In an Era of Campus Activism, a Student Group Seeks to Be the Face of Free Speech

By Sarah Brown MARCH 31, 2016

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NO MU MENTION

When black student activists at Princeton University began protesting last fall against what they saw as a poor racial climate on the campus, Joshua Freeman just didn’t get it.

Mr. Freeman, a sophomore, is black and describes himself as a liberal — a background shared by many, if not most, of the recent protesters here. He’s an engineering major, and he can count on one or two hands the number of African-
American and Hispanic students in the program, which enrolls about 60 students. He’s never had a black or Hispanic professor. Still, "there has not been a time when I’ve felt uncomfortable on this campus," Mr. Freeman said in an interview last week.

Really? "Absolutely not," he said, smiling. "People here are cool!"

He supports having discussions about how the university can become more inclusive. But he believes the demands made by Princeton’s Black Justice League activists — which include removing Woodrow Wilson’s name from the university’s public-policy school and a residential college, requiring all undergraduates to take a course "on the history of marginalized peoples," and mandating cultural competency training for faculty and staff members — would make the campus "go backwards" into a segregation-like era and stifle constructive dialogue across the university.

In November, Mr. Freeman helped launch a sort of protest against the protesters. He joined nine other students to form the Princeton Open Campus Coalition, which professes to protect students’ right to voice their opinions "in a manner free from intimidation." They say they’ve heard from both white and minority students who are afraid to speak out against the protesters because they might be labeled a racist or a race-traitor. In the past four months, students at three other colleges — Brown University, Duke University, and New York’s Hamilton College — have been inspired by Princeton to form similar groups.

Since protests over racial tensions spread across college campuses in the fall, student activists have drawn criticism for their methods and demands, some of which can seem unrealistic on the surface. But Princeton’s coalition represents one of the most concrete on-campus responses to protesters. The group has an unusual mission: It formed in opposition to a movement, rather than to advance its own specific agenda.

The coalition quickly became the darling of right-leaning media outlets such as The Washington Examiner and The Daily Caller, which hailed it for taking a stand against political correctness. The National Association of Scholars named the group among its top 10 influencers in higher education in 2015. Two of the group’s members also appeared on Fox News Channel’s Fox & Friends to explain why they opposed the protesters’ approach, and another appeared on a panel at the Conservative Political Action Conference to discuss similar issues earlier this month.

The reaction reflects that free speech has become somewhat of a conservative mantra, especially as activists espouse views seen as progressive, and much of the coalition’s support has come from the right. But its members stress that they’re nonpartisan, pointing to the diverse front they’ve assembled: Six of them identify as conservatives,
two say they’re liberal, and two consider themselves to be libertarian. Six are men; four are women. At least four are racial minorities. One has a physical disability.

Most of the students didn’t know each other before forming the coalition; they connected through friends and social media as reactions to the protests escalated across the campus and online. Joshua Zuckerman, a senior and a member of the coalition, recalled feeling angry at the time that the demands were being made unilaterally, with no dialogue. "Where were the students fighting back against this?" he wondered.

What united them, Mr. Freeman said, was an ability to publicly take controversial positions without jeopardizing other leadership roles on campus and a sense that they "didn’t mind possibly having their reputations dragged through the mud."

And they do indeed face some fierce criticism, on their own campus and elsewhere. While the members portray themselves as the voice of a large group of moderate students who feel that protesters’ aggressive tactics don’t represent their perspective, many activists and others argue that the coalition’s focus on civility serves to dismiss the salient points minority students are raising about how colleges can better serve them.

‘You Don’t Need to Scream’

Mr. Freeman, Mr. Zuckerman, and Andy Loo, a senior who identifies as a libertarian, sat last week in a wood-paneled, dimly-lit room in one of Princeton’s eating clubs.

During the first few minutes of an hourlong conversation with a reporter, the three students didn’t look like a typical group that meets on a regular basis. In fact, it doesn’t. It’s "next to impossible," Mr. Zuckerman said, to get all of the members together at once. So the group doesn’t meet much in person anymore, communicating mostly through Facebook messages and email.

The group’s first formal action was, as is often the case, to write a letter. In mid November, the members asked Princeton’s president, Christopher L. Eisgruber, to meet with them and expressed worry that Princeton students who didn’t agree with the protesters were being vilified. They spoke with him a few days later and said they were satisfied with the president’s positive response to their concerns.

They’ve publicized their message through social media, op-eds, and interviews with The New York Times, the Huffington Post, and other national publications; Mr. Zuckerman testified before a U.S. House of Representatives committee. They’ve also hosted a forum and helped bring a speaker to campus — Ramesh Ponnuru, a senior
editor for National Review— and they hope to sponsor at least two additional such events this semester.

Why was such an organization necessary? Mr. Freeman recalled an experience last fall. Mr. Eisgruber had just signed off on a pledge to address the demands brought to him by the Black Justice League after the group staged a 32-hour sit-in at his office. The language within the demands had been watered down, but Mr. Freeman was concerned that Mr. Eisgruber had effectively legitimized the protesters’ requests. So he posted what he describes as "a slightly snarky status" on Facebook.

"Self-segregation and censorship, that is how BJL chose to ‘fix’ racial issues on campus," Mr. Freeman wrote. "Good job BJL, you all still don’t have my support."

A tense debate followed in the comments section between Mr. Freeman and several others, including a Black Justice League activist. Eventually, the activist, who is also black, wrote to Mr. Freeman: "We gotta stand in solidarity with each other. At the end of the day, we only got us. Nobody ever loved us except for us." Mr. Freeman took that to mean: "Why are you siding with them? You should be on our side because you’re black like us."

