

November 13, 2015

The following statement was read at the November 18, 2014, Meeting of the Faculty in response to the events of “Black Lives Matter Awareness Week.” Approximately two months later, on January 23, 2015, the College held a “Day of Dialogue on Race and Racism,” in response both to tensions and controversies emerging on campus from Awareness Week events and to issues raised by student activists who attended the November 18 meeting to voice their concerns regarding racism directly to the faculty.

While President Martin saw the “Day of Dialogue” as “the beginning of an effort to open up conversation and make it easier to talk about [race and racism]”¹ and the Committee of Six praised the content and organization of the day’s events and remarked on its overall success, some students saw things differently. In an opinion piece for *The Amherst Student*, the authors thought “the panel and group discussions” showed “very little to no understanding of the unique racial climate of the college” and, as a result, ended up serving “as a distraction from the lived experiences of racism on campus.”² Ironically, the piece goes on to say, their “biggest critique of the day was perhaps its biggest success from the administrative perspective: the ability to divert our attention from our contribution to these systemic problems. By pressing us to avoid gazing at the overt racism that hits closer to home (e.g. All Lives Matter, annual racial epithets on campus, support of the genocidal mascot) in preference for an abstract “discussion,” we forget about the institution’s culpability in the very systemic racism that it denounces at home and abroad.”³

Students of color at Amherst have repeatedly called upon the administration and faculty to recognize the limitations of diversity discourse, to confront systemic racism at the College, and provide programmatic means to transform institutional norms and campus cultural practices, apparently to no avail. It is in solidarity with our students, who have inspired and taught *us* about the critical importance of speaking truth to power, that we submit this statement, again.

¹ Sweet, Bill. “Day of Dialogue on Race and Racism.” *The Campus Buzz*. January 28, 2015. Retrieved November 12, 2015, from <https://www.amherst.edu/news/campusbuzz/node/597580>.

² “Letter to the Editor: Day of Dialogue or Day of “Dialogue?”” *The Amherst Student*. February 11, 2015. Retrieved November 12, 2015, from <http://amherststudent.amherst.edu/?q=article/2015/02/11/letter-editor-day-dialogue-or-day-“dialogue”>.

³ Ibid.

Racism at Amherst College: A Proposal for Change

It's true. Amherst *is* a diverse place. Hardly an image on the webpage fails to depict diversity's presence, and in faculty reports and press releases, "diversity" is more often than not the descriptor-of-choice in characterizing today's Amherst for insiders and outsiders alike. In a recent letter to the faculty, Professor Cobham-Sander, Chair of the Diversity and Community Subcommittee of the College's Strategic Planning Committee, notes that Amherst, which leads its cohort of elite academic institutions in student diversification, currently devotes "22% of its operating budget to funding financial aid"; has eliminated "loans for all students who qualify for financial aid"; and has recently opened the "need blind admission process to international students, transfer students and veterans."⁴ As a result of these and other initiatives, she says, the College has assembled "a student body more racially diverse than at any previous moment in [its] history and more diverse socio-economically than is the case at any of [its] peer institutions[.]"⁵ Today, "50% of Amherst students identify as students of color" and the over "20% [who] qualify for Pell grants" matriculate "from the lowest economic quintile in US society."⁶ Professor Cobham-Sander points out that "[b]y convening an intentional community of diverse learners" and providing means to "realize their full academic potential... we hope to produce graduates whose mutually invigorating talents will enrich the wider multicultural society."⁷

Although Amherst aspires to be a welcoming place, there is strong evidence that aspirations for inclusion are far from an accomplished fact of campus life. In her 2013

⁴ "Letter from Professor Cobham-Sander to the Committee of Six." Retrieved November 14, 2014, from <https://www.amherst.edu/system/files/media/Letter%2520from%2520Professor%2520Cobham-Sander.pdf>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

Convocation Address, President Martin spoke of the connection between broader ideas regarding diversity, inclusion, and community and challenges specific to Amherst, noting that “[w]hen the norms of our institutions match so much more neatly with the norms of privileged groups than they do with those of more marginalized groups, those who have enjoyed privilege will see the institution and their forms of association within it as self-evident, neutral, open to anyone. Amherst, like all other institutions,” she said, “has a history that has made some more immediately comfortable than others.”⁸

