

Kirkland Eater

Humanities 104

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Davidson College's Statement of Purpose and Participation in Slavery

The present edition of the Davidson College Statement of Purpose is deeply contextualised by the College's Presbyterian roots. The Statement makes several mentions of the College's heritage and close bond with the Presbyterian tradition, noting that "Since its founding, the ties that bind the college to its Presbyterian heritage... have remained close and strong". As such, the Statement of Purpose is part of a larger picture involving the College's nuanced history with the Presbyterian Church, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Chambers legacy.

During the early 20th century, a movement called the "Social Gospel" was being promoted within Protestant communities, and was adopted by a large proportion of Presbyterians. Social Gospel themes were proliferated and oriented towards racial conflicts by Black leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. in the mid-20th century. This movement identified the main aims of the Church to be "the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God... the preservation of truth... the promotion of social righteousness" (Rogers 1). This movement's revitalisation in the 1960s preceded the drafting and publication of the original Davidson Statement of Purpose in 1964. With this in mind, a potential motivation for creating this artefact could be to emphasise the "mutual advantage" from the relationship between the Church and the School. Reinforcing this relationship would be important to the Trustees because of the tension building within the Presbyterian community. Further into the original Statement, the President addresses "activities which liberate men physically, mentally, and spiritually," as

key components of Davidson's purpose. This is also consistent with the Social Gospel ideas, specifically those resurfacing as a result of the Civil Rights Movement.

Within the original document, President D. Grier Martin uses diction that is commonly associated with integration and civil rights, such as "liberation," and "humane instinct," which are to be derived from Christian ideals with the intention to serve the global community. Given that the original and first Statement was published in the 1964-1965 catalogue, and uses this charged language, a deep connection could be made to the Civil Rights movement. In the years leading up to 1964, the broader American political atmosphere was focused on desegregation and the rights of oppressed persons. Contextually, in 1954, the *Brown v. Board of Education* was a key turning point in the integration of public schools (Library of Congress 1). Desegregation at this time was extremely controversial in the American South, and in the decade between the *Brown v. Board* case and the publication of the statement of purpose was filled with protest and activism for the integration of schools that remained white-only (1). These major movements towards desegregation signalled a tension within the broader American community, between proponents of and against racial integration. This tension may be linked back to the original Statement by examining the actions and events occurring within the Christian tradition that Davidson specifically claimed loyalty to (Davidson College Catalog 2). Within the broader scope of the Presbyterian community, 1958 marked one of the most significant mergers in Presbyterian history. This merger resulted in the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (UPCUSA) as a union between "Northern" and "Southern" Churches, which would be the largest Presbyterian branch until 1983. This merging resulted in the perpetuation of progressive views from the North within the Southern community, with the UPCUSA having high-ranking members participating in events such as the 1963 March on Washington with Martin Luther King

Jr (Hart 220). The next year, the UPCUSA elected Edler Hawkins, a Black American, to be a moderator of the church. These events and the gradual movement towards a progressive Church would likely have a high level of influence on a religious institution like Davidson, which thus connects back to the diction used in the original Statement, with the combination of religiously and humanistically interested vocabulary. Although Davidson would be a Southern institution, with historical ties to slavery and the confederacy, the Presbyterian community acted as a nexus for the flow of progressive ideals. With the knowledge of Davidson's loyalty to the Presbyterian Church, the first Statement of Purpose was intended to accurately reflect these ideas.

The relationship between Davidson College and Maxwell Chambers itself is actually triadic with regards to the Presbyterian Church as the third party. Chambers himself is a significant individual in the history of Davidson, due to his past involvement in the trade of enslaved persons and the legacy donation of about 250,000 USD, which made Davidson temporarily the wealthiest Southern college during a time of financial issues (Green 5; Brawley 1). However, Chambers neither attended Davidson nor was he a member of any church (Brawley 1). He came to know the College through Archibald Baker, a Presbyterian minister who was involved in both Carolinian Synods. Baker's religious background coupled with his interest in education led him to the College, which thus led to the formation of a bond between Davidson and Chambers as a result of his and Baker's friendship. Contextually, it is unlikely that Baker was unaware of Chambers' activities regarding enslaved persons. Following Chambers' death, the editor of the local newspaper who was an elder in the Presbyterian church neglected to carry the Chambers obituary in spite of the fact that the editor customarily published the obituaries of prominent citizens. This could imply that it was well known within the Presbytery that Chambers profited from the buying and selling of enslaved persons (Brawley 1). In light of this

information, visiting the 1994 revision of the original Statement of Purpose reveals nuance in the expansion towards inclusivity outside of both the Presbyterian tradition and the general Christian tradition. The few years preceding 1994 provided reasons for this shift towards inclusivity such as the Presbyterian Church joining a *Formula of Agreement*, which united the Presbyterian, Reformed, Evangelical Lutheran, and the United Churches for the purpose of amending “historic condemnation” and establishing a better-informed channel of decision-making. However, with an understanding of Dr. Green’s “Maxwell Chambers and His Complicated Connections to Davidson College,” the turn from associating the Chambers building with experiences rather than its namesake marked a pivot towards understanding and questioning tradition occurred in the buildup to 1994 (Green 4). Significantly, the dedication of the second Chambers building did not mention the name of Maxwell Chambers in 1930, and more recently, a college publication was released that explored Davidson’s involvement with the Confederacy in 1988 (5). This signified a pivot towards avoiding associations with the College’s complicated past involvement with Chambers, which was initiated by Baker.

With regards to Chambers, the College made a subtle yet significant shift in appreciation to donors in 1994. The first iteration of the Statement read the same as each subsequent version with “Davidson holds a priceless heritage bequeathed by those who have dedicated their lives and their possessions for its welfare. To it much has been entrusted, and of it much is required.,” but the original includes a few sentences appended to the end referencing “gratitude” to the donors and the dedication of effort to the heritage (Davidson College Catalog 2). This was removed in the 1994 iteration. The aforementioned pivot away from Chambers as an individual may have contributed to this revision, as this version intended to increase the feelings of inclusivity on campus (Blodgett 1). However, given the complex history of the College, this

could be a failsafe for controversies surrounding donors. In 1972, the first “giving society” was formed at Davidson, and several more followed from that point, such as the Phi and Eu formed one decade after 1994 (Davidson Giving). In cooperation with each other, this could be seen as a method of relocating gratitude from the Statement and preventing a similar situation with the Chambers building by appreciating donors but being more cautious with associating names and their legacies with the College.

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