

Students

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A University Examines Underlying Problems After Racist Incidents

At Oregon State, controversies over a noose and a blackface image force candid conversations

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"Racism is ... "

A student group called Team Liberation wrote those words across the top of a sheet of easel-pad paper and hung it in Oregon State University's Memorial Union, to see what passers-by would jot down. The afternoon after it was taken down, about a dozen people gather around a table — at one of many diversity-related events held on campus these days — to discuss the experiment's results.

"Ignorance," one anonymous hand has written. Onto that response, someone has tacked the words "is an excuse," the "is" repeatedly underlined for emphasis.

Then appears a rebuttal: "Too often used as an excuse."

Other responses signal resentment toward the whole exercise. "Play the race card and you can get away with s — ." "Racist jokes are hilarious."

Like many campus events staged in response to racism, the discussion here has a preaching-to-the-choir dynamic. The group of people who have shown up is much more racially and ethnically diverse than Oregon State's overall student body, which is overwhelmingly white. And no one in the room challenges assertions by those around them that racism and capitalism are inextricably intertwined, and that only white people can be racist because they have all the power.

Again and again, Lauren L. Dillard, a white junior from Canby, Ore., finds herself in the hot seat as her peers bring up her involvement last fall in the publication of a controversial blackface image in the student newspaper.

She says little in response, mainly just taking notes.

What Hangs in the Air

Oregon State is hardly the only college in the nation grappling with the problem of racism and weighing sharply different views of how to deal with it.

For decades, campus racism has seemed to erupt into the public consciousness in cycles, usually after spates of incidents involving students' wearing blackface, parties with themes that mocked a minority group, or the publication of racially charged articles or cartoons in student newspapers.

Last fall it was the appearance of anonymously hung nooses at a long list of colleges — including Central Michigan University, Columbia University, Minneapolis Community and Technical College, and the University of Maryland at

College Park — that stirred fears that colleges were becoming hotbeds of hate.

Typically, such incidents are followed by student protests, efforts to find and punish the perpetrators, and pledges by college administrations to promote diversity and tolerance. Often the uproar over the outward expression of racism dies down, but the underlying problem seems to remain.

Oregon State, a land-grant institution with an enrollment of almost 20,000, has been shaken by controversies over both blackface and a noose in the past year. But the incidents here were not seen as clear-cut expressions of racial animus, for which specific people should be held accountable, so much as acts of ignorance and insensitivity that pointed to a need for broader change.

Administrators at Oregon State, unlike their peers at many colleges, have taken the view that it would be a mistake for them to focus their energy on responding to various racist incidents. To make lasting progress in diminishing racism, they say, campus leaders must focus on promoting diversity in a forward-looking manner, between the controversies that erupt.

Last fall's events polarized the campus, but they also forced students to begin candid discussions of racism and examine their own biases.

"I'm not proud of where we are," says Terryl J. Ross, director of the university's office of community and diversity, but "all the conditions are right for us to go to the next level."

True Colors

Ironically, Oregon State's latest controversies began as a celebration of black, one of its school colors.

As the Beavers were preparing for an early October home game against the University of Arizona Wildcats, the student newspaper, *The Daily Barometer*, printed a front-page story on a campaign to have students wear nothing but black to the football game. With Ms. Dillard at the helm as its editor in chief, the staff, which is mostly white, designed a photo illustration of a student in a black T-shirt, black shorts, black bicycle tights, and black shoes.

That wasn't all. Taking the blackout idea up a notch, their model smeared black paint on his face and neck, with his dark, wavy hair adding to the effect. A caption said: "Paint your face black, it scares Wildcats."

Ms. Dillard says she and six other *Barometer* editors looked over the illustration without thinking for a second that it might offend anyone. They did not give a thought to minstrel shows, Jim Crow, the racist, "darky" archetype.

"I saw school spirit," Ms. Dillard recalls. "I saw one of our school colors."

Several white students showed up at the game wearing not just blackface, but black Afro wigs.

Adding Insult

Within weeks, it became clear that the *Barometer* had given rise to a storm, with students writing angry letters to the editor, protesting outside the stadium during the next home game, demanding that the administration do more about racism on the campus, and summoning Oregon's newspapers and television stations to cover the controversy.

