

Historical Equality and Diversity at Alfred University
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Our 2005 commencement speaker was Dr. Alvin Poussaint, an expert on race relations in America, the dynamics of prejudice, and issues of diversity. Pres. Edmondson's press release announced: "We are honored to have Dr. Poussaint speak at our commencement. As our country becomes increasingly multicultural, we all need to understand how to not just co-exist, but to establish productive relationships with people of diverse backgrounds."

His statement concluded by saying: "It is a message very much in keeping with the historic mission and spirit of Alfred University, which was the first institution of higher education in the United States to admit women on an equal basis with men, and among the first to admit students regardless of their religion or ethnic heritage."

This presentation examines that historic mission and spirit of the University's early history and stance on equality and diversity. There's often rhetoric thrown about on campus that alludes to this but usually there's not much given in way of explanation and that's my goal today. I'll wrap up by examining some of the more recent efforts that have been made to help us return to those early values.

Credit for the early open attitude here really should be given to the local Seventh Day Baptist Church whose congregation was more liberal and radical than many of the other SDB congregations in the U.S.

Credit for some of the background research for this presentation goes to Susan Strong whose dissertation focused on the University's approach to women's education in the 19th century, and to Dr. Abderrahman Robana who, a number of years ago, researched the history of international students.

I'd like to open with a speech penned and delivered on campus in 1880 by the University's second president, Jonathan Allen. It's called "New Truth."

Be positives, not negatives, affirming, not denying. You need to rise above all negative carpings, and choose and work for what is positive, affirmative, what is advancing. Truth and goodness live and thrive only on these, not on denying, criticizing, negating, not on snobbishness, not on exclusiveness, not by tearing down others. The scholar should be open-eyed to all truths, and filled with their light; he should flash new ideas along the pathway of humanity, kindling new light, awakening nobler sentiments. You are not to be complacently receptive, but to be felt as a positive power. Rather guide than be guided, lead than be led, in all beneficent and progressive movements. Freely investigate parties, sects, institutions. Be friends and helpers of literature, art, science, law, government, industry, religion. The world ever tends to draw down, blunt, stultify; hence there needs to be counteracting, lifting up, purifying, by returning often to the fountains of culture. Seek the deep calm waters of eternal truth, far out from all the murmuring shoals of fanaticism and sectarian or party living. Disrobe your spirit of all cant, prejudice, and fetish worship. Let life be clean, calm, wholesome.

So disrobe your spirit of all cant, prejudice and fetish worship. Acceptance, equality, diversity. These are not new words in the University's vocabulary. They were in place on December 5th, 1836 when the Alfred Select School opened and they're currently the underlying theme in the Admissions marketing literature: "Individuals. Inspired." Admissions brochures proclaim "Alfred University is a place where people are accepted for who they are and what they stand for. It's a diverse community of people who share a common goal of living and learning in a place they love. What's more, Alfred University

is the second oldest co-educational institution in the nation as well as one of the first to embrace ethnic and religious diversity.”

I’m here to support that AU can rightfully boast of a strong tradition and background in support of diversity and equality. Many people are familiar with Alfred’s distinctive early role in co-education and equal treatment of women. Not only were women allowed to attend the school but they were encouraged to speak publicly and studied side by side with their male counterparts. Alfred’s women were the first in the country to give public orations at commencement ceremonies. The first outside female lecturer, Elizabeth Oakes Smith, spoke here in 1847.

Not as many are aware of the University’s acceptance of various religious beliefs, ethnic minorities, gay and lesbians, and international students. The founders of the University were strong, radical, and not afraid to speak out for what they saw as right: that all people should be equal.

Early leaders like William Kenyon, the University’s first president, and Jonathan and Abigail Allen are credited with molding students into leaders and independent thinkers, all the while working to make sure that anyone and everyone was welcome to attend. An egalitarian spirit and sense of liberalism have been part of AU’s heritage since the Seventh Day Baptist settlers decided to open the Select School as a way to educate their children.

