

Call to Action

BY LYNETTE LOBBAN

After another racially charged video rattles the university, students and administration agree that working together is the only way to initiate meaningful change.

Not a day has gone by since Jan. 18 — when a racist video of two University of Oklahoma students surfaced on Twitter — that OU President Jim Gallogly has not awakened to a full slate of meetings with students, faculty, senior staff or state legislators to begin work on a quantifiable plan to put an end to divisive racial incidents at the university. Gallogly, seven months into his tenure as OU's 14th president, did not create the problem, but it could be his greatest legacy if he were able, as he has been tasked, to lead the university to its overdue conclusion.

With nearly three decades as a corporate executive and a reputation for resuscitating companies in debt, Gallogly was hired by the OU Regents to reign in deficit spending and keep higher education affordable. While the university's financial health is still very much high on his agenda, Gallogly must now address social issues that may prove as detrimental to his alma mater as budget shortfalls.

Kyle Harper/Norman Transcript





HUNDREDS OF STUDENTS were joined by faculty and staff in the Better Together March Jan. 24 on the OU campus. The march was one of several peaceful protests to show solidarity for marginalized populations within the OU community.

On the Friday before Martin Luther King celebrations at OU, Gallogly was in a meeting with Oklahoma State University President Burns Hargis discussing ways they could work together for the benefit of their respective universities and the state. As he walked out of the meeting, someone handed him an iPhone and said, “You’ve got to look at this video.” There he saw two OU students, one in blackface uttering a racial slur.

“It hurt me to the very core of who I am,” says the 1977 OU law alumnus. “It was racist. It was disgusting, and it was not what I expected at my university.”

Many in the black community did not share his surprise.

“I love this university,” says sophomore Jamelia Reed. “And I cheer and I cried when we lost the Orange Bowl, but ... I have to tell you as a black student, this is not surprising to us. We go through it every day. Not only do we have to pay for tuition and work to keep up our grades, we have to deal with whatever the

majority population wants to throw at us that day.”

The video drew media attention from *The Washington Post* and *The Chronicle of Higher Education* to a Weekend Update segment on “Saturday Night Live.” The two women involved, one a member of Delta Delta Delta sorority, issued apologies to the OU community and withdrew from the university. The sorority also condemned the video and expelled the student from the chapter.

A few days later, a second video of a man in blackface walking near the OU campus emerged. The two incidents were a painful reminder of a video of Sigma Alpha Epsilon fraternity brothers singing a racist chant on a party bus that made national headlines in 2015. Those identified as leading the chant withdrew from the university and SAE’s national organization closed the OU chapter in condemnation of the act.

Joy Douglas, a student employee at Bizzell Memorial Library, noted, “Every time that we’re talking about discrimi-



ABOVE - George Henderson speaks at the Martin Luther King Jr. celebration Jan. 20 at Catlett Music Center.
 RIGHT - Jamelia Reed, OU sophomore, gives President Gallogly a hug after calling for administrative action to end racism at the university during a rally Jan. 22.

nation and racism is when something makes national news. Racially charged events are not new on this campus.”

In rallies, public forums and marches held on campus, students have expressed their belief that the roots of racism can be traced back to OU’s beginning, a fact that David W. Levy, David Ross Boyd Professor Emeritus of History, documents in Volumes 1 and 2 of *The University of Oklahoma: A History*. One of OU’s founding faculty members who arrived in Norman in 1892, Edwin DeBarr was head of the chemistry department, founder of the engineering school and Grand Dragon of the Ku Klux Klan in Oklahoma.

DeBarr was dismissed by the OU Regents in 1923 for his association with the Klan, but his name appeared on the chemistry building until regents voted to remove it in 1988. But it wasn’t until 2017 that the Norman City Council voted to change the name of a street near campus from DeBarr Avenue to Deans Row Avenue.

At the Jan. 22 “Rally to Stop Racism,” organized by the OU Black Student Association, Gallogly listened for more than two hours as students, faculty and staff expressed their pain and frustration at how little had changed since 2015, as well as their hope for the future through administrative action.

“As students, you are right to hold your peers, as well as the institutional leadership of which I am a part, to the highest moral and ethical standards,” said Karlos Hill, associate professor and chair of OU’s Clara Luper Department of African and African-American Studies.

“You have the right to gather here in one unequivocal voice to say that hate is wrong. Not only is it wrong, but it’s unwelcome at the University of Oklahoma.”

Jane Irungu, interim associate vice president for the Office of University Community, added her support not only to students of color, but also to “our multicultural students, to our international students. We are saying today, as we commit ourselves to moving our institution forward, not just by words but by ac-



tion, that every space you occupy at the University of Oklahoma needs to bring healing to you, not pain and suffering. Our goal is to make sure we establish an environment of respect, to build each other up and not to tear each other down.”

Monica Fray, Miss Black OU 2018, who is also a U.S. Air Force veteran, student, mother and social worker, encouraged students to work together.

