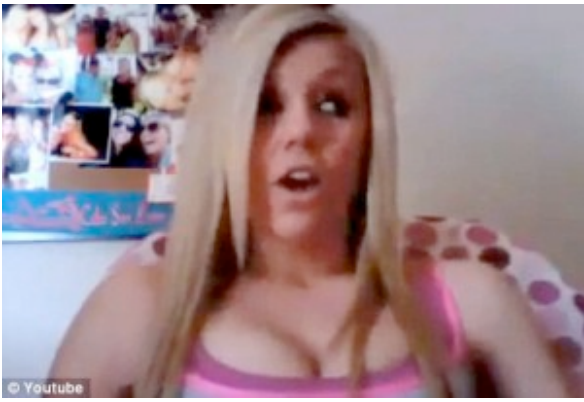


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The Last Word on Alexandra Wallace

by [Guest Columnist](#) on April 4, 2011 · [View Comments](#)



By Chon Noriega

While the Chicano Studies Research Center was opening its newly renovated library as a unique resource for students, community members, and scholars from around the world, UCLA was receiving worldwide media attention for student Alexandra Wallace’s now infamous YouTube rant, “Asians in the Library.”

The video drew an immediate and sharp rebuke from UCLA Chancellor Gene Block. The student, who removed the posting and apologized, received threats and withdrew from the university. So what have we learned?

The first lesson is that libraries remain important sites for education: as library patrons we encounter not just a collection of resources, but other people as well, and we must learn to learn from both. The CSRC Library has hosted scholars from Finland, England, Italy, Tunisia, and Japan, among other places. Even from Mexico! Knowledge begins with difference.

The second lesson is that social media has transformed the way we communicate: exchanges that were once private can now be made into instantaneous and public spectacles. But UCLA’s curriculum has not caught up to that new normal, and we are not preparing our students for the mediated social environment they must navigate. Digital natives such as Ms. Wallace have no prior experience with the once sacred divide between public and private. Although she removed her posting, it will live on forever, and prospective employers will know about it once they Google her name.



The third lesson is the one most frequently overlooked in this entire incident: Ms. Wallace was a student—our student—and students make mistakes. That is part of the learning process. Otherwise we would not grade them! Our job as educators is to create and sustain a learning environment—a community, if you will—and to guide students through the difficult and necessary process of learning to learn from books, from other people, and from sitting in a library.

Ms. Wallace’s video should not be considered as something alien to the UCLA community. To do so is to fool ourselves about the complicated state of “diversity” on the campus and to deny ourselves any opportunity to learn from the inevitable mistakes that can and will happen. The video should be acknowledged as a mistake, and as an offense to Asian Americans, but it should also be seen as a learning opportunity. It behooves us to ponder how we might have made the best of that opportunity, and how that student might have been part of such a process.

Chon Noriega is a professor and director of UCLA’s Chicano Studies Research Center.

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