The Seventh Day Baptists value education and had an early role in speaking out against inequalities. A prime illustrative example is a resolution adopted by delegates to the 1836 Seventh Day Baptist Conference held in Alfred:

“Resolved, that we consider the practice of holding human beings as mere goods and chattels, entirely subject to the will of their master ... is a practice forbidden by the law of God...which not human legislation can render morally right...and which ought to be immediately abandoned.” They also resolved that *“the condition of more than two million of native Americans, unrighteously held in such bondage, demands the sympathies and prayers of citizens...”* These resolutions were passed at a time when expressing such sentiments was a dangerous activity and mob violence was still frequently the response to such views. Even on college and university campuses, places we today think of as more liberal, open to discourse on all sides of an issue, and protecting of academic freedom, administrators expelled students and dismissed faculty who expressed their abolitionist beliefs. Not so at Alfred.

Alfred’s faculty and students vocally supported the reformation and elimination of slavery. In 1841, Jonathan Allen wrote a play that correctly predicted the Civil War and the demise of slavery 20 years later.

In 1846, Abigail Allen founded Alfred’s first women’s literary society (one of the earliest in the country) and strongly advocated for women’s equal education at a time when that was controversial. Considered a radical by many, Abigail spent her entire life campaigning for the rights of women, blacks, and the uneducated. She led by example, speaking out and working for what she believed. In 1887, she led a group of women to vote in a local election. She presented her views at women’s rights conventions in NYC and was invited in 1900 to Washington, DC for Susan B. Anthony’s 80th birthday celebration as recognition of her work for women’s rights.

Continuing its progressive trend of discussing issues not normally acceptable in many other public venues, a course entitled “The Legal Rights of Women” was taught here as early as 1854. Since many schools considered coeducation as unnatural and forbade people to even talk about it, the idea that we had an entire course discussing women’s

legal rights is something of a marvel. Many of the women educated at early Alfred went into male-dominated professions: scientists, doctors, politicians.

Supporting the classroom dialogue were campus lyceums. Two men's and two women's that occasionally held joint sessions. Oftentimes the lyceum's evening program was the debating and deciding, pro or con, of a question or issue. Not so uncommon. What was uncommon was the type of question being openly discussed and debated for the time period. For example, at their January 7th, 1854 meeting, the women of the Ladies Literary Society resolved that it is as important for ladies to study politics as for gentlemen. At their May 20th meeting the next year, this resolution was discussed: "It is improper for ladies and gentlemen to attend the same school." This was decided in the negative. And as a final example, on May 30th, 1857 they supported the resolution "that the exclusion of women from our higher institutions of learning is an instance of unparalleled tyranny."

As is often said, actions speak louder than words and one example is that our Board of Trustees gained its first female member when Charlotte Groves joined in 1885. The first female editor of the *Fiat Lux* newspaper, certainly a prestigious position, was Julia Wahl in 1917.

In 1846 the first international student arrived on campus: Joseph Fulton from Havana, Cuba. The following decade students enrolled from France, the West Indies, Spain, and Canada. The first black student to enroll was Eliza Durant from Haiti in 1850.

Writing for AU's 1986 sesquicentennial book, Dr. Robana contributed an essay on international students and their role in Alfred's history. He wrote: "*In the middle of the 19th century, before the Civil War, almost all of Alfred's foreign students came from France, Haiti, Canada, Cuba and Spain, primarily as a result of SDB missionary contacts in those areas. These missionary contacts also extended to the Holy Land, which may account for the fact that two students from Palestine were registered at the university between 1899 and 1909.*"

From 1865 to 1900, the majority of foreign students came from European countries, such as England, Sweden, Austria, and Holland. Their numbers correspond to the great westward-flowing migration of that era from Europe to America. It is also known that some of these immigrants settled in the Alfred area.

"It should be noted, however, that many Alfred professors and administrators journeyed abroad, no doubt contributing to the university's reputation. In 1866, for example, William C. Kenyon, Alfred's president, traveled through Europe and the Holy Land. But after the turn of the century there appeared to be a steady influx of Chinese and Japanese students into Alfred, reflecting perhaps a period of high emigration from Japan to the United States."

