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EDITOR'S PICK

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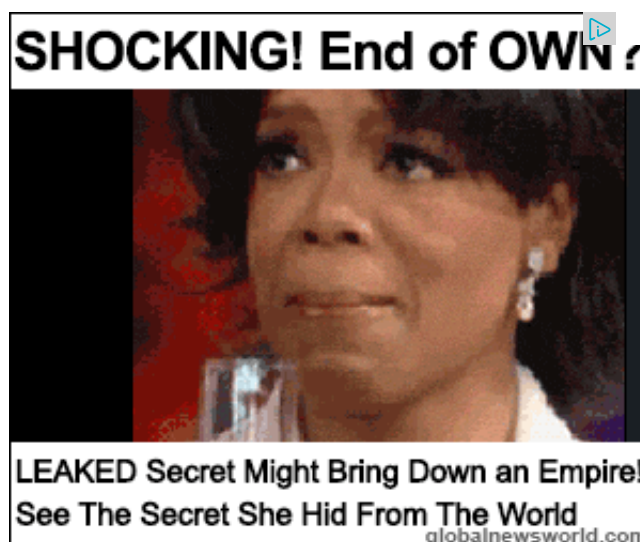
UNC racial inclusion town hall fires emotions of participants

Katie Jansen Updated 1 hr ago

CHAPEL HILL — A town hall meeting on race and inclusion at UNC-Chapel Hill Thursday night brought heated emotions as students approached the microphone to share their experiences and potential solutions to racial problems on campus.

Frustration was evident from the beginning, as what was scheduled as a two-hour discussion quickly transformed to a 20-minute speech from a group of students issuing demands for change.

As Clarence Page, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist chosen to facilitate the discussion, took the stage at Memorial Hall, he was interrupted by call-and-response chants of, "Whose university? Our university."



The demonstrators read not only their demands, but also demands from students of color at The University of Missouri, the University of Capetown and UNC's Black Student Movement of 1968.

When they were finished, most of the students in that group walked out despite Page's invitation for them to stay. They announced they were holding a press conference outside of the building.

But as the night wore on and speakers approached the microphone in a more orderly fashion, many topics were broached — the painful impact of microaggressions, the call to recognize students without full legal status as eligible for in-state tuition, the need for the university to retire Columbus Day in favor of Indigenous Peoples Day, biases toward student athletes, especially female student athletes.

Many of the speakers, who were primarily undergraduate and graduate students, expressed their exhaustion with continuing to talk about the same subjects and said they'd rather see action.

"Symbolic gatherings in the name of progress assure nothing more than the continuation of the status quo," one man said.

A freshman agreed with that sentiment.

"When I came to this town hall meeting, I was hoping to hear some ideas from the faculty," he said. "If I wanted to talk about race and just talk about it, I could do that in my first-year seminar."

Some faculty did speak, such as Jennifer Ho, who teaches a class called Mixed-Race America. She encouraged students to take classes about race that are available at UNC.

Students expressed varying attitudes toward faculty, administrators and the Board of Trustees.

"You are listening, but you are not hearing us," one woman said. "Don't call us angry, and don't call us rebels because you're the ones who produced it."

But others thanked Chancellor Carol Folt and the faculty for their support of students and their work on the issues.



“It kind of frustrates me that there are students standing up to speak, but they walk out,” one student said. He added that it’s clear that the faculty and administration cares, but have limited power. To make true change, students must educate themselves on power structures in a public institution, he said.

Folt, who recently drew criticism for allowing a Confederate rally to take place on campus, also addressed the nature of a public institution. The university’s spaces are public and open to individuals or groups to gather and speak, she said, but ensuring the safety of students during such demonstrations is her priority.

Thursday’s town hall was not a direct reaction to strained race relations nationally, especially at the University of Missouri, Folt said. The discussion was a part of Carolina Conversations, an initiative started last year.

Folt said the timing of the discussion was important because she wants students to know that faculty and administrators are listening. She said university leaders will meet immediately to identify key areas that can be addressed right away.

“The frustration, I hear it loud and clear, that people want action,” she told the audience. “But I also did hear lots of actions that I may not have heard before.”

Folt said officials need to do better at communicating what steps they are taking to address race relations on campus. Although she could make no specific promises Thursday, she said, she assured students work would continue.

"I believe we will make progress that people can see," she said. "I hope this is the start of things that we can do together."



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Clarence Page

Katie Jansen

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