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SPOTLIGHT

Sign of the Times?

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This is the first in a series of essays exploring race and diversity at UB. The purpose of writing these essays is to increase the visibility of conversations that are occurring intensely within some communities and often not at all within others. Underlying these articles is a commitment on behalf of UB's leadership to explore the meaning of racial and other differences at UB, encourage our community to "lean into discomfort," and in doing so, create the kind of inclusive, intellectual community that will allow all students, faculty and staff to thrive and realize their full potential.

Earlier this semester, a graduate art student hung signs around the North Campus, reminiscent of those hung in the United States during legalized segregation, with the stated purpose of exposing "white privilege." Several key facts surrounding the posting of the signs remain in dispute: Was the student "coloring outside the lines" when she hung the signs or acting under the close supervision of an instructor? Did University Police act professionally in responding to student calls? Did the art department knowingly disregard official university policy requiring safety authorization for art projects hung in university common areas?

While facts continue to unfold that will shed light on these questions, there is no doubt whatsoever that the student's actions, and the reactions that followed, set into motion a series of responses whose reverberations continue to be felt on campus and off. I'd like to discuss some of what I am hearing around campus and what it means for UB. This is consistent with the sentiment expressed repeatedly at the Sept. 23 Open Forum that attention to racial tensions on campus should not end with a student forum inspired by a single campus incident, but lead to a broader institutional response.

In a series of essays entitled "Signs of the Times?" I will address four assertions made about the sign incident and attempt to explore the broader context in which they were made and understood.

Students of color overreacted to a harmless art assignment.

Restricting the display of art is censorship and violates the First Amendment.

#WeWantAnswers.

UB Police mishandled the incident due to cultural insensitivity to students of color.

This initial essay takes on the issue of the reaction of students of color at UB to the signs and explores the lived experiences of students of color prior to contact with the signs.

Did UB's students of color overreact to a harmless art assignment?

The Black Student Union meeting on the evening of the incident and subsequent meetings called by clubs and organizations of students of color were widely reported in The Spectrum and on social media. At those meetings, many of which I attended, students of color expressed shock and outrage, discussed how the signs made them feel unsafe and unwelcome, and recounted other experiences with campus police and others that made them feel unwelcome at UB.

In contrast, many of the initial reactions I heard from faculty, administrators, staff and students focused on the scale of the reaction by students of color. So, I thought it would be helpful to put things into perspective.

This incident is not unique to UB

Racial incidents are occurring on numerous campuses across the U.S., causing alarm at institutions that feel they are generally making progress toward campus diversity. Although it has been 61 years since the U.S. Supreme Court held that racially segregated public education is unconstitutional, racial equality in public education remains an elusive goal. The experiences of students of color on America's college and

university campuses underscore this. Within the past two or three years, numerous racial incidents have made the headlines. And these do not even reflect the less-publicized — or unreported — incidents that occur.

In my informal canvassing of media coverage of these events, I found they group roughly into two categories. The first is direct, intentional expressions of overt racial bias aimed at students of color. These acts include:

An incident in which a University of Southern California student threw a drink at Student Government President Rini Sampath and shouted “Indians aren’t worth sh*t!” as she and her friends walked past a fraternity house.

Three University of Mississippi fraternity brothers hung a noose around the neck of a prominent campus statue of James Meredith, the black student who integrated the school, and draped the statue with a flag bearing a Confederate battle emblem.

Vandalism, in which swastikas and nooses were drawn on the walls of a residence hall and on the door of a room occupied by black and Jewish students at SUNY-Purchase, and swastikas were sprayed on the doors of the house of Alpha Epsilon Pi, a Jewish fraternity at UC-Berkeley.

Parties and rituals that denigrate or parody people of color, such as the “Crip”mas Party at Clemson University’s SAE chapter in which fraternity members sported bandanas, sagged their pants and made gang signs parodying African-American as gang members and thugs, and a Chi Omega sorority theme party where members wore sombreros and fake mustaches and held signs that read: “Will mow lawn for beer + weed” and “I don’t cut grass, I smoke it.”

These are just the incidents that immediately preceded the posting of the signs at UB. Since then, a veritable avalanche of overt acts of racial bias have led to protest and upheaval on a variety of college campuses, including the University of Missouri, where repeated incidences of racial antipathy on campus prompted the football team to threaten to boycott a game; Ithaca College, where an alumnus — a person of color — who was participating on a panel was repeatedly referred to as a savage after describing her ambition as a “savage hunger” to succeed; and UCLA, where students wore blackface to a Kanye West-themed fraternity party replete with sagging pants and women sporting rear ends of exaggerated proportions.

