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NORTH CAROLINA AGRICULTURAL AND TECHNICAL STATE UNIVERSITY

## Empowering A&T's Emerging Agents

**Greensboro, NC – September, 2018** – Damion Waymer is a professor and chair of the Department of Liberal Studies, College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences. Before joining the faculty at N.C. A&T, he served as the Associate Provost for Faculty Affairs, Development & Diversity at the University of Cincinnati where he led aggressive faculty recruitment initiatives.

Corporate greed led to the fall of the economic market in 2008. Enter the Occupy Wall Street Movement in 2011. While crises such as national economic collapse often are considered incidents people and organizations should avoid at all costs, crises also provide opportunities for people whose voices are otherwise silenced the opportunity to inject their opinions publicly, challenge existing power structures and change the narratives in society. Crises can be an opportunity for the “little people” to change the course of history.

If you're 18 – 24 years old, Dr. Damion Waymer has news for you: you have the power to effect change. Once a marginalized, discounted population, America's youngest voting bloc is smart, aware, engaged and more connected than ever before. Waymer calls these folks emerging agents; the people who are coming onto the scene to effect change in policy and society. Young people not only have opinions, they have arrived at them through powerful personal experiences and meaningful discourse with peers from all over the world. Compounding this already strident youthful activism is the fact that the parents (and grandparents) of today's young people have, well, completely dropped the ball. You needn't look much further than the national debt, the environment, school safety... we could go on. To their credit, young people appear ready and raring to step up and be the adults in the room. How can we help them be successful? The future of our nation depends on it.

### Define Your Message

Waymer is interested in speech. He has studied it (Purdue) and made a career of it (Cincinnati, Texas A&M, now N.C. A&T) but mainly he practices it. He immerses himself in what people say, what motivates them to say what they do, and how messages are received and acted upon. In his mind, speech has never been more important than it is today in 2018.

“One of my heroes in academia and life was a woman named Marie Nichols,” explains Waymer. “She was a professor of rhetoric, an author, and one of the most accomplished communicators of the twentieth century. What made her great was the tremendous emotional investment she made in speech. She knew the words people chose, and the way they said them, were powerful. I use Nichols' tenets in much of my teaching, and it guides my research as well.”



**North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University** is the nation's largest historically black university. Classified a “higher research” university by the Carnegie Foundation, it is a land-grant member of the University of North Carolina System. A&T is known for its leadership in producing graduates in engineering, agriculture and other STEM fields. The university was founded in 1891 and is located in Greensboro, North Carolina.

There are recurring themes in Nichols' written and spoken work: people should stop blaming the past and start speaking thoughtfully about the future they want to see; it isn't enough to throw an idea out there and see if it sticks-- she called this enlightened choice, the best outcome will require a lot of thought; the most powerful thing a person can do is speak authentically from personal experience; and people should strive to speak with honesty, truth, justice, tolerance, courage and hope.

"It is fascinating to me that a woman born in 1908 has such a perfect message for 2018's emerging agents," says Waymer. "The difficulties and strife we encounter today are not new experiences; they are part of the human condition. We have worked through difficulties before, and we will again, if we take responsibility and care in our speech with one another." Waymer wants the emerging agents in his classes to dig deep, acknowledge past personal experiences, but look forward as they define their message.

*Based on persistent thought about your life, what do you stand for?*

## **Raise Your Voice**

Waymer's research projects address fundamental concerns about issues of power, race, class, and gender, and how these social constructions shape and influence how people receive, react, and respond to certain messages.

As a young person growing up in rural South Carolina, Waymer was exposed to some of the nation's most dysfunctional voting mechanisms. The 1965 Voting Rights Act allowed for the creation of "majority-minority" districts which were designed to empower the disenfranchised, allowing a racial minority the opportunity to elect their favorite candidates to public office. Unfortunately, unintended consequences turned things upside-down in South Carolina (and many other states in the United States), resulting in disproportional representation in state legislatures. To this day, 50 years after the legislation, the voices of African Americans are being diluted severely as politicians are gerrymandering voting districts, in part, to minimize African Americans' voting power. Waymer wrote a paper about the strategic manipulation of districts, which was published by the London School of Economics: <https://bit.ly/2bzuHZW>

Black representation is part of the personal message which Waymer has sought to define: marginalized populations must raise their voices through voting, activism and powerful, authentic speech. "Young people often ask me what they can do to change a world which they perceive as stacked against them. The first thing they need to understand is that the world has always been stacked against someone. The good news is, there are many examples where people just like them have defined their message, and raised their voices." With many modern elections being decided by a few hundred votes, it's obvious that every American vote counts. But, when we make our voice count in addition to our vote, we can change opinions, affect many votes and create the change we want to see.

Emerging agents! How will your voice manifest itself this year? Will you vote? Will you march? Will you write? Will you speak? Think about your unique experience, allowing your past to help define your message. Now look at the tools in front of you, and get started. Use your voice to influence others and aim to create a world where all people, all ideas and all voices are represented.



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