

A star-crossed semester

By [Mary Beth Mathews](#)

August 25, 2015

In our "Reflections From the Classroom" series, seasoned teachers talk about their experiences walking with students and guiding their learning.

"Tell me what a feminist looks like," the woman at the microphone chanted. Obediently and enthusiastically, we responded, "This is what a feminist looks like." It was a beautiful, if chilly, April afternoon, and several hundred students, faculty members, and administrators [had gathered](#) in front of the University of Mary Washington's administration building to mourn the murder of Grace Rebecca Mann and celebrate her life. Another student—her housemate—was under arrest, charged with abduction and first-degree murder.

The events of the last few weeks of UMW's spring 2015 semester capped an academic year filled with debate and demonstrations. In many ways the situation mirrored events at other American universities.

In the fall, students held a spirited [town hall-style meeting](#) to debate whether to endorse fraternities on campus. Leaders of the school's Feminists United on Campus argued against Greek life at UMW. During the meeting and for some time afterwards, [derogatory comments about the feminist group appeared in the form of "yaks"](#) on Yik Yak, the anonymous social media app.

Next a student recorded several members of the men's club rugby team singing a "traditional" rugby song about finding and raping a dead prostitute. The recording led to student debates over the extent to which the team [should be sanctioned](#). Concurrently, a Latina student began wearing a sign to [protest](#) the racial stereotypes portrayed in an Instagram picture of a student "taco party" as well as the apparent lack of disciplinary action against the subjects in the photo.

In January, UMW president Rick Hurley announced the suspension of the rugby team, and the hate "yaks" reappeared, blaming the feminist group for the punishment. And in March, a student group, [Divest UMW](#), began a sit-in outside the president's office to protest the board of visitors' refusal to study divestment of the school's

endowment from fossil fuel funds. (Full disclosure: I signed a faculty petition supporting Divest UMW's aims.) On April 17, the administration decided to end the protest and called in state troopers. [Two students and one community member were arrested](#), placed in a police van, and jailed.

Among the people who gathered to protest the arrests was Grace Mann. She would take part in one more demonstration that week, on April 19—the annual Day of Silence to protest discrimination against the LGBTQ community—but her bright life tragically ended that afternoon.

A common theme runs through the events of this academic year: student voices raised to change the world. The students who wanted fraternities on campus and the students who opposed them were both drawing on a tradition of grassroots activism. It's no coincidence that UMW Divest leader Zakaria Kronemer cited civil rights leader James Farmer when he spoke to the press about the April arrests. "They've arrested students for doing the very thing I learned in the James Farmer seminar," he told the student newspaper, "upholding our rights to peacefully and honorably fight for our voices."

Farmer, a [founder](#) of the Congress of Racial Equality, [ended his career at UMW](#) (then Mary Washington College), teaching a popular course on the civil rights movement. His campus legacy includes, [among other things](#), a first-year seminar, "Race and Revolution," a team-taught introduction to the ongoing struggle for equality in America. (I have taught a section of this seminar.)

Kronemer, Mann, and some of the other students involved in this year's activism took that course and learned how injustices persist in our time. Mann in particular wanted to be involved in making the world a better place, embracing her Jewish roots and the work of [tikkun olam](#). Farmer's seminar students explored the religious, economic, political, and social aspects of the civil rights movement. They found methods to organize and protest, and they embraced them with youthful zeal. When one of their own became the victim of a senseless crime, [they initially chose a campus bust of James Farmer](#) as an impromptu memorial, leaving flowers, notes, and photographs until a rainstorm forced a relocation indoors.

Even though the star-crossed semester is over, the pain remains. In early May, when the national group Feminist Majority Foundation [announced](#) it was assisting several students with their Title IX complaint against UMW, the Yik Yak vitriol returned. In

June President Hurley responded with a [statement](#) that seemed to protect the school's reputation more than it offered common ground. With our students now back on campus, I plan to address the torn fabric of our university relations and build activities into my courses aimed at healing some of the wounds.

Our weekly feature Then and Now harnesses the expertise of American religious historians who care about the cities of God and the cities of humans. It's published in partnership with [the Kripke Center](#) of Creighton University and edited by [Edward Carson](#), [Beth Hessel](#), and [John D. Wilsey](#).