“To my white friends: we need you. We didn’t start racism, and we can’t end it, either. We need you to speak up when we aren’t present. Be our voice. To the students of color: we must bridge the gap for each other. As minority groups we must stand up for the disenfranchisement of those who are marginalized on the basis of sexuality, religion, identity, background, etc. Martin Luther King said, ‘Life begins to end the moment we become silent about the things that matter.’ ”

As the rally wore on, emotions ran high, as Indigenous, Latino, international and LGBTQ students shared experiences of discrimination at the university and increasingly charged President Gallogly with blame and the responsibility to affect a change.

By the time he spoke, Gallogly’s voice cracked with emotion. “I don’t know what to say. Not one moment in my career have I had a moment when I really don’t know what to say ... I was asked to come here because of the financial condition of the university and I came because I’ve always felt a part of this place. But this is not the OU I know. And maybe I don’t deserve your respect. Maybe I don’t. But I love this university and I’m working very, very hard to make it a better place.”

As he spoke, the crowd in the ballroom of Oklahoma Memorial Union grew quiet, while the president and former

“This is a defining moment in our university ... We are better than this moment. Let’s prove it.”

CEO expressed his own frustration and his need for help. He shared that just before OU’s Martin Luther King Jr. celebration on Jan. 20, he had called George Henderson, OU David Ross Boyd Professor and Regents’ Professor of Human Relations, who has been a leading civil rights activist in Oklahoma since 1967 and was a personal friend of Dr. King.

“I said, ‘George, you’re a man of great wisdom, you have faced these issues many times. I need your advice. I do not fully understand how to handle things because I may be 66 years old, but I have so much more to learn.’”

According to Gallogly, Henderson told him, “Do not fall prey to hate. Do not just react in an aggressive manner. Do not expel those students. It is the wrong thing to do. That does not solve this problem. It isn’t even a step in the right direction. Be clear about how wrong those statements were. Be clear how you feel about it.”

“And you know how I feel about it,” said Gallogly. “It is a shameful moment in our history that keeps recurring and recurring. And it is our moment of truth and we have to do something about it and I will be held accountable. And I want your help. I do not simply want your criticism.”

In the days since the rally, the BSA has united students in a “Better Together” march and public forums have been held in residential halls. Conversation has moved beyond the campus to the OU Board of Regents and the Oklahoma Legislative Black Caucus, which, along with Gallogly, is addressing considerations set forth by the BSA, including a zero-tolerance policy on racism in the code of conduct, enhanced curriculum dedicated to social and cultural education, and an increase in multicultural faculty and staff with additional funding and support for African-American programs.

Although Gallogly was hired by the OU Regents for his problem-solving abilities and business expertise, he says he became aware of diversity issues even before he began tackling university finances. At his first meeting with senior staff, the president looked around the room and reportedly observed, “There are too many people in here who look like me.”

“The very first week I was here, before I was president, looking out at the staff I had inherited, I asked, ‘Does this group represent the diversity in our university and our city

and our state?’ It was the very first thing I asked.”

Weeks before the videos surfaced, Gallogly had recommended David Surratt as the new vice president of student affairs and dean of students. Surratt, an assistant vice chancellor and associate dean of students at the University of California, Berkeley, is an OU alumnus with a doctorate in higher education administration from George Washington University. In the multicultural education program at Berkeley, he was responsible for student advocacy, first-year student initiatives, assessment, and crisis response. In addition, Surratt will serve as head of the newly formed Student Code of Conduct Review Committee.

Two OU professors have agreed to join the review committee: Karlos Hill from the Department of African and African-American Studies, and Joseph Thai, professor and Glenn R. Watson Centennial Chair in the OU College of Law, who specializes in the U.S. Constitution and the Supreme Court. Student, faculty and staff representatives are currently being invited to join the committee following recommendations from several across the university.

In addition to changes in the student code, the administration has launched a review of diversity plans within each college, elevated the emphasis of its affirmative action program and relocated it from the Title IX office to Human Resources to drive the recruitment of diverse and multicultural candidates. Human Resources now reports directly to the president.

One of the most important initiatives, says Gallogly, is the introduction of Crimson Commitment, a program for in-state students who are recipients of Oklahoma’s Promise for families with an annual income of \$55,000 or less. Beginning in fall 2019, a student enrolled in Crimson Commitment will not have to pay tuition and fees for four years by combining outside and OU resources. The program also offers academic and personal support, peer mentoring and graduation coaching. To aid with issues of affordability, Gallogly and his administration have identified \$32 million in savings to offset the revenue lost by not raising tuition for the first time since 2013.

“There’s far more right with this university than there is wrong,” Gallogly summed up at the “Rally to Stop Racism.”

“And while we have been humbled by the actions of a few, there are so many here with such strong voices who want change and I happen to be one of those voices. But do not just listen to my words, you watch my actions. You hold me accountable.

“This is a defining moment in our university. I love each one of you. And I am happy to look you in the eye and tell you that. That’s why I’m here and that’s the only reason I’m here. We are better than this moment. Let’s prove it.” 