For the three coalition members gathered last week, rattling off arguments against each of the Black Justice League’s demands seemed like second nature. "What we’re honoring Woodrow Wilson for is not his racist policies — I think most people understand that," Mr. Loo said. "It’s that we’re recognizing his contributions to the university."

What about, say, dedicated housing for black students? "Pushing ourselves into our own corner will just isolate African Americans from the rest of the university," Mr. Freeman said. "It’s going to be a constant ‘us vs. them’ mentality."

Then Mr. Zuckerman established the coalition’s main point: "You don’t need to scream at the president through a megaphone to get him to listen to you." There are formal channels at Princeton — such as meetings of the faculty and of student government — for students to bring forward policy proposals, he said.

Destiny Crockett, a junior and Black Justice League member, said in an interview last fall that avoiding such channels was precisely the point. She and other activists had been meeting with administrators for months about the demands, she said. "We are doing away with this respectability policy and this idea of saying, Let’s do this another way to make people feel more comfortable."
Ms. Crockett has described the coalition as "an anti-Black Justice League group with no policy demands, and a habit of invoking the politics of respectability," according to Princeton Magazine. She didn’t respond to a request for comment for this article.

A ‘Deeply Troubling Understanding’

Ask students on campus, and some will tell you that Princeton is the kind of environment in which a group like the coalition can gain traction, perhaps more so than at other colleges.

The university’s administration seems to be free-speech friendly, said Noah Mayerson, a sophomore. For instance, he said, Mr. Eisgruber drew attention earlier this month by saying that he’d allow a pro-Osama bin Laden event on campus if such a request was ever made. Several students suggested that Princeton had a more ideologically diverse student body than most colleges.

Some at the university see the coalition’s appeal to civility politics as tone-deaf. Isaiah Nieves, a freshman, described the creation of the group as "something we see often in American society, where predominantly white groups try to suppress the voices of people of color."

Eddie S. Glaude Jr., chair of the Center for African American Studies and a professor of religion at Princeton, pushed back against the coalition’s view that black students who didn’t agree with the protesters’ demands had no voice. Mr. Glaude helped draft a letter supporting the Black Justice League that was signed by more than 100 Princeton faculty members. "The assumption that the black community is singular, that there is a sense of sameness that informs our politics, is an assumption that grows out of a very deeply troubling understanding of who we are as human beings," he said in an email.

Angus Johnston, a historian of student activism who teaches at the City University of New York's Hostos Community College, said he supports the coalition’s mission of promoting open debate, but he took issue with the group’s assertion that students not speaking out for fear of being called racist amounted to a threat to free speech. "Calling somebody a racist is part of dialogue," he said. He said he’d like to see "a more vigorous defense of free-speech rights being mounted by the people who are framing their concerns as free-speech concerns."

What Comes Next?

A question lingers for the group: How might it take on an identity that’s not rooted solely in last fall’s protests? "We’re not just a reactionary group," Mr. Freeman said.
But finding a longer-term existence won’t be easy; five of the coalition’s members are seniors.

Much of the coalition’s recent activity has involved reacting to campus controversies on social media — both on the group’s Facebook page and individual members’ accounts. After an incident at Emory University last week, in which students protested chalked messages of "Trump," "Vote Trump," and "Trump 2016" on their campus, Mr. Zuckerman posted a Facebook status criticizing the students and relating their reaction to debates about oversensitivity that cropped up last fall at Yale University and Oberlin College. The Princeton group as a whole has weighed in disapprovingly on Harvard University’s social-justice place mats and Georgetown Law School’s decision to ban students from campaigning on the campus for Bernie Sanders.

Coalition members have also been "participating in the university’s process," Mr. Zuckerman said, by attending forums intended to solicit students’ feedback on the demands. They’re now looking for ways to move forward, he said, as "the arguments for and against these demands have pretty much been beaten into the ground."

By the members’ estimates, the coalition has become a known presence on the campus. Most students interviewed by The Chronicle knew about the group. "Sometimes people come up to us and just want to talk," Mr. Zuckerman said. That role might be one way the group could achieve longevity, said Peter Singer, a professor of bioethics at Princeton and a prominent philosopher. Mr. Singer hosted a debate between the coalition and the Black Justice League during his practical ethics course last semester. "I think it’s good to have a group that would offer students support, no matter how controversial the issue might be," he said.

For Devon N. Naftzger, a senior and coalition member who says she’s a conservative, the group has been an opportunity to cross paths with students far outside her usual social and intellectual circles. "I have never seen a more naturally diverse group of people," she said by phone.

For a group that prides itself on its diversity of opinion, Mr. Freeman, Mr. Zuckerman, and Mr. Loo seemed to agree on just about everything during an hour of conversation. What don’t they agree on? "Bernie Sanders," Mr. Zuckerman offered immediately with a laugh, looking at Mr. Freeman. "Come on, feel the Bern, y’all!" Mr. Freeman protested jokingly.

With its protests, the Black Justice League has made some strides at Princeton — it has sparked a nuanced discussion about Woodrow Wilson’s legacy, and cultural
affinity groups now have designated rooms in a university cultural center. The lasting impact of the Princeton Open Campus Coalition is less clear.

"Do we all know the right way forward? No," Mr. Freeman said. "Do we all disagree about which way is forward? Yes, probably. But we all agree that the way we’re going right now is not the right way."