Silent Sam, Charleston, Charlottesville and George Floyd made the headlines. On a less visible but equally impassioned front, faculty of color at Chapel Hill believe this is the moment for action toward equity.

by Barry Yeoman
Kia Caldwell woke up June 18 with the news heavy on her mind.

For months it had been dominated by a single headline: the COVID-19 pandemic, which in the U.S. has blazed most mercilessly through communities of color. Then, in late May, came George Floyd’s asphyxiation under the knee of a Minneapolis police officer. The video of Floyd, calling out for his late mother, pierced the national conscience and highlighted the ever-lengthening list of Black Americans killed by white authorities and civilians.

Demonstrators had gathered in more than 2,000 cities and towns. They hoisted signs and blocked roadways and dodged tear gas and rubber bullets. Their message spread beyond the streets as education, business and political leaders vowed to work against racism in their own domains.

For Caldwell, a professor of African, African American and diaspora studies, the national news was inseparable from the University’s mission — to craft an institution that reflects the diversity of 21st-century America.

In 2019, Kia Caldwell and 13 colleagues wrote a memo describing “the rapidly declining racial climate at the University.”

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Some faculty of color say they see goodwill on the part of campus leaders.

“We had a meeting with the administration,” said Miguel La Serna, a professor of history. “They actually were saying that they felt like they can get on board with a lot of these things and that they would be happy to work with us toward implementing them. So that was a really encouraging sign.”

But La Serna, Caldwell and others add that intentions aren’t enough. It will take an ambitious, well-funded, collaborative effort, they say — an effort central to Carolina’s mission — to craft an institution that reflects the diversity of 21st-century America.

An agonizing history

Academia can be a rough place for what scholars call BIPOC faculty — Black, Indigenous and other people of color. U.S. campuses have been plagued by reports of hostile work environments and lackluster diversity efforts.

“The widespread claims that higher education is objective, meritocratic, and color blind, providing equity for all, do not hold up,” sociologist Ruth Enid Zambrana wrote in her 2018 book Toxic Ivory Towers. Underrepresented minorities are “expected to publish more, teach more, and serve more to progress at the same pace” as their white peers.

The numbers at UNC mirror the national trend. Blacks make up 22.2 percent of the state’s population but 5.1 percent of the faculty, according to 2018 figures from the University’s Office of Institutional Research and Assessment. Hispanics make up 9.8 percent of the population and 4.5 percent of the faculty. Indigenous people make up 1.7 percent of the population and 0.6 percent of the faculty.

The overall student makeup, based on spring 2020 numbers from the same office, is 8 percent Black, 7.8 percent Hispanic and 0.5 percent Indigenous.

But Carolina has a distinct story, too, which dates to its 18th-century founding. Enslaved people helped build the campus, and the University’s first Board of Trustees consisted overwhelmingly of slaveholders. Slavery funded the University, too; human beings were often sold along with real estate by university attorneys, who received a commission on

In 2019, Kia Caldwell and 13 colleagues wrote a memo describing “the rapidly declining racial climate at the University.”

Morale, they wrote, runs low among Black faculty, who are underrepresented in proportion to the state’s population.

“We invite the University leadership and our faculty colleagues to stand and work with us,” said the preamble, “to make UNC-Chapel Hill a more equitable and inclusive campus, where all can succeed and thrive.”

The 35 original signatories encouraged others to co-sign. And they did — more than 1,200 faculty members, students, staff and alumni. Carolina’s administrators say they agree with the sentiments behind the Roadmap for Racial Equity and intend to dissect the University in search of the causes of these disparities. “It’s not until we actually get at the root [that we can really begin to reverse-engineer this institution to eliminate all traces of structural systemic racism],” said Bixion, who also is executive vice chancellor.

The advisory conversations broke down into 13-part plans to diversify the faculty and leadership and our campus. “We invited the University leadership and our faculty colleagues to stand and work with us,” Caldwell said.

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Many campus buildings memorialize slaveholders and white supremacists. In 2015, Saunders Hall, named for Ku Klux Klan leader William L. Saunders (class of 2015), was renamed Carolina Hall after years of student agitation. (The Board of Trustees rejected students’ call to rename it after Black anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston.) Last year, four more buildings had their names removed. Three more are awaiting decisions by Chancellor Kevin Guskiewicz and then the trustees. Dozens of others are up for similar consideration. The “Memorial” in Kenan Memorial Stadium has been removed, its original namesake, William R. Kenan Jr. (class of 1894), who provided most of the money to build the stadium and had dedicated it to his parents in 1927.

“The commemorative landscape is not neutral here,” said historian Malinda Maye, former provost and chancellor of the University’s Center for the Study of the University’s Center for the Study of the Civil War. “You have a belief on the part of the decision-makers that that commemorative landscape is wallpaper; that it doesn’t truly reflect anything about who we are now. And I think what students and faculty have been saying is that these are not tokens of memory. Those points on the landscape provide us with orientation in how we conduct ourselves on a day-to-day level.”