To a degree not seen in most racial controversies on other campuses, the accusations of racism were quickly followed by a backlash against the accusers. Many students, including white students and some members of African-American and other minority groups, argued that the newspaper's illustration and the wearing of blackface at the Arizona game was about school spirit, nothing else. In letters to the editor and online forums, they said the students alleging racism were "crying wolf" and causing needless conflict.

About a month later, just as the controversy over the blackface display had reached a climax, a noose was found hanging from a tree next to the Phi Gamma Delta fraternity house.

Initially, it had a fake witch dangling from it, having been hung by fraternity members as part of a Halloween haunted house.

The Phi Gams have acknowledged in hindsight that their lynched-witch display may have shown an insensitivity to the plight of those executed for witchcraft over the ages. But they say they did not intend to evoke America's history of racist lynching.

Someone ripped down the witch in the wee hours of All Saints Day, but the noose remained. Upon hearing that it had stayed up in the tree for several days — at a time when the Jena Six controversy in Louisiana had been dominating national headlines — some students and professors on Oregon State's campus decided they couldn't care less exactly how the noose got in the Phi Gams' tree.

Behind the Smiles

Oregon State's school colors are orange and black, but the color most associated with its students is white.

As of last fall, non-Hispanic white students accounted for nearly 85 percent of its total enrollment, reflecting the homogeneity of the state, from which the university draws four-fifths of its students.

Black students account for just 1.4 percent of enrollment, making them only slightly more prevalent here than American Indians. Hispanic students account for about 4 percent, Asian-Americans and Pacific Islanders, about 8 percent.

On the surface, at least, the campus seems like a remarkably warm and hospitable place, where students of different racial and ethnic backgrounds interact to an extent not seen at many other colleges. In dozens of recent interviews, many black, Hispanic, Asian-American, and American Indian students here said they were comfortable on the campus and had never felt discrimination.

"It is a very welcoming campus and a very welcoming atmosphere for minority students," said Jacob J. Baez, a Mexican-American junior who has been involved in various Hispanic campus organizations.

Oregon State's president, Edward J. Ray, says he sees his campus as "very civil and very caring." But, he adds, the friendly atmosphere has the down side of making it harder for people to realize when other people on campus feel uncomfortable or encounter bias.

Many recent studies of race relations on the nation's college campuses have concluded that white and minority students have different views of their surroundings. White students are much less likely to perceive the existence of discrimination, much more likely to see their institutions as supportive of minority students, and much more optimistic about their ability to get along with members of other racial groups. Whereas white students tend to base their assessments of race relations on personal interactions, and to see informal social activities as the best way to bring about improvements on this front, black students tend to base their impressions on the viewpoints espoused by those around them, and to believe that racism must be tackled on an institutional level, through structured educational activities.

Many students at Oregon State say they frequently hear their peers tell racist jokes or use racial slurs — often in the context of quoting rap lyrics or dialogue from movies or television shows — but they do not see in such statements any intent to cause harm.

A widespread perception among administrators and faculty members here is that much of the racial insensitivity found on the campus is attributable to white students from rural parts of the state, mainly its eastern regions. Some students and professors here argue, however, that such assertions are based on classist stereotypes.

'Chronic Hassle'

Minority students can be much more bothered by encounters with racism on college campuses than they would be elsewhere because they assume, or at least hope, that campuses are safe havens from racism, says William B. Harvey, chief diversity officer at the University of Virginia and a former director of the American Council on Education's

Center for the Advancement of Racial and Ethnic Equity.

Among the people who say they have come to see Oregon State's campus as a racially hostile environment is Shannon S. Warren, a recent graduate who now plans to work here as a research associate in the ethnic-studies department.

Ms. Warren, who formerly served as director of multicultural affairs for the student government and as president of the university's Black Student Union, says some of her professors here expressed surprise when she excelled academically. They seemed to call on her in class discussions as if they thought of her as a spokesperson for her race. Some students here, she says, "overcompensate" and express interest in her in ways that she finds intrusive, like by touching her hair or skin while excessively complimenting those features. "They look at you like you are an exhibit," she says.

