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Teaching an Honors Seminar on #BlackLivesMatter in East Texas

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In spring 2017, Ervin Malakaj (Assistant Professor of German) and Jeffrey L. Littlejohn (Professor of History) led a Difficult Dialogues seminar on #BlackLivesMatter for the Sam Houston State University (SHSU) Honors College. The seminar considered the complex historical, economic, and cultural forces that produced the movement along with the various responses to it. By mid-semester, however, the course had become a target for fake news blogs and websites. Critics of the #BlackLivesMatter movement attempted to portray the course as a propagandistic endeavor intended to force a left-wing ideology upon unwilling students who had reluctantly enrolled in the course in order to receive scholarship money from taxpayer funds. Media responses mischaracterized the institutional parameters governing the course as well as the course aims. Consequently, Malakaj (as the instructor of record), the SHSU Honors College, and university administrators were all contacted by various interest groups angered by the news. Donors threatened to withdraw donations to the university. Students who had been accepted for admission

and had declared that they would matriculate the following fall threatened to withdraw their initial intent to attend the university. At the same time, however, the course instructors and the university received a great deal of support.

We provide here an outline of the institutional parameters within which the course was offered, the pedagogical aims and content of the course, and an examination of the public and university response to the fake news story. Our goal is to offer a case study that will benefit honors colleges considering similar course programs as well as those having dealt with or anticipating negative public responses to sensitive programming.

HONORS INITIATIVES AT SHSU

The SHSU Honors College serves nearly 800 high-achieving and academically talented students, who come from a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds. Nearly 40% are first-generation college students, and roughly 41% come from generally underrepresented populations. Its curriculum and requirements are standard: in addition to maintaining an institutional GPA of 3.25 and regularly participating in advisement, honors students are required to take eighteen hours of honors-only courses and six hours of upper-level seminars. Students are also required to participate in community service activities and to attend honors scholarly, social, and cultural events. Finally, students have the option to graduate with Highest Honors by completing an honors thesis and are strongly encouraged to participate in the annual Undergraduate Research Symposium. Thus, this program both adheres to the National Collegiate Honors Council's standards for an honors college and fulfills the SHSU Honors College's mission "to offer a uniquely broad and intellectually stimulating academic, cultural, and social experience that emphasizes undergraduate research and encourages personal and professional growth" ("Elliott T. Bowers Honors College at Sam Houston State University").

At the core of the honors college's mission and underlying all its initiatives is the desire to shape its students into active learners, critical thinkers, and engaged citizens. To these ends, select faculty, known for outstanding instruction and research, teach the honors courses and seminars. These courses privilege inquiry-based active learning over information-based passive learning. The honors college especially promotes critical, independent thinking and active learning in its interdisciplinary seminars. Team-taught by a number of faculty from different fields of study, the seminars target a specific political, cultural, scientific, or literary topic. The interdisciplinary nature of such seminars is, as Edward O. Wilson has explained, the most promising path to scientific

advancement, intellectual adventure, and human awareness. Ultimately, the SHSU Honors College strives to help its students become more articulate in expressing their ideas and opinions, more aware and respectful of the ideas of others, and more informed, involved members of their communities.

In the seminars, the SHSU Honors College can work outside the constraints of traditional departments. For example, all faculty members are required to have a certain number of classroom hours each semester (FTE hours) at SHSU; this makes team-teaching in most departments difficult because it complicates how the FTE hours are divided. Additionally, as most departments must be primarily concerned with covering classes required for their programs rather than providing electives, little room often remains for exploring topics that are not part of a department's core. Likewise, adding or changing courses is a process that generally must pass through departmental committees for approval and also be approved at the university level if substantial changes or novel classes are proposed. This process can take multiple semesters, sometimes years, to complete. The honors college has the advantage, though, of being able to compensate faculty for their time outside of the normal FTE system and so can facilitate team-taught classes that are virtually impossible outside of the college.

HONORS SEMINARS AT SHSU

Faculty in the honors college launched the Difficult Dialogues seminar series in the fall of 2009. Modeled after a Ford Foundation initiative of the same name, the Dialogue seminars address sensitive subjects in a discussion format that is meant to foster open scholarly inquiry and intellectual rigor. Seminars engage students in constructive discussions of controversial content, and instructors encourage students to move beyond their preconceived ideological views to confront competing views and arguments.

