

The Future of Morality: What Role Should Colleges and Universities Play?

Stephen F. Black

**Dr. Carolyn Dahl, Dean,
College of Continuing Studies**

Good morning. Thank you for being here so bright and early. Some of you in this room have a crazy idea. That is that students can change the world. In fact, most of you may have this idea. Many of you have invested your personal and professional energies in this notion. You get up every morning determined to make it happen, to make progress toward this crazy preposterous idea.

Stephen Foster Black, our keynote speaker this morning, shares this idea with you. Stephen Black is the personification of engaged learning, of that powerful idea that learners, scholars, and communities armed with a shared purpose can and do change the world. What an honor for us to spend the morning with him.

Stephen Black is the grandson of United States Supreme Court Justice Hugo L. Black. He grew up in New Mexico after most of his family left our state in the 1950s and '60s following his grandfather's controversial role in civil rights decisions, including *Brown v. Board of Education*. Despite growing up over 1,000 miles from here, from a very early age Stephen has always been connected to Alabama through the legacy of his family's commitment to public service. Stephen Black received his bachelor's degree from the University of Pennsylvania, where he graduated magna cum laude, and his juris doctor from Yale Law School. Following graduation from law school, he returned to Alabama to join the Birmingham law firm of Maynard, Cooper & Gale. After three years with that firm, he was called to public service, serving briefly as assistant to the governor of Alabama, focusing on policy and economic development.

During his experience in the governor's office, Stephen was struck by the enthusiasm of the thousands of students he encountered when speaking around the state. Stephen then came to the University of Alabama and convinced the president and provost to create the Center for Ethics and Social Responsibility and a related statewide organization, Impact Alabama, also housed at the center.

Through the work of the center, students are supported in developing a personal definition of

moral and civic maturity. The center is dedicated to making the values and skills of citizenship a hallmark of a University of Alabama education through authentic experiences in communities that, as Ambassador James Joseph framed for us yesterday, make the plight of others our own. Impact Alabama is a statewide service-learning effort, unique nationally, a nonprofit staffed by 30 full-time college graduates who have provided more than 3,000 college students with opportunities to participate in structured service-learning projects that promote learning and leadership development.

Since the Ethics Center and Impact Alabama began, students and staff have provided more than 3,600 hours of service to the Tuscaloosa Pre-K initiative. Through Documenting Justice (see Table 1) they have written and produced films focused on subjects of social justice of both state and international significance. They have provided advanced placement in science and math for high school students throughout the state. They have prepared tax returns for more than 17,000 working families, claiming \$31 million in refunds and saving approximately \$4.7 million in commercial preparation fees. And through FocusFirst (see Table 1) they have provided comprehensive vision care to more than 175,000 children. In 2008, Black received the prestigious Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Community Health Leaders award for his work with FocusFirst. This national award is given annually to individuals who demonstrate creativity and commitment in addressing society's most pressing health issues. Ten recipients were chosen from among 800 nominations.

The Birmingham News says of Stephen Black: "Black is bright and energetic and he speaks persuasively on such broad issues as tax, constitution and education reform. Black exhibits a new spirit of leadership that Alabama desperately needs." What I predict you will say about Stephen Black is "Wow! Amen!" Dear colleagues, it's my great honor to present Stephen Foster Black.

STEPHEN BLACK

Thank you, and what an incredible introduction. That sets the bar way too high. Have you been listening to the news about the debates



Stephen Black told a plenary audience at NOSC 2012 that student civic engagement is essential to a college education and to the nation's progress.

from the presidential campaigns? They're so worried about underperforming they're acting as if they're going to be lucky to make it through with complete sentences. That's the way I feel after that introduction.

In the short time I have I'm going to talk fast because I've got a lot to say before my time is up. At the risk of saying things we all know, I still think it's worthwhile to step back and go back to the reason why any of us do work tied to universities relating to communities. With all the talented and educated people in the room, there's a risk of developing such an expertise and focus on one specific area that every once in a while we need to lift our heads up, step back, breathe deeply and acknowledge again why what we do is so important.

Reason to Care about Citizenship

There is a reason for colleges to care about citizenship: They're entrusted with the lives of young human beings growing into adults with a moral and ethically engaged life in front of them. I don't think there's ever been a time when there was a greater call on universities to be thoughtful about their responsibilities. I would argue that we face a bigger challenge right now in regard to the future of ethical and engaged citizenship than at any time in our country's past.