The campus and community not only hosted foreign students but also students from the Seneca Indian reservation in nearby Salamanca. The first were two women who enrolled in 1861, Jennie Jimmeson and Emma Johns. The trend continued and is well-illustrated in the following story excerpted from "The Life and Sermons of Jonathan Allen": "*In the late 1880s, the chief of the Seneca Indians came to Alfred to secure homes for some of the girls in his tribe. He said it was useless to educate the young braves only, for since they came back to marry heathen wives, the future families would be scarcely above the old standard unless the girls were also educated. The mothers of this community heeded this call, and during the next few years some fifteen of these girls were trained in all home arts, while a part of the time given to school education. A number of the young Indian men were also educated at the same time. We did not lose sight of these maidens of the forest, but afterwards, when visiting them, we found some of*

them mothers in pleasant homes, while others were engaged in teaching or in missionary work among their own people."

By the end of the 19th century, students had also come from England, Brazil, Peru, China, Bolivia, Sweden, Austria, Holland, Palestine, and Japan. The reason for any foreign students braving the 19th century travel conditions to Alfred were, again, most likely the result of the Seventh Day Baptist Missionary Society.

Not only were students of various backgrounds and ethnicities part of the University's daily fabric, prominent speakers were also invited to campus, oftentimes by the various lyceums. And not just your everyday, ho-hum speakers, but nationally known figures who spoke out loudly on issues of equality: Julia Ward Howe (1871), Sojourner Truth (1871), Frederick Douglass (1852, 1857, 1861, 1871), Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1870), and Susan B. Anthony (1870). Gerrit Smith, a famous freedom fighter and philanthropist who, among other things, provided financial backing for his friend the militant abolitionist John Brown and the anti-slavery fight, became a trustee of the University.

Their thoughts and ideals were also reflected and reiterated by faculty at the school. Students received the message from all angles. And not only was there thought, there was action. Darwin Maxson, faculty member and later trustee, was active in the Underground Railroad by opening his house on Main Street, now the Gallery, to ex-slaves as they made their way North.

In 1876, Jonathan Allen wrote an article titled "Mixed Schools." In it, he says *"Humanity, the offspring of Divinity, is an organic unity, with a nature, prerogatives, privileges, needs, and destiny, conformable to its origin and nature. It is not made up of individuals, segregated like a sand heap, but wrought into organic unity. This humanity is bi-fold, masculine and feminine, with correlate and co-equal rights, prerogatives, and needs, one in its inspiring principles and ultimate aims, mutually necessary and helpful in all cultures and progress, co-ordinate in all labor, with constant and mutual ministries, with co-equal, self-sovereignty, and mutual self-sacrifice....All isolation of individuals, all segregation of classes, on the principles of caste, birth, sex, or occupation, becomes abnormal, dwarfing, and distorting....The essential powers of the spirit are neither masculine nor feminine, but human, sexless. Thought knows no sex....Neither man nor woman should be so educated as to emphasize their individual peculiarities, but seek first the common, broad, human elements, leaving individual differences to develop themselves freely."* The next year in a speech on suffrage he stated *"In the presence of rights, race, sex, or color distinctions disappear. The humblest and feeblest being has the same rights as the most powerful and gifted."*

A prolific writer, as well as teacher and minister, Jonathan Allen was highly revered in Alfred, as was Abigail. Their thoughts and deeds carried much weight. Their words continue to shed light on their strong stance for unity and reform within America's educational system as well as her moral sense. I think many of you are familiar with Abigail's quote: "Be radical, radical to the core."

In 1891 Jonathan reflected on the University's history in an address and offered these thoughts*: *The University "did not start into being to satisfy the wishes of any particular class, calling, profession, or pursuit, but to meet a felt want, voicing itself, irrespective of calling, class, race, color, or sex....Alfred University had its origin in a response to the cry of the people for more light [hence, Fiat Lux]. It has grown up naturally as the trees grow, from the common soil of the common wants of the people.... It has been from the start deeply religious, earnestly, even radically, reformatory. It imbued its students more or less with the same spirit, preparing them to go forth as evangelists, reformers, leaders in*

all the enterprises having for their end the bettering of human conditions or doing away with evil and wrong that blind and bind men."

