

## Foreword

In this simultaneously moving and distressing study, Professor of History Emeritus Dale E. Soden surveys Whitworth University's track record with regard to diversity, equity, and inclusion. He demonstrates that while this vogue catchphrase has transformed the cultural landscape of higher education over the past decade, the university at which he spent most of his professional career has been about this work with varying degrees of success for nearly all of its close to one hundred-and-thirty-five-year existence. Dr. Soden, the award-winning author of books and articles on religious life in the Pacific Northwest and official historian of the university for the better part of four decades, has combed the remaining records, supplementing them with oral interviews of surviving principals to provide, to my knowledge, the most detailed longitudinal account of racial matters at any institution of higher learning in the West.<sup>1</sup> His significant accomplishment is all the more noteworthy because of its thoughtful analysis of the convergence between the national issues of race, American social culture, higher education and Whitworth's Reformed and Evangelical Christian mission.

Whitworth College, founded in 1890 by missionary and educator George Frederick Whitworth, initially shared the vision of other nineteenth century educational institutions in the United States—that White Anglo-Saxon Protestant values and achievements embodied the apex of human achievement and should be admired and passed on unquestioned to the younger generation. Unlike many of its contemporaries, however, which barred members of minority racial and ethnic groups from matriculating, the small college on Puget Sound admitted students

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<sup>1</sup>Brody Gasper and Sydney Freeman, Jr. have recently authored a somewhat similar study at a major Pacific Northwest state university (*The Seminal History and Prospective Future of Blacks at the University of Idaho*, 2023), but as the title suggests, its purview is limited to the experience of African Americans.

who did not fit the WASP profile from its opening years. Unfortunately, for much of Whitworth's history neither its progressive admissions policy nor its deeply embedded Christian ethos could dislodge its philosophical mooring to Western white supremacy norms. Those from underrepresented groups, like Indigenous males on the Tacoma campus in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and Japanese-Americans during World War Two in Spokane (the college's home since 1914) felt pressure to adapt to those norms. Soden discovered that whether subtle or overt, the compulsion to conform inhibited students of color from cultivating an authentic self-identity and resulted in patterns of constricted behavior.

It was not until the dawn of the modern civil rights era in the 1950s that the underlying Eurocentric cultural assumptions of the nation, and by extension, Whitworth College came under increasing scrutiny by those who did not (and could not) meet those criteria, led by the institution's African-American student population. From the mid-1960s racial matters moved closer to center stage at Whitworth as campus leaders began to rethink recruitment policies in light of its religious mission. But significant reforms did not proceed without volatile and painful confrontations. Several well-intentioned, innovative policies failed initially because they were rife with unforeseen negative consequences as Soden's careful dissection of some of them so clearly illustrate. Yet, failure often signals movement in a positive direction and the author, aware of the missteps made over the decades, finds merit in the initiatives taken.

While the preponderance of evidence is gleaned from the experience of Whitworth's African-American student population, as the narrative moves from the late twentieth century into the twenty-first, the voices of Indigenous, Latinx, and Asian/Pacific Islander Whitworthians join those of their Black contemporaries to demonstrate the almost universal effects of unperceived and therefore unexamined racialized narratives. Only as the institution and its people have been

willing to converse across those narratives—at significant risk to all sides—has true progress, however incremental, been made.

Professor Soden threads the proverbial needle with this probing, somber look at how one church-related university campus has evolved (albeit in fits and starts) from its unquestioned initial adherence to white European conventions to expose and interrogate them more fully and honestly over the last six decades. His concluding action points should serve as a firm reminder that, as with most other problematic aspects of American life, the awareness of and subsequent rooting out of systemic, institutional racism has been and will continue to be an arduous process, fraught with agonizing vulnerability for all those engaged in the quest for true equity and inclusion. And though Whitworth, a university since 2007 has farther yet to go, Soden’s analysis of where it has been provides valuable benchmarks against which to measure future success.

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