I want to talk to you about the biggest single challenge confronting ethical progress today. And let me be clear, I'm defining progress in a way that everyone can agree, meaning a non-ideological definition. The idea, as corny as it sounds, a conception from our founders, the idea of an America as a country worth dying for that gives you the right and the liberty and the privilege of

caring about your children, working hard, having some sense of commitment to your community, and, based on those ingredients, having a rational expectation that your children will realize a better life than you had and your grandchildren a better life than them. That is what I refer to as the *transcendent trajectory of progress of our nation*. In this incredible experiment in democracy, as messy as it is, the biggest challenge before us is here right now, live and in living color, in a way we've never seen before, a bigger threat than terrorism, another banking crisis, bigger than a double-dip recession. Bigger than all that, I think, is *fundamentally what happens to a nation whose citizens year after year become less and less personally engaged with people unlike themselves*. Sort of Robert Putnam moving forward, a whole body of scholarship and concern over what happens in an increasingly competitive world economy where more Americans and all kinds of Americans are working longer than ever before, at least trying to find the hours to work longer than ever before.

Demographic Changes

When you couple the phenomenon of fewer and fewer people engaged with others unlike themselves with demographic changes and the reality of a majority suburban nation, the majority of Americans don't have any sense of the challenges to citizenship that comes with these conditions. Fifteen years ago marked that point for us, the first time in our history that a majority of us lived in the suburbs, which means we have added onto our daily burden, in addition to longer work hours, commuting. The drive goes up. There are some jobs in the suburbs but the majority are not. To realize their understanding of the American dream, more and more Americans are suburbanizing further and further out. Buying a home with a lawn and some trees puts them on the highway more hours every year.

Articles written 15 years ago about Atlanta's response to the longest average daily commute in the western world referred to it as "the revolt of the commuters"—beautiful loft projects coming up in downtown Atlanta. We've got some great ones in Birmingham, too, and there's some cool loft projects in downtown Tuscaloosa. Beautiful story, but statistically an anomaly.

We continue to be a more suburbanizing nation.

If you lay a demographic track over the highway system of America, you'll see Americans continuing to segregate themselves in \$30,000 to

\$40,000 a year income brackets along the highway systems of America, spending more time in the car, more time at work, and less time engaged in relationships with people, especially those unlike themselves or in relationships aimed at causes and purposes beyond their own family's immediate needs.

Rotary, Kiwanis, Lion's clubs, 4-H, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, PTA ... those organizations have two things in common: One is they've had a dramatic and positive impact across generations in our nation, and two, they've all declined dramatically in the last two generations. And you think to yourself: Fewer mothers showing up for their children's PTA meetings than 30 years ago ... do they just not care about whether their kids and their schools thrive? And you have in your head: "No idiot, that's not it. It's because they're working." And in fact you would be right.

In fact the vast majority of women would love to be at their school's PTA, but they are working every hour they can find because they want to feed their children. And I think that's an understandable perspective to have. But it also means fewer of us are engaged in projects beyond our own immediate needs. As I tell college students all over the nation, whether you are Republican or Democrat, the building block, the core of ethical citizenship, the ability to decide things well on behalf of other human beings, the ability to invest your own time and talent to the betterment of a community or society — is compassion.

And not as a sound bite, as an idea that you as a human being develop, or fail to develop, that allows you the gift of seeing the world through someone else's eyes, of being able to feel what it would be like to lead someone else's life. Fortunately for us all, it's human nature to have compassion, if sparked properly by putting people in situations where they're exposed to others unlike themselves in real-life vulnerable situations where they can gain insight and return to a safe place to reflect, to read about the structural basis for the situation they just witnessed, and you start to see the flames of compassion sparking. Unfortunately, statistically, this is happening for fewer Americans and we see it play out in dramatic ways.

I remember, you all remember, Katrina coming through. I remember the images after the water broke through the levees and rose. Do you remember the images from news helicopters, of hundreds and then thousands over that two-day period holding up signs, "Help," "Drop Food," "Need Water"? The semester after that I took a

sociology of religion course at Emory. The professor brought in a survey, a three-night national phone survey. It was fascinating to read. Perspectives on all sorts of issues. We're turning through this thing, and we get to a page where one of the questions said, "Did these images sadden you?" And one of the students across from me, an African-American Ph.D. student, noticed the breakdown of answers by race. And the black column was 99 percent, which in my mind I think the 1 percent didn't hear the question right. Of course they were saddened at the images, at least 99% of African Americans were. But only 54 percent of white Americans were.

