

Introduction: A History of Race at Whitworth University

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Race and race relations have always comprised an important part of Whitworth's history. That assertion might surprise most readers. At first glance, the institution appears to be an unlikely place for a significant history of race relations. The university's student population, faculty, staff, and administration have been overwhelmingly white during its 130-plus years of existence. Spokane, Washington, Whitworth's home since 1914, also is known for its unusually high percentage of white residents. The college resides some seven miles north of the city in a virtually all-white neighborhood.

However, upon closer examination, Whitworth's history is surprisingly intertwined with issues related to race. While few in relative numbers, students of color have attended Whitworth since very early in the college's history. But beyond simply the presence of diverse individuals, issues related to the broader narrative of America's civil rights movement, racism, white privilege, and ideas regarding diversity, equity and inclusion have long been part of Whitworth's story.

This history is intended to capture many of the stories of students of color, but it is also intended to document and analyze the historical trajectory of the many ways in which Whitworth administrators, faculty, staff, and students have expressed attitudes and established practices regarding matters of race. This overview is an attempt to document ways in which admissions policies, employment patterns, student life practices, and individual students—both students of color and white students have shaped Whitworth’s cultural norms and behaviors around race.

Not unexpectedly, race relations have changed considerably over the past 130 years at Whitworth. In 2023, the university is a much more racially diverse community than at any time in its history. Currently, slightly over 32 percent of Whitworth’s student body identify as persons of color. The board of trustees, administrators, faculty, student life personnel, and the student body have articulated commitments to cultivating a more racially diverse campus. That commitment to racial diversity is rooted in decisions that have largely been made since the middle 1960s. The current focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion has manifested itself in a particular emphasis on trying to ensure that all students who come to Whitworth feel like they “belong” at Whitworth. The curriculum in 2023 provides more opportunities than ever for all students to understand factors that perpetuate racism, as well as the history and current state of race relations in the United States.

Yet, considerable challenges and obstacles remain for many students of color at Whitworth. Some of these challenges are relatively new, but many of them have existed since the earliest years of Whitworth’s history. While not as frequent as once was the case, students of color still experience stereotyping and other offenses, often in the form of microaggressions. Among the most persistent challenges for the vast majority of students of color is the necessity of

navigating the tension between adapting and assimilating into a predominantly white culture, while simultaneously cultivating a sense of pride and appreciation for one's racial identity.

Whitworth's history of race relations is comprised of a long arc that consists of roughly three eras. For the first 75 years in the college's history, racial tension was rarely perceived to be an issue by Whitworth administrators and faculty. College personnel expected all students of color to assimilate into the existing campus culture, a culture shaped largely by Western values and accented by white Presbyterian and evangelical norms. The most dramatic occurrence of this expectation during those first 75 years took place in World War II when President Frank Warren invited as many as twenty Japanese Americans who had been interned early in the war to enroll at Whitworth. These students expressed immense gratitude for being allowed to attend Whitworth. They joined in with campus social groups and athletic teams and suppressed any impulse to express their Japanese identity or culture. They wanted to be seen as patriotic Americans during time of war. They wanted to fit into Whitworth and wider white American culture.

For the handful of Black students who attended Whitworth during its first seventy-five years, Whitworth, like virtually all predominantly white institutions in the first half of the 20th century, offered next to nothing that signaled acknowledgement of the African American experience beyond slavery and the abolition movement. There were no Black student organizations or other affinity groups. Whitworth did have a white faculty member or two who showed special interest in the few African American students enrolled, but for the most part, Black students were simply expected to fit into white Anglo-Saxon Protestant cultural norms. If any of the handful of students of color prior to the mid-'60s questioned this approach to race relations, they kept it to themselves.