The death of Jonathan in 1892 and Abigail in 1902 ultimately led to gradual changes here. As Susan Strong expressed it "*...the loss of the Allens' fervent, vocal commitment to women's equality, and the decades of 'modernization' in the early twentieth century, accompanied by growing emphasis on fraternity life and athletic teams, led to a fading of the rhetoric and diminished pride in the ethos of egalitarian gender roles pervading Alfred's founding principles and carried out by its first two presidents. After Jonathan Allen's death in 1892, new pressures transformed the University. Experiencing serious financial problems coincident with a national depression, the school rapidly shifted direction under new leadership, adding engineering, art, and agricultural programs, and moving away from its Seventh Day Baptist roots. Slowly, in rhetoric and in actuality, Alfred's environment became less assertively liberal."*

The late 1930s saw the beginning of student organizations centered on the study of foreign languages and cultures: El Centro Iberoamericano (Spanish club) joined the French and Latin clubs.

Faculty excursions around the world continued to have an impact on the University's international enrollment. Dr. Willard Sutton, a ceramic engineering professor, and his wife spent many years in Southeast Asia. Their efforts led to an impressive enrollment of students from the Far East during the 1940s and 1950s.

Dr. Robana wrote that the chairman of the university's language department, Dr. Rodriguez-Diaz, "*had a wide circle of friends among the leaders and laymen of Latin America. [They] were instrumental in attracting a generation of Hispanic students to Alfred in the 1950s and 1960s."*

As a way to foster international relations and better understanding between Americans and the people of different countries represented on campus, the International Club was formed in 1949 through the efforts and support of the Hornell and Alfred communities. In his essay, Dr. Robana elucidated by writing: "*At its bimonthly meetings, the club engaged in informal discussions, invited outside speakers, and showed films or slides with international themes. In 1955, the club had 50 members representing students from Alfred University and neighboring Alfred State College. The club also provided an opportunity for American-born students to learn, first hand, about the culture and habits of people from other countries.*

The International Club created an environment that encouraged the growth of similar campus groups, mainly a French club and a Spanish Club. Later, the International Club was merged into a community organization called World Friends."

In 1968, Alex Haley, author of the classic biography on Malcolm X and *Roots* spoke on campus as part of the University's first "Black Awareness Weekend." It was co-sponsored by the Student Activities Board and the Society for Afro-American Awareness, a group founded the same year to promote black awareness and pride. A major feature of the three-day weekend was a performance of "Journey into Blackness" -- a musical production and dramatic rendition of the history and culture of the Black American.

With the civil rights movement making ripples on the national scene, the students heard a 1970 lecture titled "Shaping of the 20th century Civil Rights Movement: The Evolution of Black Protest." We also welcomed Julian Bond, a nationally known civil rights advocate, to campus.

Moving on to other examples of religious tolerance, a good illustration is to point out that in 1952, 26% of our students were Jewish, compared to the national average of 8%.

This was due to Alfred's strong historical tradition of welcoming such students even prior to World War II, at a time when many other institutions were banning these individuals based on their heritage.

Another illustration of Alfred's early tolerance of divisive issues is to remind you that the Village of Alfred was one of the first in the country to pass a sexual orientation equal rights amendment in 1974. The Alfred Gay Liberation student group organized the same year and has transitioned through various name changes: Unity, Gay People at Alfred, Supporters of Homosexuals on Campus, and now Spectrum. Also in 1974, a group of courses oriented toward minority and international issues were developed. For example "Black people in white America," "African politics in the 20th century," "Aspects of Hispanic Civilization," and "The American Indian."