Recently, the Pew Research Center has shown that our country is becoming increasingly partisan and entrenched in "red vs. blue" thinking ("Partisanship"). The Dialogues seminar series hopes to help close this gap. Never intending to force a student to change his or her mind on a topic, the seminars aim to explore complex, culture-war-related issues from multiple vantage points, using faculty experts from various disciplines. The courses use a seminar format with small class size, focus on discussion, class research projects, group work, and self-exploration. While the exact workings of any class vary by topic and faculty, participating faculty are encouraged to measure student engagement in innovative ways.

While SHSU honors students must take two seminars to graduate with honors, they select which ones they take (among usually six to eight offered per semester). Students' motivation for taking one seminar over another is determined by their interest in the topics. The focus of many of the seminars changes from semester to semester; indeed, the course descriptions intentionally allow for flexibility in topic and approach so that classes can focus on issues currently in the news. For example, in the semester immediately following the Blue Bell ice cream recall of 2015 (a pretty big deal here in Texas!), the honors college ran a class titled "The Politics of Food."

Other former Dialogues seminar topics have included "Science and Religion," "Environmentalism," "Race and Racism," "Medical Ethics," "Animal Rights," and "Sex." These are all complex topics that can be effectively examined in a seminar format with multiple faculty representing various specialties and viewpoints. The Dialogues seminars are clearly named so that the students are aware of the topics being taught. Honors students know that Dialogues seminars tackle difficult, often controversial topics and that their viewpoints will be challenged at some point, regardless of their position on a given topic. Everyone, faculty included, will be a little uncomfortable once in a while. The honors college sees it as its responsibility to offer these courses in view of its innovative institutional capacity to do so. The goals are to make sure students learn to evaluate their positions critically and to facilitate a deeper understanding of those who do not hold their views.

In the fall of 2016, the Black Lives Matter movement was a frequent topic in the mainstream news and on social media. Students were talking about the movement, but no one seemed to have a clear understanding of it. Moreover, few news outlets sufficiently accounted for the complexity of the movement, its aims, its place in the Black cultural history of the United States and beyond, and the structural inequality it protested. In short, it was the perfect topic for a Dialogues seminar. The course focus was timely, complex, interdisciplinary, broadly relevant to several majors, politically divisive, and relevant to the age demographic for most of our students. During a meeting in the early spring of 2016, Malakaj and Patrick Lewis (Associate Dean of the Honors College and Professor of Biological Sciences) decided that Black Lives Matter would be the topic for one Dialogues seminar in the spring 2017 semester.

BACKGROUND AND CONTENT OF BLM SEMINAR

The shooting of Michael Brown, an 18-year-old Black man, by Darren Wilson, a white police officer, in Ferguson, Missouri, on August 9, 2014,

galvanized local, national, and international protests against police brutality. Following Brown's death, leading Black intellectuals situated the shooting within the broader histories of structural racism in the United States. Angela Y. Davis in *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of a Movement* (2016) and Ta-Nehisi Coates in *Between the World and Me* (2015), for instance, reanimated old critiques of power systems rooted in prejudice. In the meantime, the founders of the #BlackLivesMatter movement (BLM)—Patrisse Cullors, Opal Tometi, and Alicia Garza—expanded an already substantial international following using various social media outlets during the outrage following Ferguson. According to the official website, BLM materialized in 2013, following the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the shooting of Trayvon Martin, and developed local chapters across North America in order “to build connections between Black people and our allies to fight anti-Black racism, to spark dialogue among Black people, and to facilitate the types of connections necessary to encourage social action and engagement” (“BlackLivesMatter”). BLM drew criticism from many different factions that claimed it did more harm than good, encouraging violence against the police and thereby further dividing people rather than uniting them. Naomi Lim, for instance, reported that Rudy Giuliani, former New York City mayor, called the movement “inherently racist.” The BLM course at SHSU sought to expose the complex social and economic histories behind an increasingly divisive movement.