Next question, "Did these images anger you?" Answer: 99 percent of African Americans were angered but only 52% of white Americans were. There was an awkward silence in the room at this point, and the professor throws the paper down, crosses her arms, and says, "Do you see? This is a racist, cold country." And I remember thinking, "Yeah, there are racists walking around, but I don't think it's the 48 percent in that poll. I think that's something different." I raised my hand, reluctantly, and started explaining, and the professor added more and we decided to do more research over the next week and come back. Partly from more structured focus group research in the following week, it became clear what was being measured in that initial poll. It turned out that as a considerable majority of white, educated, middle- and upper-income God-fearing Americans saw that scenario unfold, many of them, if they were being honest, had this in mind: "Of course I feel bad for those people. I don't want to see anyone get hurt. I don't want to see anyone die. But let's be honest: I saw that damn storm rolling through the Gulf of Mexico four days earlier. My cousins drove to Birmingham. I have friends in New Orleans. They were in Dallas two days before the storm came in. I feel bad for those people, but they could have taken a little bit more personal responsibility, planned ahead, and driven out of town."

Now will someone tell me the factual problem here? It turns out that millions of Americans, the majority of them working at least 40 hours a week, don't have cars. And I remember walking out of that class thinking: "That's so fundamentally a failure of college. If we can't have our students leave with a higher education degree in a state like Alabama, where, at that point they're better educated than 90 percent of the state, without a basic factual awareness of what it is to live like the majority of Americans live, which right now is paycheck to paycheck with negative savings, higher

credit card debt than ever before, and for millions of Americans, without a car.”

Those images came to my mind a couple weeks ago with a recent popularized – not just from a presidential candidate – conception of a lazy 47% who don’t pay taxes. And it becomes easy for anyone who pays taxes to dismiss them and not have to consider any of the details or the life circumstances, because it certainly is easier to think: “These people don’t care, they don’t pay. They don’t take responsibility for themselves.” It’s a little bit more shocking when it’s a candidate for the president of the United States. Whether you are a Republican or Democrat, whether you go back to Reagan or either of the Bushes or President Clinton, we can all acknowledge that 20 percent of that 47% are seniors on fixed income who have been paying into the system their entire lives, and 60 percent of the remaining are working as many hours as they can find, most of them full time, receiving their earned income tax credit, which President Reagan doubled, because, until three months ago, there was bipartisan consensus across the nation that a morally responsible nation supports low-income families based on their willingness to work.

Immoral to Leave College Ignorant of How the Majority Live

The bare facts of the life lived by the majority of Americans are something that it is immoral to leave out of a higher education. And it’s not enough to lecture about it. I can speak to 600 college students and put on the chalkboard every category that America is one, two or three in the industrialized world, and it’s a bunch of categories. We are in a blessed nation: self-made millionaires, self-made billionaires, copyrights, patents, women’s access to higher education, women’s access to entrepreneurial ownership opportunities. What a beautifully free, productive, wealthy, advanced nation we are. But also on that list we must include the infant mortality rate, which in the last three years has put us 28th. The state you’re in right now has a between 20 and 25 percent functionally illiterate adult population.

I say that to students and I know many are thinking to themselves, “Twenty percent illiterate. Gosh, we got a lot of lazy, dumb people around.” And sometimes a hand will go up and someone will say “Twenty percent. I don’t think you’re lying to me, but where are they?” And I feel it’s very important to let them know they’re all around you, that they’re seeing one a day at least. There are a lot of complicated nuances about growing up to

be an adult in America and sometimes graduating from public school functionally illiterate. But I assure you for the vast majority of them, laziness isn’t anywhere in the building, and most of them have been working every job they can find since they were 15.

Now, community engagement, service-learning, the scholarship of engagement, taking seriously the role of ethical developers by connecting colleges and universities to communities of all different kinds meaningfully and respectfully ... I think that’s beautiful. I want to add one other part to that. I don’t know if any of you have been thinking of celebrating this young generation for being charitable. Regardless of ideology, I think anyone would admit we have problems in our health care system. Most people agree it shouldn’t be OK to have 48 million people without health insurance, the vast majority of families below the middle not receiving primary care and very few children seeing pediatricians at all.

