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PROFILE

Guiding the difficult conversation

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This is the second in a series of essays exploring race and diversity at UB.

This semester, through a series of discussions hosted by Meegan Hunt, associate director of residential life, I have met four times with students in UB's residence halls to talk about the racial climate at the university and the student activism that has taken place in response to campus racial incidents across the nation.

The 2015-16 academic year will be remembered for the sheer volume and visibility of racial incidents on college campuses, as well as the scale of student responses. The activism at the University of Missouri is considered by many to be historic and courageous. About a quarter of the Mizzou football team threatened to strike due to the failure of university administrators to respond to a long series of overtly racist incidents against the university's black students. With a potential \$1million fine for forfeiting the upcoming Brigham Young game hanging in the balance, state legislators pulled the trigger and the campus chancellor and system president found themselves suddenly unemployed. The press heralded the valor of the football players — all too often exploited by the lucrative machinery of collegiate sports — in leveraging their newfound political power.

Not just at Mizzou, but across the nation students are demanding that their colleges and universities address persistent and long-standing inequities. The demands range from calls for curricular reform (a call to establish a black studies program at Niagara University, elevation of an existing ethnic studies program to departmental status at Yale) to more inclusive staffing (minority and female peer counselors in freshman residence halls) to accountability measures (creating a chief diversity officer position within the ranks of senior leadership at Vanderbilt, developing cultural competence training and accountability systems at Yale), to reprisals (voting “no confidence” in the president of Ithaca College, removing the master and associate master from their positions in Silliman Residential College at Yale). Depending upon the circumstances and history of each individual campus, these types of demands may be reasonable or extreme. Often, they are meaningful steps in creating an equitable and inclusive campus culture.

However, student demands that seek to limit freedom of speech and expression pose a distinct challenge for state university administrators who are charged with both operating an inclusive institution and protecting the rights of free speech and expression. For example, Yale students demanded the dismissal of a residential college lecturer after she emailed all Yale students and administrators voicing her opposition to an earlier campus-wide email from the Intercultural Affairs Committee advising students to avoid donning “culturally unaware and insensitive [Halloween] costumes” that might offend students of color and other minorities. On another occasion, students at SUNY-Plattsburgh called for the resignations of the editors of the school's student-run newspaper after they ran a cartoon widely considered to be racially offensive on the front page.

These demands have an uncomfortable quality. They arise from the experiences of students of color who are frequently confronted by highly provocative speech ranging from racial epithets like the ones hurled at students in Missouri (where black students regularly experienced being called the “n” word), to micro-aggressions like white male panelists on an Ithaca College alumni panel repeatedly referring to a black female alumna as a “savage” after she described having a “savage hunger” to succeed as an undergraduate.

They can be tone deaf to the good intentions of allies, like at Cornell when a group of white students who independently organized a rally and a hashtag campaign in support of Missouri protesters were called out by students of color for not involving them in the planning. But consider the history of the black struggle for affirmative action and how it ultimately served to advance disenfranchised whites, while continuing to stigmatize blacks.

These demands are deeply troubling to university faculty and administrators when they seek to redress harms to students of color through remedies that erode principles of academic freedom and free expression that are fundamental to higher education in the United States. And yet in many cases, the chorus of voices criticizing the methods employed by the protesters and the scale of their response is equally deafening.

Here at UB, we have been wrestling with student unrest sparked by an art “installation” on campus involving “white only” and “black only” signs posted near bathrooms and water fountains on campus in late September. In light of the range of student protests occurring across the country, it is particularly important to point out that the demands made by UB students consistently focused not on the content of the artistic expression, but on the fact that until the graduate student artist stepped forward and claimed responsibility for the signs, the nature and intent of the signs

were menacingly unclear. This ambiguity, in conjunction with an unrelated campus alert earlier that same day about the possible presence of a gun in the Student Union, led to confusion, anxiety, fear and unnecessary police involvement.

Since then, President Tripathi has acted to ensure that this “perfect storm” is unlikely to happen again by putting into place an interim operating procedure that will be vetted by the appropriate faculty governance structures going forward. In addition, the Higher Education Program within the Graduate School of Education and the Department of Visual Studies are planning events on campus that engage students in meaningful discussions of race and artistic expression.

This is the type of leadership a public research university can — and should — demonstrate. In a nation where a routine encounter with law enforcement can prove fatal (think Sandra Bland, Eric Garner and other unarmed black suspects who died in custody), students of color are evaluating their experiences on college campuses in relation to the larger context of violence against African-Americans and Latinos, and questioning persistent inequities. In the same way that the visual arts graduate student sought to bring attention to those inequities and the complicity of whites, so too did the Black Student Union and other students of color organizations. UB faculty and staff have the expertise and the life experience to guide students in discussions that illuminate the issues of race and inequality, and help them constructively and effectively address the issues, while appreciating the importance of free speech to the academy and the democratic enterprise.

