

# Dr. Alex Willingham Talks Activism, Then and Now

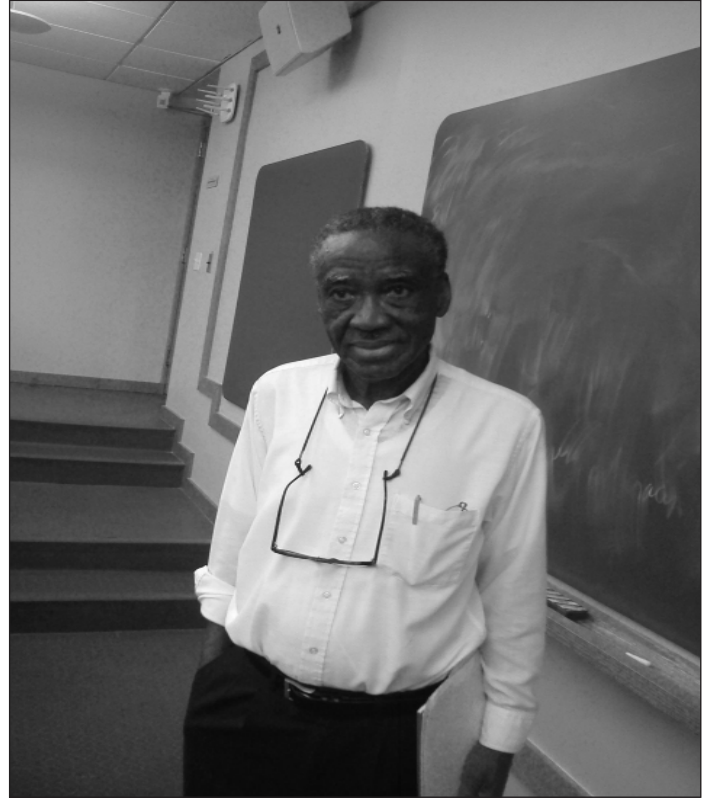
Emanuel McMiller

**Dr. Alex Willingham was educated at the Southern University, Baton Rouge (1963), the University of Iowa (1965), and the University of North Carolina (1974). He has been part of the Williams Political Science department since 1989. Since joining the faculty, he has served as Chair of the African- American Studies Program, Director of the Multicultural Center, and faculty advisor of the Williams College Law Society. He is considered an expert in African-American history, especially the Civil Rights Movement, and the interaction between politics and race. In the following interview, he discusses the forms activism has taken from the 1950s to the present.**

What initially made you focus on the issues and subject areas that you [specialize] in now, predominantly civil rights? What made you feel that you had to get more involved and what made you delve even deeper into the subject area [i.e., Political Science] that you're teaching?

*Well, I guess first of all I did like politics and political science and stuff like that, but, frankly, my biography coincides very closely with attacks on... [the]elimination of racial segregation. When I was born, all those laws were in place. When I started coming to maturity in college and young adulthood, they were very much under attack. So it was hard to avoid to tell you the truth. I had some profs, in undergrad particularly, who were very interesting, exciting and dynamic, and that was part of it as well.*

While you were in undergrad and grad school in the 1960s, did you take an active part in those student movements at the time, whether it be attacks on racial segregation or otherwise?



*Well, I guess the answer probably is yes and no. It's no insofar as one talks about an active role in SNCC and the organizations that were effective at that time. We had two major confrontations when I was at undergraduate school at Baton Rouge, a typical southern segregated city. And I was supportive in those. By the time I got to graduate school in Iowa, I made a departure from that. I went one way, because I [was now] in the Midwest. By 1968, I went UNC, so I [was] back in the South, and I got involved in a little activity down there. I did not see myself as an activist in terms of SNCC. Once I got into academia, I knew my concern and my responsibility was the classroom. It was to support things in the classroom that were worthwhile, but it wasn't to do propaganda for students that I [happened to be] teaching.*

What do you think is the main obstacle confronting the Civil Rights Movement today?

*I would rather say that the Civil Rights Movement came and then came to a conclusion. Not that race is out of the question, or off the table or anything, but it does leave for us lessons about tactics, and ways of thinking about stuff.*

*Me and several of my friends are worried that as we got comfortable jobs, and so forth and could be pointed out as [people] who did fairly well, that good numbers of Black people did not make it, and continue to live in situations that we would say were racially problematic. There are some concerns out there that we would want to address. [Particularly], what is needed here is [further development] in these [underprivileged] communities, not of respect from white power structures or petty bourgeoisie black leaders but the capacity of our communities to respond to important issues.*

Where do you see the future of student-based activism and protest?

*I got a feeling it's always going to be there, and it's going to recur. I would have to say that the Occupy Wall Street is the basis of stopping to think. It's sounding very youthful.*

There's been a lot of talk about the Occupy Wall Street Movement, and I've noticed that you tried to differentiate the Civil Rights Movement from the Occupy Movement. How would you describe the difference between them, and what's the danger of putting them in one category together?

*When we look at the political history of the country, we have to think about movements as coming and going, and we need to be more sensitive about the peculiarities of those movements, especially the progressive ones. Plus, I like to respect those people in other movements for what they did.*

*Every one of these movements was met with all kinds of skepticism. When that first early activity occurred, let's just call that April of 1960. It was 1968 when Martin Luther King, Jr. was killed. That's nearly a decade.*

*We're not talking about something that just happens in two or three weeks, or a month or so.*

*In regards to the Occupy Wall Street, this may be the movement that is evolving at this new point in history. I don't like something that says there is no leader, but I see their point. This is the same thing that SNCC did in 1960.*

The world is becoming increasingly technological, and most of the discussions that we have are taking place in the online community. Do you think that there may be a danger in limiting ourselves to online activism and online protest, and not being active physically?

*Well, I'm just going to tell you. I don't have a lot of faith in [the internet] myself. After the Murdoch situation, I'm rather suspicious about communication. At the same time, whatever instruments are there are going to be used, so I can't oppose it. I suspect that people will get to know one another better on a face-to-face basis though when possible.*

*I would have to say, though, that every generation adjusts to its particular situation. There's no doubt that the long distance telephone in '60 became very useful, and it was relied on by many people (for purpose of organizing).*

Are there any words of advice you have for student activist organizations in terms of the role that they can play in the future of society?

*One of the things that happened in the civil rights movement that I remember very well was the way some of us got very connected to that activity and ended up drifting away from their classwork. Some of the active ones (in the movement) didn't graduate. And that kind of bothers me.*

*Make sure you got your eyes on the prize, which is the work you want to do. I can't say don't get involved in other things, because some of that can be very educational.*