However, by the mid-'60s, the impact of the Civil Rights movement began to influence Whitworth administrators, faculty, and students generally, regardless of their racial identity. The most significant change occurred when a decision was made to try to recruit more African American students for the fall of 1968. With that decision, Whitworth entered into its second era of race relations. Prior to that fall, Whitworth could claim only five African Americans in its student body, but with more focused recruiting efforts, twenty-three Black students registered for classes. Even more significant was the fact that many of these students came from Harlem, New York as well as the central area in Seattle. Many of these students had been deeply influenced not only by Martin Luther King Jr., but by Malcolm X and the emerging Black Power Movement of the late '60s. Far from wanting simply to "fit in," most of these students expressed their desire to celebrate their Black culture and nurture their Black identity. From that point on, Whitworth administrators, staff, faculty, and students made efforts first to understand and then to respond to the reality that increasing numbers of students of color were not comfortable with Whitworth's ethos or curriculum.

This project documents in some detail the decisions that were made during this era to diversify the campus, the struggles that many students of color experienced at Whitworth, and difficulties that faculty and staff encountered in developing a more diverse curriculum and Student Life program. From the formation of the Black Student Union to initial efforts to establish a Black Studies program, to protests on campus and arrests of students off campus, this period is critically important to understand.

During this second era which extended from roughly the 1970s to 2000, race relations at Whitworth were marked by efforts to develop programs and policies intended to affirm the importance of diversity on campus. International students assumed a greater role beginning in

the 1980s and 1990s. Increasing numbers of faculty advocated for a curriculum that not only featured more exposure to the history of racism and its ongoing impact on American society, but also more sophisticated teaching strategies designed to help students of color flourish in the classroom. The Student Life division of the college/university directed much more attention to challenges that students of color faced while living on campus. However, retention of non-white students was disappointing; turnover among the few faculty and staff of color was common, and many students of color still found Whitworth lacking.

In response to the disappointing results, at the beginning of the 2000s, Whitworth entered into a third era which extends to the present. Under President Bill Robinson, Whitworth embarked on a new partnership with the Northwest Leadership Foundation and Tim Herron called Act Six. With Herron's assistance, Whitworth recruited a group of ten first generation applicants, primarily students of color from Tacoma and later from Spokane to come to Whitworth and provide campus leadership. This program proved successful and served as a foundation for additional efforts to diversify the student body, curriculum, and student life programming.

From the early 2000s until the present, under presidents Robinson, Beck Taylor, and Scott McQuilkin, Whitworth has continued to elevate the importance of diversity. Yet, even in the last twenty years, the story remains complex. On the one hand, many students of color have expressed satisfaction with their experience at Whitworth. However, as incidents on and off campus have underscored the ongoing existence of racism in American society in general and in the Pacific Northwest specifically, many students of color have expressed frustration with their experience at Whitworth.

I have chosen to treat Whitworth's history chronologically, primarily because it is important to see the long arc of this history. Colleges and universities are particularly vulnerable to a short-term perspective. The vast majority of students attend for at most four or five years. Faculty, staff, and administrators are generally here for longer periods, but they too are often so focused on the present that it is difficult to see what they are doing in larger context.

The arc of Whitworth's history is both sobering and inspiring. Mostly people at all levels have been well intended, whether that is the result of their Christian worldview, or simply out of a general desire to be welcoming and accepting. Whitworth's history is filled with stories of students of color who have gone on to spectacular careers. But it is sobering, still, to realize how much ignorance of the experience of people of color has manifested itself both in and out of the classroom. It is sobering to acknowledge, that even among highly educated and well-intentioned people, many cultural assumptions have seemed to reflect elements of white supremacy.

Nevertheless, it is not insignificant that Whitworth's board, administrators, faculty, and staff have been persistent in believing that diversity in our student body is a good thing. More than thirty years ago, Whitworth inserted into its mission statement the value of diversity. Now seems to be a good moment to try to describe and analyze the arc of this institution's history. Surely, there will be many who may criticize this study, either out of disagreement or because of oversights, but I have hope this will be seen as an effort to help Whitworth be transparent about its past regarding one of the most difficult social issues in all of American history. In many ways, race remains a vexing issue for Whitworth. Hopefully, this study will enhance understanding of why this has been the case. In whatever ways Whitworth proceeds into the future, fuller recognition of its past seems an essential foundation.