Littlejohn, Malakaj, and Bernadette Pruitt (Associate Professor of History) conceptualized the course and collaborated with Siham Bouamer (Visiting Assistant Professor of French), Ching-In Chen (Assistant Professor of Poetry), and Jorge Varela (Associate Professor of Psychology), SHSU faculty who taught sessions during the course. In light of the public divide that was fueled by simplistic narratives about BLM's aims, the instructors sought to help students develop a stronger sense of how to approach contested issues effectively and accurately. More importantly, they devised the course to help connect national and international discussions about systemic injustice to the local experiences of the students. To this end, the focus of the class, which consisted of students from various ethnic, racial, and ideological backgrounds, was to help students develop stronger speaking skills in debate-friendly environments. Students were expected to restate points made in assigned texts, comment on them, relate to them, and express ideas in various formats. For the latter, students performed, during an open mic held in an outdoor classroom on campus, poems of their own composing. Additionally, students

traced their own relationship to the topic, recording themselves addressing a set of questions about BLM before and after the course. In order to motivate students to participate in discussion and feel included, the instructors used weekly writing protocols in which students read different texts and noted their reactions as they thought critically about the readings.

SHSU is located in Huntsville, Texas, 75 miles north of the Houston metro area. Huntsville strongly identifies with its historic ties to General Sam Houston (1793–1863), the first and third President of the Republic of Texas, who retired there. The university received its name from him; monuments related to him and his family ornament the campus and town; and a museum bears his name: The Sam Houston Memorial Museum. The first day of the BLM course began with a trip to this museum, which, according to its website, maintains a “dedication to preserving the memory of Sam Houston (1793–1863) and his times” (“Dedicated to the Life and Times of General Sam Houston”). Once in the museum, students were asked to examine the exhibits with a focus on how they depicted the Black experience. Only one such example existed in the institution, which claims to give contemporary audiences access to the Huntsville and Walker County experiences during the age of Sam Houston. After a 30-minute tour of the museum, students met in small groups to examine a series of documents: census records from 1850 and 1860, which revealed that the majority of the population in the county was Black, and property records from 1860, which showed that Black bodies were the most valued commodity in the county. The lesson here was to illustrate the violent historic erasure of the Black experience in the town and, by extension, the county, an erasure that prevails to this day and shapes the lives of people of color.

This trip to The Sam Houston Memorial Museum positioned students early on to think critically about the historic position of the Black experience in relation to official public history. The trip also ushered students into the first unit of the course, titled “Historical Overview: Racism & Reactions to It,” in which students thought about the history of racial violence and injustice, considering the origins of Black history and vital discourses. To this end, students listened to lectures on ethnic and cultural differences in Black experiences throughout the vast continent of Africa. They also read the works of Carter G. Woodson, Barbara Jeanne Fields, and Annette Gordon-Reed in order to understand race as a construct before exploring the way race became a tool in the shaping of U.S. cultural, political, and economic history. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor’s groundbreaking 2016 study, *From #Blacklivesmatter to*

Black Liberation, accompanied readings from W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*, connecting older Black intellectual traditions to American history after WWII in order to arrive at what Taylor calls the "culture of racism," a thesis positing that "race and racism have not been exceptions" in the long history of progress in the aftermath of WWII; instead, according to Du Bois, "they have been the glue that holds the United States together" (Taylor 29).

Taylor's text framed the sessions in the second unit as well, which was titled "Policing, Incarceration & Resistance." It covered the history of policing in the U.S. in relation to the Black experience. In this unit, students watched and discussed Ava DuVernay's 2016 documentary film *13th*, which outlines the extensive ties of private corporations to the prison industrial complex. The unit coincided with Black History Month at SHSU, and students attended a number of events to help them connect course discussions to lectures in public settings, e.g., a week of lectures and film screenings on the Black Panther Party.

In the third unit, titled "Politics of Personal Expression," students explored the political-personal writings of Ta-Nehisi Coates and Angela Y. Davis, paying particular attention to the national effects of racial injustice as it relates to broader questions of systemic inequality generated by post-industrial capitalism. Following these readings, students participated in poetry workshops with Ching-In Chen, in which they read poems about racialized systemic injustice by Ashaki M. Jackson from her 2016 chapbook *Surveillance* and in which, in writing their own poems, they were positioned to think creatively about injustice. Here, in line with the focus throughout the course, students could appreciate the complexity of seemingly simple matters related to questions of injustice. Considering how personal expression in the form of poetry can serve as resistance to oppressive movements helped students gain a stronger understanding of the impact of BLM on a broad public group, which was increasingly galvanized to speak truth to power.