Until two years ago, the centerpiece of Carolina’s commemorative landscape was Silent Sam, erected when Confederate victory was celebrated on July 4, 1913. The statue was designed to intimidate Blacks and instill fear of the return of slavery. During its installation, Juliana Carr (class of 1886) recalled having “horsewhipped a negro wench until her skirts hung in shreds” because she “maligned a Southern lady.” Carr, who had leadership roles in the GAA and served as the association’s president from 1912 to 1917, added that “the purest strain of the Anglo Saxons is to be found in the 13 Southern states — Praise God.”

Members of the campus and Chapel Hill community had protested Silent Sam since the 1960s, and in recent years clashed with monument defenders. “Campus is where students live,” said Caldwell. “So basically, this was their home environment that was being filled with hate and danger.”

Even after the statue’s toppling in 2018, the Silent Sam issue didn’t disappear. The UNC System Board of Governors brokered a deal with Sons of Confederate Veterans — a group that promotes a message, repudiated by mainstream historians, that the Civil War was not about slavery and that has documented alliances with white-supremacist groups. The Chapel Hill campus was told to make up to $2.5 million available for costs associated with moving and displaying the monument.

BPOC faculty call the settlement with the SCV, which a judge later voided, a demoralizing blow. “That $2.5 million deal was an atrocity,” said Sharon P. Holland, chair of the department of American studies. “We were told we would have to think that a Black faculty member would not be pissed off about that.”

Blouin notes that University leaders had no say in the settlement. It was approved by the UNC System Board of Governors, political appointees who govern the system’s 17 institutions. “I think we were all violated to some degree by that decision,” he said.

At the time, then-Interim Chancellor Guskiewicz wrote a letter to the Board of Governors noting the “concerns and opposition from many corners of our campus.” Faculty wanted to see more outrage. “We were really hoping for a written condemnation of the Sons of the Confederacy or [of] the settlement,” La Serna said. “And we got neither.

Tenure is tough
La Serna, who is Peruvian American, grew up in a working-class neighborhood in Sacramento “where police car chases ended up literally in my backyard, with people jumping my fence and helicopters overhead,” she said. Education was her “escape hatch.” After earning a history doctorate in 2008, she came to Chapel Hill as part of the Carolina Postdoctoral Program for Faculty Diversity.

“It was a tremendous opportunity for me to get my foot in the door,” she said. The program develops scholars in the hopes of preparing them for tenure-track appointments at UNC and elsewhere. “And that ended up working out.”

In addition to her fellowship on 20th-century Latin America, La Serna turned his attention to making Carolina a more inclusive campus. It’s “physically exhausting,” she said. “Anything less than excellent, I think, feels like a tremendous drain on the community.”

For BPOC scholars, at Carolina and elsewhere, the extra workload takes away time from scholarly writing, making it harder to earn tenure. And Carolina’s tenured faculty are less diverse than the University’s overall faculty.

“Whenever I would go to these meetings where faculty would voice their concerns, I left with the feeling that it was always an excuse,” said Enrique W. Neblett Jr., a associate professor of political science.

Ronald Williams II suggests “decolonizing” the curriculum by requiring students to study African American, Asian American, and Native American history. Such a mandate would produce better-informed students and could draw more BPOC faculty, Williams said.

The exhaustion theme permeates many conversations with faculty of color. “I probably ran myself ragged the first five years I was here,” said Erika K. Wilson, an associate professor of law. Because Black faculty have no room to be “anything less than excellent,” she said, “I was waking up at 4 in the morning to get some time to write, to prepare for class, and trying to make 24 hours be 30 hours in a day.”

Johnson, the business professor, described Wilson’s schedule as “the norm.” Until the pandemic, he arrived at his office at 6 every morning, part of a decades-long strategy to maintain the competitive edge that Black academics need. “You have to be prepared to stay up all night to kick somebody’s butt tomorrow morning,” he said. “You can never take a day off.”

Even that might not be enough. Johnson talks about “race fatigue” — the experience of repeatedly serving on personnel committees only to see Black scholars fanned into non-tenure-track positions or a Black colleague’s research dismissed as “ghetto sociology.”

The professors met with campus administrators last summer to prepare a “roadmap” of work that they said was “unteachable.” But in practice, it’s a lot easier to be prepared to stay up all night to kick somebody’s butt tomorrow morning,” he said. “You can never take a day off.”

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reason the couple took jobs at the University of Michigan, he added, was its national leadership on diversity issues.

For BIPOC scholars, at Carolina and elsewhere, the extra workload takes away time from scholarly writing, making it harder to earn tenure. “The fact that we’re doing a lot of service and mentoring and student support is not taken into account,” Caldwell said.