To return to the meetings in the UB residence halls, these conversations were open and unscripted. I listened to a range of important observations about the racial climate on our campus, as well as great suggestions about how UB can move forward.

One common, recurring theme I have noticed is students recounting “cultural encounters gone wrong.” Students from a range of cultural, racial and socio-economic backgrounds describe experiences with students from dissimilar backgrounds that were awkward, difficult and in many instances negative. Hearing these stories, I responded to the group that when universities draw students from vastly different life experiences and bring them together in close living and learning contexts, they expect — naively so — that students will organically embrace the diversity represented and appreciate the incredible opportunity it presents to form new friendships and expand horizons. I call this “making the magic happen.” One problem though: Without clear consensus on the rules of engagement, these encounters are often painfully awkward, creating a space of tension and uncertainty that doesn’t promote inclusion. Students of color, and international students in particular, describe feeling marginalized by these encounters on a predominantly white, suburban campus in the United States. Yet, we seem surprised when students self-segregate and choose to room, study, eat and socialize with those who look like them and share their same values.

I’ve learned from these discussions that UB needs to be more intentional and deliberate about shaping cultural encounters on campus so that they are positive and promote inclusion. One promising suggestion is that the campus develop some simple practices that will be generally understood as good faith efforts to engage others from vastly different backgrounds, particularly where sensitive issues are involved. Much like when we travel abroad and notice that people are far more likely to engage with you when you make an effort to speak their language, so too might cultural encounters across difference be more successful if the initiator engages in an open manner.

Adopting informal rules of cultural engagement go a long way toward creating good will and minimizing some of the collateral damage from cultural encounters that leave students feeling marginalized and alienated. Three rules to begin the process are:

Openly acknowledge difference: I am a white male from a tiny little town in upstate New York and you are an African-American woman from New York City.

Inquire: I’d like to know more about you and what you think of the discussion in the dorm meeting earlier tonight about racial privilege.

Validate the person as you inquire: I am asking because I am trying to broaden my thinking about this topic, not because I think you’re an expert just because you are black. I value your insights.

Ricardo Azziz, a former university president, made a further important observation about these forms of cultural engagement. No matter how much they may want to, presidents and other campus leaders “cannot instantaneously change their campus culture by fiat.” He went on to explain that the culture of a campus is the product of many factors, including the institution’s history, the culture of the community that surrounds the campus and the views and perspectives of local campus employees who turn over at a much slower pace than that of students. Azziz also said that in the midst of a crisis, “campus leaders cannot suddenly create a campus culture that respects and fosters open dialogue.” In other words, without the trust that forms the context for working through difficult issues in an open and respectful manner, open dialogue is nearly impossible. So to that end, I add a fourth and fifth point:

Recognize that there must be a context of trust for working through these difficult issues: I think that this might be a hard conversation, but I want to have it and trust that you do, too.

Recognize that UB is committed to an open and inclusive environment.

This last point is very important. UB is deeply committed to the principle of “inclusive excellence.” Inclusive excellence recognizes that the highest level of quality in research, teaching and service can only be achieved when diverse perspectives are engaged. The full engagement of diverse perspectives isn’t produced by a “check the box” approach to diversity, but by one that intentionally and meaningfully welcomes a diverse assortment of viewpoints. The SUNY system recently formally adopted the principle of inclusion as a key aspect of excellence in higher education when the board of trustees passed a resolution stating its aspiration that SUNY be the most inclusive state university system in the nation. Inclusive excellence, and the diverse faculty, staff and student perspectives that are indispensable to it, is at the core of UB’s mission.

To that end, Provost Zukoski and I are planning to pilot an unprecedented, multidisciplinary course in spring 2016 entitled “12 Difficult Conversations in 12 Weeks.” Hosted by the residence halls, this class will meet in the living/learning spaces at UB and feature faculty members from a broad spectrum of academic programs. These faculty have been identified by students as being particularly effective at advancing understanding of difficult topics that take many students out of their comfort zones.

The faculty members will choose the topics and students can sign up for individual lectures through the residence halls. The goal of the course is for students to engage in difficult conversations that are prompted, guided and directed by faculty members. The tagline for the course is “Always safe, never comfortable.”

Ultimately, our goal is to model for students — and faculty members — practices that promote constructive engagement about difficult subjects. This course is only one of many ways UB is working to promote an open and inclusive environment that respects differences, values academic freedom and unflinchingly prepares our students to lead in the future.

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