to them. More than a third of respondents said they were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with campus climate related to diversity.

The results are not necessarily reflective of the entire student population because they were gathered through a convenience sample — all undergraduate students were invited by email to take a voluntary survey. Still, it is clear many students believe Elon lacks diversity and is not inclusive to all.

Lack of belonging and unity the real issue

Diversity is about much more than demographic trends and student backgrounds. It is also about the shared experiences of the community as a whole. This is the true

4 PERCENT

OF STUDENTS DID NOT CONSIDER THEMSELVES TO BE AN ACTIVE GROUP MEMBER - MEANING THEY DID NOT PARTICIPATE IN AN ORGANIZATION AT LEAST ONCE A MONTH.

root of the problem Elon is facing.

How can more students come together? How can siloed groups become unified? How do you encourage students such as McMichael, who want to break out of the boxes people have tried to confine them into? These are the questions the university is asking, and the questions are largely unanswered.

Sophomore Kenneth Brown benefited from Elon's commitment to promoting diversity and is very much appreciative of the opportunities he has earned, yet one interaction reveals much about his experience. Asked if he feels he belongs, a lengthy pause ensues.

“Do I belong here?” he said, looking up at the ceiling in search of an answer.

“Do I belong here?” he said, still unsure of how to respond.

“I don't know just yet,” he said.

“I just haven't had a moment where like, ‘Wow, I'm here and I feel like this is for me.’ I feel like I've had small outbursts, but not like an epiphany where like, ‘Wow, I'm here and I can fit in here,’” Brown said.

Brown is an involved student on campus. He can often be seen watching Elon athletic events or hanging out at the Center for Race, Ethnicity and Diversity Education (CREDE).

He also serves as sophomore class president in the SGA and is involved in Black Student Union. When he is not participating in activities or walking to and from events, he can typically be seen talking with his fellow students.

“You've just got to be nice to people,” he said. “Whether it's saying hi or saying a kind word, for me, that's what my parents taught me growing up. Treat others the way you want to be treated, smile, say please and thank you and be nice. You know, all

you've got to do is say hi to people.”

Brown being unsure about whether he belongs at Elon could come as a surprise to people and reflect the magnitude of the problem the university is facing in fostering an inclusive climate.

“Inclusivity, to me, is the ability to be able to have tough conversations, talk to people who are different than you, but at the end of the day, you still have their back because you're a Phoenix, I'm a Phoenix, we all are Phoenix,” Brown said.

Elon students are mostly white, female or come from North Carolina or northeastern states. Elon has heightened its efforts in the past several years to recruit people of more diverse backgrounds.

Brooke Barnett, associate provost for inclusive community, is in her 16th year at Elon and said she has seen the university's representational diversity increase within that period of time in terms of the number of non-Christian students, students of color and first-generation students.

Earlier this academic year, Greg Zaiser, vice president of enrollment, called the Class of 2020 the “largest and most diverse in Elon history.”

Even so, the university reports an ethnic diversity of 18 percent. Six percent of students are black and 5 percent are Hispanic, according to The College Board.

Brown represents Elon's relatively small black population. A highly involved and motivated student in high school, he was named an Odyssey Scholar and given a scholarship, in part, because of his ability to overcome adversity growing up in a household with a low socioeconomic status.

“Elon has taken major steps to ensure that not only students who are minorities on this campus feel