The final course unit, "Mainstream/Social Media & Resistance Movements," considered the impact of organizing strategies during the Civil Rights Movement, which depended on print and TV media, in comparison to the use of social media in strengthening and empowering individuals internationally to challenge injustice. Moreover, students considered how the public history of housing movements, captured in Chad Friedrichs's 2011 documentary *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth*, has been shaped by people in power. Combined with Davis's work, this film helped students discuss the conditions leading to uprisings and protests. Finally, students toured several historic African-American

neighborhoods in Huntsville that had been seized and effectively erased by local white institutions and leaders during the 1970s and 1980s. Two exceptional students in the course developed posters on these neighborhoods for the 10th Annual Undergraduate Research Symposium held at SHSU and hosted by the honors college.

THE FAKE NEWS STORY

At 10:46 pm on Sunday, March 5, 2017, Rob Shimshock, an education reporter for *The Daily Caller*—a news and opinion website founded by Tucker Carlson of Fox News and Neil Patel, former advisor to former Vice President Dick Cheney—wrote a blog post titled “College Honors Program Pays Students to Take ‘White Privilege’ and BLM Courses.” The blog post immediately focused on the BLM Dialogues seminar then being taught and cited a future course planned for fall 2017. The headline of the story, along with bits and pieces of factual information from the SHSU Honors College website, implied that SHSU provided \$2,800 in scholarship funds and special academic advantages to students if they took these specific classes. The quotations the author used from the website were accurate, but Shimshock arranged them, along with his own interpretation, to produce information that was misleading. The following morning, *The Blasting News* picked up the story and posted a commentary with the headline “Need money? Texas college will pay you to feel guilty about your whiteness” (Bressi). The commentary led off with “In an attempt to promote ‘community engagement’, Sam Houston State University in Huntsville, Texas, has developed an honors program that awards students a scholarship worth up to \$2,800—along with several other perks—if they enroll in ‘white privilege’ and Black Lives Matter courses” (Bressi). The article went on to mock other courses offered through the honors college as well as give personal information about the professor teaching the seminars, such as his name, race, list of publications, and other courses he had taught.

The university obviously did not develop the honors college to award students thousands of dollars to take the two courses mentioned in the commentary. The college was established in 1987—long before social media, hashtags, the Black Lives Matter movement, or the current connotation of Whiteness in society were formed. While students admitted to the honors college receive scholarships, they earn the award based on outstanding academic achievement, not because they are being paid to take certain courses.

The website *InfoWars* picked up the commentary as well, using its own subheading: “College lavishes incentives in exchange for Marxist

indoctrination.” Shortly thereafter, an anchor for the nationally broadcast *Fox & Friends* morning TV news program showed a video of a Black Lives Matter protest in Minnesota in 2015 and stated that SHSU was “offering a scholarship to take classes on Black Lives Matter and white privilege.” The anchor went on to say that special academic advantages were granted to the students, once again implying that students were being rewarded if they took the two courses. *Fox & Friends* went on to post the news segment on its website, along with Rob Shimshock’s story from *The Daily Caller*, with the headline “Disgrace on Campus” over Shimshock’s main headline of “College Honors Program Pays Students to Take ‘White Privilege’ and BLM Courses” (Shimshock, *Fox News*).

Not one time had any of these “news” organizations reached out to the university to confirm information about the honors college, its courses, its academic requirements for students to enroll and remain in the program, or the reasons its students might have access to computer equipment or labs. Following the media debacle, the SHSU President’s Office, Alumni Relations Office, Provost’s Office, and main switchboard began receiving calls, with the majority coming from SHSU alumni to express their disappointment with the courses or to vent their anger. Almost all who contacted SHSU indicated that they wanted to terminate any connection they had with the university. Some emails lamented the fact that the university would permit such a course to be offered: “To hear that Berkeley, Yale, Harvard, and other liberal colleges were offering this course would not have surprised me. I am extremely disappointed that this course is not only being offered, but also providing funding to those who decided to take the course.” Other emails explicitly proclaimed that the university is not offering students a chance to succeed and instead offers a course that “is divisive and will cause more problems on your campus than you even understand.” More direct critics called for the university to be defunded by the state: “My prayer is that you lose taxpayer funding NOW. No indoctrination of our students. I rebuke you in Jesus’ name!”