After a seemingly quiet time in the 1980s, the University began to focus on multiculturalism and issues of diversity again in 1991 by forming the Blue Ribbon Committee on Issues of Diversity as a way to examine the campus culture as it pertained to blacks, gay & lesbians, women, and Jewish and international students. Since that same time, AU has offered one of the country's only classes in gay and lesbian history. It also became the first university in the nation to bar academic credit for the Army's ROTC program as a statement on the military's policy of discriminating against gays and lesbians.

We celebrated our first Multicultural Awareness Week in 1991. Sponsored by the Student Senate as a way to promote awareness and knowledge of the diversity within the students and faculty, it also aimed to inform and unite people of many different backgrounds. We have since celebrated Diversity Week, Multicultural Week, Black History Month, Global Awareness Day, Latin Heritage Month, Asian Heritage Month, Women's History Month, Native American Heritage Month, and GLBT History Month.

Not only have there been weeks or months dedicated to celebrating and raising awareness of specific groups, but a number of academic conferences have been organized. A Native American conference was held over a series of five different days throughout the 1990-91 academic year and included as one of its speakers, Ward Churchill, who was recently been in the national news for his fight for academic freedom. Dr. Churchill also spent time on campus as a visiting professor.

The Multicultural Education Conference on Teaching and Counseling met here in 1995 and was entitled "A Celebration of our Differences through Education."

Many well-known figures were distinguished speakers on-campus in the 1990s also: scholar, Henry Louis Gates; Nobel Prize Poet, Derrick Wolcott; pianist, Leon Bates; Civil Rights activists, James Farmer and Coretta Scott King.

The ALANA group has been outstanding in their efforts and have provided the campus with a range of award winning programs: the Best Multicultural Program in the nation for their Cultural Café, the AIDS Walk and AIDS charity basketball game, the Steppas first place win at regional competition, the Tsunami relief basketball game, Raices, Alfred 2 Asia, CSA fashion show, and so much more. They have been consistently recognized at the Alfies Award ceremony for best campus programming and best new campus events.

It was also the ALANA members who acted to form the Committee on Racial Equality as a way to address a racial incident at GJ's Club in 1997; that group continues under the name SAFE (Students Acting for Equality). Other students like Beth Greenwood and Matt Washington worked to facilitate campus discussions on issues through their "Courageous Conversations" and "A-United" programs. The Student Senate has passed at least two diversity-related resolutions in the last 15 years.

And efforts continue as there's always room for improvement: currently there's movement to make sure that our transgender students are more comfortable, Student Affairs is conducting a cultural climate assessment and this new Institute of Cultural Unity is taking off. I commend the students and staff for being committed to a campus environment that builds the necessary respect and regard for human dignity that our world sorely needs.

The final report of the Blue Ribbon Committee concluded with these observations: *"Listening to those who presented, hearing their needs and concerns, there seemed little question that, in today's emerging society, the institution must assume a greater leadership role in preparing its students and staff to become responsive to, and part of, a larger and more inclusive world community. In the final analysis, perhaps one of the greatest responsibilities facing higher education today is the need to impart to each individual who becomes a part of the academic community a sense of the integral part s/he must play in building an enhanced respect and regard for human dignity and the universality of human rights. Only by learning and teaching acceptance of, and appreciation for, society's ever increasing diversity can the University population become part of the global solution so necessary for a just and lasting social order."*

At the same time, I hope that we can all appreciate the longstanding heritage of Alfred University in helping to uphold that ideal. Granted, I can't rightfully espouse that the University has been a perfect place, that it couldn't have done more, or that there haven't been some bumps in the road along the way. But, overall, I think we can be proud of its early acceptance of people which was truly exceptional for the time. Our founders were adamant that we should speak out against inequalities and injustices. Let's honor their memory by ensuring that their early messages continue to be felt by everyone who graces our campus today and in the future, as well as by those we touch in our everyday lives.

Robana, Abderrahman. "Foreign Students: Community With a Worldwide Vision" from Sesquicentennial History of Alfred University, (1986).

Strong, Susan. Excerpts from her dissertation "The Most Natural Way in the World" (1996).

*excerpted from his address entitled "Divine Guidance and Help"