

## I'm just saying...

by Brian Shimamoto

On March 11, just hours after a 9.0 earthquake devastated Japan, third-year UCLA student, Alexandra Wallace, posted a 3-minute video on YouTube that lit a firestorm of controversy over freedom of speech versus freedom from discrimination. By March 18, Wallace announced her decision to leave UCLA after alluding to death threats and harassment of her family.

I do not condone Wallace's comments and believe them to be racist in nature; however, I couldn't help but be disappointed at yet another opportunity to engage a student in a critical dialogue about the persistence of racism in our country.

It is clear from the myriad of responses to Wallace's video blog (vlog) that many people were outraged and very likely triggered by her mocking ching chong imitation and her gross stereotyping of Asians - and rightfully so. Unfortunately, like many I wasn't terribly surprised by 'Asians in the Library.' As Anna Lau, a professor of clinical psychology at UCLA recently wrote in one [blog-response](#), I too have learned that anti-Asian American sentiment is not only widespread, it's also socially acceptable (does anyone remember A&F's 'Two Wongs Make it White' Chinese Laundry t-shirt?).

As a student affairs practitioner, I have frequently used my knowledge of student development theory to inform my practice when working with college students. By understanding the process young adults go through to reach maturity, I believe I am better able to assist them with that development. Dr. Milton Bennett published his **Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS)** in 1986 to explain the process individuals go through to become more successful in negotiating cross-cultural interactions. After watching Wallace's video tirade, it is clear to me that she has a **Polarized-Defense** world-view of cultural difference; that is, she is typically over-critical of the cultural other (those different from herself) and under-critical of her own culture (as if no white student has ever used their cell phone inappropriately).

While Bennett's model acknowledges that *exposure* to cultural difference is vital to progress through each stage, the *development of intercultural competence* is far more successful when intentional. The DMIS identifies developmental tasks for each stage of the model. In Wallace's case, her developmental task is to become more tolerant of cultural differences and to recognize the basic commonalities among people of different cultures. This in of itself is not the ultimate goal (many of us shudder at the idea of "tolerating" difference); however, for a person in the early, ethnocentric stages of the DMIS, this is *progress*. In fact, if we intervene too early with a developmental task further along the continuum, the individual often becomes more entrenched in their stage. I find myself wondering how open to cultural differences Wallace will be now that she feels she has no choice but to leave UCLA.

Unfortunately examples such as Wallace's viral video seem to occur with more and more frequency these days. But as Channing Kennedy pointed out on [Colorlines.com](#), "...the Internet's rebuttal to Wallace fought unexamined bigotry and hateful language with more unexamined bigotry and hateful language - relying largely

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on derogatory terms and stereotypes about women." [Emphasis added] The irony of this eye-for-an-eye response is that it serves to *polarize* us into two camps: those who demonize Wallace as a card-carrying, racist bigot and those who side with Wallace and characterize her critics as "overly sensitive." How is this different from what Wallace did to Asians in her vlog?

So how else could this have ended? Was there a different choice for Wallace? Perhaps a restorative justice approach may have been an option. By involving all stakeholders and taking the time to identify ways to repair the harm done, this incident could have been an opportunity for both Wallace and those impacted by her actions to better understand each other. Unfortunately, based on how most people responded to her vlog (some with threats of violence), leaving UCLA may have been the only choice she felt she had left. Regardless, from a Student Affairs perspective there is still an opportunity for powerful intergroup dialogue to occur. Intergroup dialogue programs are based on the premise that sustained and meaningful intergroup contact, dialogue, and education are necessary to address issues of conflict and to promote the creation of just, multicultural campus communities. These kinds of interventions support the development of intercultural competence and can help to change the complex social relationships our students find themselves navigating. By choosing to stay in the moment and engaging in meaningful conversation we can begin to build authentic relationships based on mutual respect.



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