It soon became clear that those contacting the university were especially upset about two points: that SHSU was offering seminars on the Black Lives Matter movement and understanding Whiteness and that the university was paying students to take the courses. SHSU’s issue management/crisis communication team determined that the news cycle and social media have a very short shelf life and contemplated ignoring the situation. However, unlike previous issues that the university has navigated, wherein people who had absolutely no affiliation with the university were the ones expressing outrage

on social media, this one had touched SHSU alumni. The university's leaders felt that an attempt should be made to correct the misinformation. The first step involved posting a university statement on the provost's website, denouncing false accusations about its courses. Provost Richard Eglsaer's March 2017 message first and foremost sought to take a firm position to communicate that "we, at Sam Houston State University, are here to educate not indoctrinate" ("A Message"). Once this statement was in place, subsequent emails and callers were referred to the statement. Either because of the statement or because people moved on to other issues, calls began to slow down. In addition, the team used the prepared statement to answer, either by phone or by return email, specific questions that came up in subsequent correspondences. This method proved to be successful as some alumni responded positively. One email read, "Thank you so much for your response. It does answer my question, but it also made me think of more. Would you mind sending other topics that are offered as part of this program?"

While SHSU has chosen in the past simply to state the facts and clarify misconceptions in response to news stories, this time the issue management team felt that it was appropriate to appeal to the source of the misinformation for a correction. Emails were sent to Shimshock, *The Blasting News*, *Fox & Friends*, Fox Network, and other outlets that wrote on the matter; these communications pointed out the inaccuracies of their stories and, using the university's prepared statement, gave them correct information. University administrators took a firm stance, stating that "your broadcast sent the erroneous message that our university pays students to take controversial courses on topics that you know are unpopular with your viewers. Even worse, your slant was to sensationalize the reporting with video footage of a demonstration that took place in Minnesota almost two years ago. We expect you to set the record straight and correct the misinformation you gave to your audiences" (March 2017). Though no retraction nor apology came from these organizations, their news cycle moved on.

What should be noted is that two area television stations, the local newspaper, and the university's student-run newspaper took an interest not only in the media reports but also in the university's response to them. SHSU has enjoyed a positive relationship with the area media for many years, a relationship that is based on cooperation and respect through experience in a variety of situations. The newspapers used information from their interviews with the university provost to write their articles, and the television stations sent reporters to campus to interview the university's public information officer,

the dean of the honors college, and several students enrolled in the honors college, all of whom expressed dismay that the story had been erroneously reported. Moreover, *Forbes Online* posted an opinion piece by SHSU history professor Brian Domitrovic titled “Earth To Daily Caller: There Are Conservatives On Campus,” decrying the presumption that SHSU is a liberal haven indoctrinating innocent students, an accusation made in the initial *Daily Caller* post and repeated by others.

Within two days, the furor had died down. Except for a few incidental inquiries asking what the social media comments had been about—the university’s social media page was replete with comments fueled by the negative press the course received—no one later contacted the university to express outrage or demand an explanation.

LESSONS LEARNED

What remains important is that this fake news media debacle created a serious institutional issue for the instructors teaching the #BlackLivesMatter course, the honors college, and the university. While the instructors and the honors college anticipate—even invite—critique for the sake of deep conversation and understanding of pressing issues of our times, the toxic discourse created by fake news outlets threatened the very foundation that provides students and faculty the venues in which such matters can be addressed. Central to the resolution was the extensive collaboration among instructors, the honors college, the university public relations office, and university leaders. At a time when faculty and programs are increasingly “under fire not for statements they actually made, but for views ascribed to them by others,” as scholar Peter Schmidt states, a trusting relationship among university constituents is central to protect academic freedom and deep reflection. The SHSU Honors College takes pride in its rigorous Dialogues seminars and other programming designed to produce model citizens and sees the Dialogues seminar on BLM as vital to the success of this mission.

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