

Analyzing the Renaming of Calhoun College at Yale University

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Introduction

Following a year of campus-wide debate concerning the possible renaming of the Calhoun residential college at Yale University, on June 13, 2016, a dining hall dishwasher named Corey Manafee took matters into his own hands and smashed a stained glass window in the Calhoun dining hall which depicted African American slaves picking cotton in the fields. Manafee's act of defiance resulted in his termination and arrest while simultaneously garnering national attention to the issue of slavery's legacy and America's institutions of higher education.

In his statement to the New Haven Independent, Manafee said he was tired of looking at the racist, very degrading image. Bellany's actions acted as a flash point in an already contentious debate over the racially charged symbolism of the college, named for slavery advocate and former U.S. Vice-President John C. Calhoun. "The debate gathered steam last summer with a petition demanding a name change, and has since grown to encompass the slavery-themed paintings, artifacts, and stained-glass tiles displayed in the college." (Brighenti, Xu & Yaffe-Bellany, 2016)

Each of the residential colleges on Yale's campus is named for someone significant in Yale's history. Calhoun College was named in honor of John C. Calhoun, an 1804 graduate of Yale College and an intellectual forefather of the Confederacy who famously defended slavery as a "positive good." (Becker, 2016) The contentious debate over the renaming of Calhoun College which lasted over two years took many twists and turns before it was finally resolved. In April 2016, President Salovey announced that the university would in fact be retaining the Calhoun name despite the protests by students and faculty. The playing out of this entire drama perfectly illustrates the top-down management style and power dynamic that is present on most,

if not all, American universities. The reins of power are held tightly by the president and the administration.

While Yale prides itself on being a liberal institution that promotes and is a champion of free expression and free exchange of ideas, the university responded initially to this latest challenge to its institutions and authority as most universities would by putting its foot down, in effect saying that although the majority of the student body and faculty were united in calling for a name change, we [the administration] shall not be moved.

According to the Dimensional view of power, President Salovey was exercising his positional power as head of the university. The university also was exercising coercive power first of all by punishing the dining hall worker who dared to destroy a university artifact, a controversial one, nevertheless a university artifact. The worker was arrested, fired and removed from all ties to the university. This sent a not-subtle message to the student and faculty protestors to not overstep their bounds or they too would be punished.

In the wake of Manafee's arrest, the student protests continued and intensified, now with a human figure to rally around. Not wishing to come across as a dictator, President Salovey agreed to appoint a commission to investigate the issue of a possible renaming of Calhoun College. According to relational leadership models, true leadership is socially constructed through which emergent coordination (evolving social order) and change (new values, attitudes, approaches, behaviors and ideologies) are constructed and produced. (Uhl-Bien, 2006) President Salovey, in his statements to the university community now attempted to take a neutral stance in the debate deferring all decision making regarding the issue pending the findings of the commission.

“Our residential colleges at Yale, into which you are being inducted this weekend, constitute one of our most cherished means of fostering an unusually close sense of community among undergraduates.... Alumni and faculty have written to me and to Dean Holloway from varying perspectives, some at length and with considerable force. And inevitably we found ourselves wondering, and not for the first time, how best to address the undeniable challenges associated with the fact that Calhoun’s name graces a residential community in Yale College, an institution where, above all, we prize both the spirit and reality of full inclusion.” (Salovey, 2015)

Please note in this 2015 address to the incoming freshman class that President Salovey begins by encouraging the incoming freshmen to identify as Yalies even citing the “close sense of community among undergraduates”. He is engaging in institutional group socialization which is a normal process that all new students undergo in order to get them to identify with the university and its values. However, in this case, there is the unspoken desire of the President to win students over to his way of thinking. He then goes on to position himself and the administration as the protectors and encouragers of academic freedom. According to the relational leadership models, effective leadership only happens with the willing consent and participation of those being governed, and to the extent that they see you as a legitimate leader.

Criticism from faculty members of the original decision to keep the Calhoun name is what led Mr. Salovey to establish a commission to study the issue. It was not the voice of the student body in isolation that caused a reconsideration. In the end, the commission appointed by the President came back with a recommendation that Calhoun should in fact be renamed. Following the commission’s recommendation, many names were bantered about including the name of Ben Franklin. Ultimately, the administration decided to rename the college after Grace

Murray Hopper, a trailblazing computer scientist and Navy rear admiral who received a master's degree and a doctorate from Yale. Though the president, Peter Salovey, said that he was still "concerned about erasing history," he said that "these are exceptional circumstances." He also added, "I made this decision because I think it is the right thing to do on principle." (Remnick, 2017)

It is not every day that a student protest is successful in reversing a university's policy. However, in this case, with the backing of many faculty members, the students' will prevailed in the end. The triumph for the students illustrates the power of networks. The debate over the renaming of Calhoun College became a nationwide debate engulfing alumni across the country in addition to faculty members. The insertion of a dining hall worker, someone who normally would have no power or influence, into the mix simply served to expose and magnify any strong arm tactics of the university. In addition to the historic discussion of the appropriateness of having a college named for an unapologetic white nationalist and slaveholder, now you had a blue-collar, low-level, African American worker being bullied by the big Yale Corporation. The optics certainly did not look good for the university which ultimately wound up offering Mr. Bellany back his job.

Another important factor in the student victory was the inclusion of alumni, including many prominent and powerful African American alumni, in the debate. This meant that the university could not just gloss over student demands. Alumni are important stakeholders to any university. Their financial contributions are instrumental in keeping these institutions in operation.

This entire situation illustrates the power of networks. To the students' credit, they were able to secure the support of faculty, alumni, the media and the general public in this very public

debate. Whenever a disadvantaged or disempowered population engages in protest, it does so with a certain amount of risk involved. Each and every one of the students involved in the protest in the end desires to graduate from the institution with a Yale degree. Although it would be egregious, the university can threaten students through use of its bureaucratic power. While the President did not get his way on this issue, he can at least rest in the fact that academic freedom of expression was protected. His leadership and position were preserved, and he can always boast that he effectively presided over a very important and transformational period in Yale's history.

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