It occurred to me nine years ago that vision care is one aspect of that failure. There’s not a state that any of you are from that comprehensively provides vision care to children before they get to public school. The reason is you can’t find them in very big numbers until they get to public school. And it occurred to me: “Aha, what a beautiful opportunity for service-learning. Let’s see how serious campuses are about committing to changing things in their communities. This is doable, long term.” (see Table 1)

Screened 4,600 Children

In the first year I convinced seven beautifully engaged, thoughtful professors to make vision screening part of their course. And I hired two college graduates for \$1,000 a month to defer law school to help start this. We got \$4,000 cameras to take pictures of children’s eyes and we went to low-income daycare centers and Head Starts and in the first year we screened 4,600 2-, 3- and 4-year-olds in Alabama, and 12 percent of them had an eye problem that no one had diagnosed. We started building a network (see Table 1) of eye care professionals who agreed to see them for free if they didn’t have insurance. Most of them we could enroll in All Kids [a state and federally funded public health program]. That was eight years ago. Last year, with a staff of 30 employees and 20 campuses around the state we screened 33,000 2-, 3- and 4-year-olds at 1,100 low-income daycare centers in all 67 counties of one of the poorest states in America. The entire thing is done

by people under the age of 23. No other state in America has this. And it's all campus-based and the majority of the students end up in a classroom thinking, "I love what I've just done, that's pretty cool."

But what are we doing? We need to engage 18-year-old volunteers to provide basic vision care? Why, because it's the 3-year-old's fault they don't have a pediatrician? We literally found 14 kids last year with cataracts in one or both eyes. They'd be permanently blind within two years. But we have, the way you have on your campuses, a generation of 19- and 20-year-olds who will set their alarm for 6 o'clock in the morning, pick up that camera, drive to a rural county to find a daycare center you can't see on MapQuest, and go into the living room of a trailer where six kids are sitting on the floor to set that camera up to take pictures of their eyes because they believe in their gut those kids deserve health care like any other kid. Now I love that experience for our students.

The Belief They Can't Learn

There's another side to the growth of engaged learning and scholarship that's not just service based. I would argue one of the biggest challenges facing public education in America is the lack of belief by the majority of Americans that low-income children can learn at all at a high level, that at a certain point it becomes irrational, decade after decade, to pour money into something that doesn't change.

I get that feeling. I've heard it from people honestly giving it to me. I promise you the majority of Alabamians don't see the high-end result everyone is hoping for. And the most angering thing that happens is, in Alabama we have 4.5 million people, and we have 11 torchbearer schools. That's a high poverty, yet high-performing school. So on the one hand, you think to yourself, "Are you kidding me? There are 4.5 million people in this state and you're telling me there are only 11 schools in low-income neighborhoods that are doing a good job? That's a disaster."

And I would say, "You're right. That's a disaster." But I think it deserves to be seen from the other side as well. There are, after all, 11. There's E.D. Nixon Elementary School in Montgomery, where 99 percent of the kids are on free or reduced lunches and 85 percent are from single-parent households. Five years ago it was on a state takeover list. Their fourth graders were scoring in the 14th percentile. A new principal was hired, a special woman. There are 32 teachers at E.D. Nixon

Elementary School. Anyone who knows anything about Alabama knows we have a strong teacher's union. It's hard to fire teachers. Twenty-two of her teachers were replaced within two years. And when people ask how did you do that in Alabama, she says: "I made it so miserable for them to be in my building, most of them left on their own. They didn't buy my story and they wanted to get out." I asked her what was her story. "Every child in the building will learn at a high level. It's our responsibility. If you don't believe that from every fiber of your being, get out of my building." And she said, "I used stronger words than that." She reminded me of Nick Saban.

Literally four years later, her school is acknowledged as a torchbearer school. Her fourth graders' reading scores are in the 88th percentile, two points higher than the state average, two points higher than Prattville Middle School, a suburban fast-growing area where the schools are filled up with families leaving schools like E.D. Nixon to get a better education.

There's a school in Mobile, George Hall Elementary School, where they had to raise money two years ago to build a shower because a third of their students don't have running water every day of the month. Their scores are even higher than those at E.D. Nixon. They're blowing the roof off the building, and as you can imagine, it's important to know what's happening in these schools. These are special principals and incredibly hardworking teachers, and there's no one silver bullet. I would trade 10 percent of the volunteer hours from students at Alabama to put them on a bus and drive them to some of these schools so their experience with service and engagement and ethics wouldn't just be about poor kids who are failing, so they would experience structural, prophetic change, and not just because white college students are helping out, but because talented teachers and principals are turning schools around.

That's what I call Documenting Justice, the side of service-learning that lets you go volunteer, lets you make a difference in a malfunctioning school or a library but also gives you the context to learn about the visionary prophetic moves forward in all realms of policy that are taking place every day, all over the country.

I'm so proud to be in this room. I can't imagine a higher calling than being involved in this cultural shift in the way universities help young people define their obligations. There has never been a more important time to be part of this conversation. Republican or Democrat or