A second, less-malevolent — but equally concerning — type of incident involves unintended expressions of racial bias toward students of color. This includes intentional acts by culturally incompetent actors like the international student at Duke University who hung a noose in a tree outside the Student Union in order to take pictures in front of it with friends — he texted others inviting them to “come hang out” with him. While the act itself was not malevolent, the impact of hanging a noose on a campus in a state with a long, painful history of lynching African-Americans certainly harmed the community. The Duke community assumed the noose had been placed in the tree to make a racially derogatory statement. About 1,000 people attended a rally at Duke that day to condemn the person who placed the noose on the tree. Only a few days later was it determined the noose was hung as part of a social outing.

These incidents demonstrate the degree to which young Americans are polarized along race and class lines, even among those selected to attend elite institutions of higher education. Despite years of civil rights legislation and litigation seeking to dismantle structures of legal segregation and economic oppression, stereotypes that seem to arise from isolation and ignorance persist, along with the deep resistance of students to stepping outside their comfort zones. While campuses are diverse, students don’t mix. This is particularly striking, given the common goal of academic communities to foster intellectual curiosity and strengthen critical-thinking skills.

UB is not unique in this regard. Student reaction to UB’s own “racist sign incident” similarly reflects tensions underlying diverse student bodies that don’t mix. UB’s incident fits somewhere between an intentional expression of racial bias aimed at students of color and a culturally incompetent act. The student who hung the signs admitted that she did so intentionally, with a stated purpose of exposing “white privilege.” Yet, the net effect of her efforts was not a successful demonstration of “white privilege” but an iteration of yet another campus racial incident that reminds students of color of the precarious status of their welcome.

Indeed, her statement to The Spectrum attempts to justify the harm she caused students of color for the greater good of confronting their own trauma. According to the student: “Are we (people of color) not complicit in our own oppression when we turn away from our shared pain?” The student hung the signs with reckless disregard for the distress they would cause students of color, and yet — like the Duke incident — the stated purpose of the act was not malevolence toward students of color, and the fuller context of the act — a class assignment — was not clear at the time the damage was done.

UB students of color had their welcome temporarily rescinded

Jason Young, associate professor of history, made a critical observation at the Open Forum on Sept. 23 that poignantly framed the student reaction to the signs. He observed that the signs hung during legal segregation made it easier to know who was allowed to be where. Whites were allowed to drink from cleaner, more modern fountains and blacks were relegated to older ones and the ones in disrepair. Young went on to point out that today, without signs visibly segregating facilities, African-Americans are allowed to occupy space that is no longer formally segregated, but may not be so welcoming. The signs made the welcome — or lack thereof — clear.

Many undergraduate students of color arrive at UB as young adults with lived experiences of being unwelcome. By the time they arrive at UB, young men of color are accustomed to being avoided by people — many, but not all of whom are white — who choose to cross the street rather than encounter them and clutch their purses when unplanned encounters occur in close confines like elevators and stairwells.

Sixty percent of UB’s undergraduate students of color were raised in metropolitan New York City. This means that most of UB’s students of color came of age in urban areas marked by white flight and intrusive policing. The racial disparities in stop-and-frisk experiences of white youth and black and Latino youth are well-documented. These disparities were the basis of a lawsuit, *Floyd v. City of New York*, in which a federal judge

held that the New York Police Department systematically violated the rights of black and Latino New Yorkers through racially discriminatory policing and racial profiling.

Equally devastating to communities of color is the increasing segregation of neighborhoods in New York and across the nation. Fifty years ago, in the midst of riots and civil unrest, an advisory committee appointed by President Lyndon Johnson famously concluded: "Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white — separate and unequal." Today, even in a much more diverse New York State, white flight, exclusionary zoning and other practices continue to create black and white neighborhoods, Latino and Asian neighborhoods. And unlike before, these areas exist in both the cities and the suburbs.

Taking into consideration the lived experiences of students of color prior to their arrival in Buffalo, as well as the bevy of racial incidents taking place on campuses across the country, is it surprising the signs posted around campus would cause them to question whether they are welcome at UB? Not really.

Perhaps the most compelling evidence was voiced by students of color at the Open Forum, who spoke with great pride about their allegiance to UB and talked about the many activities they are involved in at the university. These are not disaffected radicals jumping on yet another opportunity to criticize the university. These are students who are engaged in classes and activities at UB, and who defend UB to casual critics — read: friends attending SUNY Buffalo State. They are students who — in their words — "proudly wear the blue and white."

I sensed in their comments an intense longing for connection to UB and a deep sadness that the hanging of a few signs near water fountains and bathrooms could so easily cast into doubt the notion that UB is as proud and welcoming of them as they are of UB.

Next: Missed opportunities to have a campus-wide dialogue about artistic freedom and censorship.

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