"It is really hard on this campus," agrees DaMarcus Redeau, a senior who works as a liaison for the university's black cultural center. "Sometimes you go to classes and your classmates and teachers don't understand where you are coming from — like every day you have to educate somebody."

Counselors on college campuses use the term "chronic hassle" to describe what minority students feel about racism that is subtle and often unintended.

"When an incident happens it calls up in people all of those times they have felt hassled," says Larry D. Roper, Oregon State's vice provost for student affairs. "And now," he says, "they can actually give voice to their frustrations and say: Enough."

In It for the Long Haul

Back in 2005, when she was being recruited as head coach of Oregon State's women's basketball team, LaVonda Wagner, who is black, worried about the lack of diversity here. She says she was persuaded to take the job after Mr. Ray assured her that promoting diversity was important to him.

Mr. Ray, who became Oregon State's president in 2003, says one of his first priorities was to develop a 10-year plan to promote diversity. He believes the short-term plans that colleges generally devise in response to some racial crisis tend to just sit on the shelf. "Every campus has gone through this, and it just wasted effort," he says.

Under Oregon State's 10-year plan, completed in 2006, every academic unit on the campus has had to come up with a strategy for promoting diversity and closing race-, ethnic-, and gender-based gaps in its retention of students and employees, and is expected to periodically conduct self-inventories. Every school within the university is expected to offer courses dealing with discrimination.

The university has also made plans to renovate cultural centers for different minority groups and is trying to raise \$100-million to endow scholarships to promote diversity.

The big unknowns here are how long it will take for such efforts to noticeably improve the campus climate, and whether the racial controversies that pop up along the way will derail the process or move it forward.

White-power message?

Neither the blackface nor noose incidents of last fall, of course, figured into anyone's long-term plan. Both polarized the campus and made abundantly clear how much work Oregon State still has to do.

In the case of the noose, Brent A. Wehage, a senior and manager of Phi Gamma Delta House, says the residents did not notice it still hanging in the tree after the witch was removed, and took it down "as soon as it was brought to our attention."

Although the university's administration has accepted the fraternity's explanation, Ms. Warren, the former Black Student Union president, is certain the noose was kept in the tree as "a white-power and privilege message." She says, "there is no way in hell they could not have known."

The blackface episode proved even more divisive. Several instructors sought to use the incident to try to advance dialogue about race in their classrooms but, at least in some cases, it seemed to backfire.

Eric R. Hill, a writing instructor, recalls watching "a lot of well-meaning white liberals yelling at a lot of naïve people that they are racist."

Mr. Ross, director of the university's office for diversity, says he believes the backlash against those protesting the use of blackface did more damage than the blackface episode itself, by making minority students feel that no one cared about their feelings.

"In diversity," he says, "maybe the two most important words are 'I'm sorry.'"

Despite his dislike of crisis-driven diversity policy, Mr. Ray says he felt obliged to ask administrators to respond to the blackface controversy because "there was just an element of sensitivity that was missing here." When students say they feel they are the victims of racism, he says, "I take it at face value."

University administrators have held meetings with students to discuss the incident and plan to stage other events devoted to diversity in the coming months.

Speaking in January at a campus breakfast in honor of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., Ms. Wagner, the women's basketball coach, told her audience that, in dealing with issues of race, Oregon State needed to "get comfortable being uncomfortable."

Passing the Word

One of Mr. Ross's first responses to the blackface incident was to call *Barometer* staff members and black students offended by the illustration into the same room. "I saw people change," he says.

David Austin, a reporter for *The Oregonian* who works with the *Barometer* staff, urged the young journalists not to shy away from issues of race and ethnicity, but to confront them head on, seeking input from students of all backgrounds in reporting stories.

As a result of such instructions, Ms. Dillard says, "Suddenly I was looking at campus differently."

Under her direction, the newspaper staff has been meeting to discuss not just racism, but classism, sexism, and other forms of bias. Before she ends her stint as editor in chief this month, she plans to put together a memorandum for her successors, to help them avoid similar episodes.

"Lessons get forgotten," she says.

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