“Fierce urgency of now”

Carolina’s tenured faculty are less diverse than the University’s overall faculty. Based on 2008 numbers, whites represent 72.4 percent of all faculty and 78.4 percent of tenured professors. As noted earlier, Blacks represent 5.1 percent of all faculty; they account for 4.6 percent of tenured professors. The trend is similar for other faculty of color, who overall have made modest gains during the past decade.

Sibby Anderson-Thompkins ’87 (’90 MA), the University’s interim chief diversity officer, acknowledged that this extra work benefits Carolina while leaving BIPOC professors “vulnerable when they’re going up for tenure.” She said the University leadership wants to correct this. “We are looking at ensuring that research that is done on diversity-related issues is also valued in the same ways that other types of research are valued,” said Anderson-Thompkins. “These are key areas that we think will support the recommendations coming from the faculty of color: looking at our tenure-promotion policies; ensuring that the contributions of faculty of color are weighted in the same ways that other types of service or leadership has been valued; ensuring that research related to these areas are valued; and that, ultimately, if faculty are taking on additional work, it is with compensation.”

“Fierce urgency of now”

Carolina’s leaders have pledged to address race more forthrightly. The University’s top leaders focused on the issue during their last two annual retreats, and for the 2019 retreat they all read Toxic Ivory Towers. Individual schools have launched initiatives, too. In June, for example, the law school earmarked $1 million to improve diversity, and in September it announced the hires of two Black professors, Ifeoma Ajumwa and Osmudia James.

In January 2020, after his chancellor appointment was made permanent, Guskiewicz convened a 15-member commission to reckon with the University’s history of complicity with slavery and white supremacy. Guskiewicz said the commission “will include academic initiatives to strengthen our research and teaching, help us to study our past and learn from that past, build from that past and move forward together as a community.” The University, he said, must “build our community together—diversity and inclusion must be a priority, and we must ensure that every person on our campus feels safe, welcome and included.”

After George Floyd’s killing, the commission condemned “the deeper structures of white supremacy and racial injustice that set the conditions for such acts of violence. We recognize that those same structures perpetuate inequities on our campus and in the broader community in which UNC is situated.” Its leaders quoted Martin Luther King, Jr. from 1967, as he sought to rally people of conscience against the entangled evils of racism, poverty and militarism. King, they said, “urged the nation to confront the ‘fierce urgency of now.’ ”

“We must move past indecision to action,” King had warned. “If we do not act, we shall surely be dragged down into the long, dark and shameful corridors of time reserved for those who possess power without compassion, might without morality, and strength without sight.”

The work ahead for UNC, the commission noted, “will be painful and unsettling. It will require unflinching honesty in acknowledging long-silenced truths. But what other way is there to redress inequity and to fulfill our responsibility as the ‘people’s university’?”

At the center of these efforts is Anderson-Thompkins, who also is the special adviser to the provost and chancellor for equity and inclusion.

She grew up in Pitt County, two hours east of Chapel Hill, with a father and grandfather who served as principals of the same all-Black school. Two older siblings desegregated the local public schools. Arriving at Carolina as an undergraduate in 1981, she immediately hopped on a D.C.-bound bus to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the March on Washington.

“That set me on a course,” she said, “to advocate for social justice and to fight for African American students.” She later
became president of Carolina’s Black Student Movement. She marched against South Africa’s apartheid regime and fought for the creation of what’s now the Sonja Haynes Stone Center for Black Culture and History.

In 2007, Anderson-Thompkins returned to UNC as an administrator. For eight years, she has run the Carolina Postdoctoral Faculty Program, the nationally acclaimed program that helped launch La Serna’s career. She saw how many knowledgeable, committed postdocs of color were working against racism. “However, their work wasn’t really connected to leadership and the accountability needed from leadership.”

Without accountability, she said, “we really haven’t been able to move the needle.” BIPOC faculty, locked out of certain professional networks, have watched their white colleagues enjoy “an express lane to promotions and opportunities.” The University Office for Diversity and Equity works on behalf of which she works, lost positions. The interim job she’s now filling was vacant for a year.

The postdoctoral program Anderson-Thompkins runs, which has brought 64 scholars onto the faculty over its 36-year history, has seen 21 of them leave for other opportunities, she said. Three have taken jobs at other universities, she said. Three have become president of a university. “These are key areas that we think will support the recommendations coming from the faculty of color: looking at our tenure-promotion policies; ensuring that the contributions of faculty of color are weighted in the same ways that other types of service or leadership has been valued; ensuring that research that have equity related to these areas are valued; and ultimately, if faculty are taking on additional work, it is with compensation.” — Libby Anderson-Thompkins ’87 (90 MA)

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