

The world according to Woodward

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Students trickle into class at Murkland Hall and settle into hard wooden desks, the kind with a writing platform that juts out like a left or right wing, the kind ostensibly designed to keep students awake.

They retrieve notebooks and delve into Psychology of Race. A spectacled professor coaxes answers from them.

"Knowledge is collective," William R. Woodward says. "We share in this community."

An hour of class grinds away -- and not a lick of it about 9/11.

What gives? Isn't this UNH's "nutty professor?" The guy who questions whether the U.S. government was behind the terrorist attacks? He's the one. But, contrary to critics, he insists conspiracy theories have no place in his class.

His students express a mix of surprise and amusement when they learn their mild-mannered professor is being vilified in the press and ridiculed by the political establishment and talk radio for his membership in Scholars for 9/11 Truth.

"Really," one exclaims when he learns that Bill O'Reilly called Woodward "an idiot" and that the professor declined to be a guest on Fox News. Senior Nia Chauvin only learned of the controversy after someone asked her, "Did you hear about that teacher at UNH?" She hadn't.

Other students, upon hearing similar questions, thought people were referring to UNH mechanical engineering professor David W. Watt, who was arrested last month in connection with an alleged Internet solicitation of a minor.



UNH professor William Woodward is a member of Scholars for 9/11 Truth, which questions whether the government played a role in the attacks.

Photo by [Jamie Cohen](#)

As the controversy smolders, a grassroots student group is trying to get Woodward fired for circulating his ideas in an academic setting.

When the Psychology of Race class concluded, his students offered their own opinions of 9/11, views they noted were not shaped by their professor's personal views or extracurricular activities.

"Everything we hear, it's always going to be censored," Chauvin said.

Chris Heuer, a senior psychology major, said the government should take whatever steps necessary to learn from the terrorist attacks to avoid a repeat performance. If that requires a supplemental investigation or another inquiry into what went wrong, so be it, he said.

"I don't see why that would be a problem," Heuer said.

Another student added all these conspiracy theories should be taken with a grain of salt.

"It's hard to know what the truth is," another said.

Woodward, 61, a professor at UNH since 1975, smiled as he listened to the students making their own points.

He flashed a similar smile earlier in the class, as students teamed up to discuss a chapter from "Borders and Bridges: Building New Directions for the Women's Movement," by Janet L. Finn.

"Once we break out of a binary logic, we open ourselves to fresh ways of thinking," Finn writes of the importance of language and open dialogue.

Woodward, too, cherishes dialogue. He encourages a vigorous exchange of opinions as a way for students and teacher alike to understand how people think of race and culture. His syllabus states, "I encourage self-disclosure and application of concepts to your life. I will do the same in an effort to model what I am asking you to do."

As the students discussed the subject in pairs, Woodward leaned in and described the buzz of the discussion as the sound of inquiring minds in the act of learning.

"My ulterior motive is to make you a better world citizen," he later told the class.

Woodward, a former Durham town councilor, declined to be interviewed twice for this story, but changed his mind and agreed to allow a journalist to sit through his class. It was against the advice of some friends and colleagues.

"I don't want to be in the news anymore," he said before giving his consent.

He said the media has not accurately conveyed his views. He contends the investigation into the terrorist attacks is riddled with gaps and inconsistencies. He recommends people read the 9/11 Commission report and the counter-literature to arrive at their own conclusions.

He expressed respect for his students and UNH. As for his classes, he said, "I'm not pushing my agenda, if I had one."

Some groups do not see it that way. The American Council of Trustees and Alumni suggested a formal investigation into whether Woodward is abiding by professional standards.

"Academic freedom does not mean anything goes," said Anne Neal, president of the Washington-based organization.

UNH has reviewed Woodward's files and teaching record, and the university system's board of trustees concluded the tenured professor adheres to academic standards.

Yet the barbs keep coming. Gov. John Lynch, a past chairman of the university system trustees, has called Woodward's ideas "crazy and offensive." Others argue UNH should not condone the 9/11 conspiracy theories, just as it would not condone a professor teaching students the Holocaust never happened or that the world is flat.

Some of his friends and colleagues are a little flummoxed over the uproar. Katie Delahaye Paine, who served with Woodward on the Durham Town Council, recalled the former councilor as a quiet, diligent and thoughtful councilor.

"Bill is the last person I'd imagine would be in the midst of a major controversy," she wrote in an e-mail last week. "But he's always been very true to his convictions."

Woodward joined Scholars for 9/11 Truth earlier this year. He is the sole member from New Hampshire. He said he was partly inspired by Guy Chichester, an anti-war and anti-nuclear activist from Rye, whose advocacy also includes the fight for affordable housing.

The rally for peace goes to Woodward's roots. The divorced father of three is a Quaker, also known as the Religious Society of Friends, the Christian denomination whose traditional beliefs are pacifism, social equality, integrity and simplicity. The American Friends Service Committee, founded in 1917 by the Quakers, plays an active role in the peace movement.

Woodward is also a member of Seacoast Peace Response. His commentary on participating in a rally in New York City is still posted on the group's Web site.

When he isn't theorizing in his own time about how the World Trade Center towers fell or the accounting for the 9/11 hijackers, Woodward enjoys bird watching. He plays the tuba. And he reads up a lot on the history of psychology, making time as well for four daily newspapers.

He is working on a human ecological account of the Rwandan genocide and a proposal for public policy in Central Africa, according to his UNH faculty biography.

This week, Woodward takes his Psychology of Race class into Week 5, an exploration of race in education, and a dissection of "Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools," by educator and activist Jonathan Kozol.

So the syllabus says, anyway.



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