

## The Elephant in the Classroom

Catherine Hoffman | December 2016

Last fall racial protests at the University of Missouri made national headlines. But even though these events made national news, this semester I feel like nobody really talks about them. As a freshman myself, I think that my classmates aren't educated enough on what happened last year, and MU isn't taking steps to educate students who don't have all of the facts.

**Sam Ediger:** *I think there were some like racial issues going on like some racism happening and I think that the University wasn't doing a lot to help it or stop it, so that led to some civil unrest on campus.*

Freshman journalism student Sam Ediger has some vague ideas, but overall really isn't clear on what happened.

**Sam Ediger:** *I think the Chancellor had to step down? I think that was what happened? I think someone else was like going without food on one of the quadrangles, I forget which one. And that's about it, that I know of.*

A lot of freshmen I've talked to say they feel confused about last year's events. When I asked where they got their information, the answer was most often their parents or national news outlets. But some students say that what they saw on TV wasn't how things were on campus.

Freshman Nathan Gasana had a brother and several friends on campus last year. He has a perspective that is different from many other students who are new to MU. Not every incoming freshman had such close ties to people who were actually on campus during that time.

**Catherine Hoffman (during interview):** *Did they say anything about the media not portraying the campus climate accurately?*

**Nathan Gasana:** *Yeah that was mostly what they said, because they portrayed it as Mizzou being a racist campus instead of people standing up against racism and intolerance and things of that nature.*

So if there's a difference between stories— what students experienced to what was on the news— what are we supposed to think?

**Kayla Myers:** *Freshmen are very very like, I wouldn't say unknowledgeable, but like there's so much to learn and there's so much you don't know until you've had a semester here.*

Junior Kayla Meyers has one foot in both worlds: the world of new freshmen who are still figuring themselves out, and that of upperclassmen who are better established on campus. Kayla is a peer advisor for freshmen in a residence hall, as well as a freshmen orientation leader. She's spent a lot of time talking to freshmen, and she noticed a trend.

**Kayla Myers:** *A lot of them didn't know as much as I thought they would. I thought, especially during the summer, I thought they would ask a lot more questions about last fall.*

At the beginning of the school year, MU held a mandatory seminar for freshmen called [Citizenship at Mizzou](#). I believe Citizenship at Mizzou functioned well as a great diversity training. They talked about how to treat people who are different than you, which is an important message. But this school is in need of more than another diversity training– it needs to acknowledge the past instead of burying it.

**Kayla Myers:** *I was a little bit disappointed with Citizenship at Mizzou just because I feel like it was beating around the bush that we've had some awful things happen and some awful things said.*

I think that diversity trainings are very important, but students still need to know the facts of what happened last year. By and large, freshmen I've talked to know nothing about events like the [threat to shoot black Mizzou students](#) on the anonymous website Yik Yak and are shocked when they find out.

Freshman Sam Ediger says it's important...

**Sam Ediger:** *People need to know exactly what happened to prevent that from happening in the future and stuff like that.*

After another racially motivated verbal attack on campus in September, it's looking to me like history is repeating itself. But pushing a general kumbaya message on students about treating fellow students respectfully still resulted in a racially motivated attack on campus.

**Nathan Gasana:** *That's kinda disheartening but I feel like it's only because of a misunderstanding of what happened last year because people didn't really understand what happened.*

One diversity training isn't going to melt away years of built up prejudice in any given college student. It's not going to make hundreds of years of institutionalized racism go away either. I know that. But maybe tensions would ease if everybody at least knew all of the facts. Race isn't always easy to talk about, but tip toeing around the topic is part of what sparked frustration and anger last year. The MU administration didn't talk about race issues, and the student body protested against their indifference.

Understanding a conflict is the first step towards solving it. It's time to address the elephant in the room. We're still moving past what happened last fall, but students can't be a part of the solution if they don't even know the problem.

For Making Waves, I'm Catherine Hoffman.