The flip side of this assertion is the *uncomfortableness* that those “others” experience at Amherst, which brings us to recent events surrounding Black Lives Matter Awareness Week. With student groups, academic departments, and even the President weighing in on this situation, we in the Anthropology and Sociology Department recognize that the concern expressed in the wake of these events is part of a persistent and more broad-based discomfort experienced by students of color, black students in particular, on a day-to-day basis at the College. Furthermore, it is imperative to acknowledge that this discomfort stems from a racism woven into the fabric of campus culture; a racism that’s all too often ignored by the administration, the faculty, and majority-white students; a racism that, among its many pernicious effects, entitles some at the expense of others and, more than that, places on those those singled out by its stigmatizing force the burden of navigating an obstacle-filled course others never face in order to realize their potential at Amherst. The concern expressed by students of color and their allies in the wake of Black Lives Matter Awareness Week has existed for quite some time at the College, so much so that labels of “comfort” and “discomfort” are hardly adequate in capturing the deeper reality of racism on campus. If left unaddressed, racism will continue to undercut and nullify the very things we purport to

⁸ Bidy Martin. 2013. “Convocation Address at Amherst College.” Retrieved November 14, 2014 from <https://www.amherst.edu/aboutamherst/news/specialevents/convocation/2013#text>.

value most and proudly project as distinctive to our leadership position in the world of elite higher education: namely, academic excellence, respect for difference, and ensuring equal opportunity for all who attend Amherst.

Consider the following: The N-word is found written in snow on top of a staff member's car; a noose is discovered on a staff person's door; a cartoon displayed prominently in a campus lab used by students, faculty, and staff invokes the genocidal nature of Lord Jeffrey Amherst's actions in a drawing of him handing blankets to a family of Native Americans, with text that reads, in part, "A gift from Lord Jeffrey Amherst" and "Thank you" as the Native American response; photos surface on Facebook depicting three young white women, Amherst students all, at a College dorm party, draped in the Mexican flag, sporting straw "sombros", cartoonish mustaches, and a small toy gun, stereotypes used repeatedly throughout history to caricature and dehumanize Latinos, with Facebook "likes" registering peer approval; Amherst students, together with some from UMass and Amherst High, are playing basketball in Alumni Gym when a College police officer comes in, stops the game, and checks the ID's of several black students but none of the whites, and when asked why such selectivity, doesn't respond.

The list of similar such incidents could easily be expanded, commonplace as they are on campus. Some would be explicit in their racism, others more disguised, some intentional, others less clearly so, some random, others planned. Whatever their form, all such instances are troubling as individual events, but the *pattern* of their occurrence demonstrates that racist practices continue to stymie attempts at fostering inclusiveness, the best intentions of administrators, faculty, and student leaders notwithstanding. None of this is lost on students. For one Amherst student in the class of '04, it was the pattern of racist mistreatment that led him to conclude as far back as 2002 that Amherst is not "a welcoming environment for

black...students” and to feel “a generalized sense of not belonging” at the College, a sentiment shared at the time by many of his peers.⁹

Social science research conducted by Claude Steele and Professor Aries corroborates the experience reported in anecdotal accounts. Whether it’s majority-white perceptions of black people as threatening, violent and criminal, as less intelligent, or as poor, the evidence is clear: racism circulates everywhere--even “in the air” of campus life--undermining racial trust and threatening black students’ academic success.¹⁰ Research has also documented “a broad range of physical health problems” associated with racism as well as “heightened levels of depression,... increased hostility,... lowered life satisfaction and self esteem,... [and] feelings of trauma and helplessness.”¹¹

President Martin, Provost Uvin, Professor Cobham-Sander, and others in leadership positions are mindful of the difference an ongoing and effective institutional culture can make in promoting meaningful change when it comes to diversity and inclusion at the College. We support their efforts, particularly those of Provost Uvin, whose leadership role to date has resulted in notable progress across constituencies at the College. That said, we think it important to distinguish “diversity and inclusion” from racism. They are not the same thing. The consensus in our department is that the College, as presently configured, lacks the institutional structures, programmatic activities, and specialized expertise to address effectively the issue of racism on campus.

⁹ Smith, Kelly. Black Men's Group Alleges Racial Profiling.” *The Amherst Student*. Issue 19, March 6, 2002. Retrieved November 14, 2014 from <http://amherststudent-archive.amherst.edu/current/news/view.php?year=2001-2002&issue=19§ion=news&article=01>Submitted.

¹⁰ See, for example, Aries, Elizabeth. 2013. *Speaking of Race and Class: The Student Experience at an Elite College*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press; Steele, Claude. “Thin Ice: Stereotype Threat and Black College Students.” *The Atlantic Monthly*, August, 1999; Steele, Claude. 2010. *Whistling Vivaldi: How Stereotypes Affect Us and What We Can Do*. New York: Norton.

¹¹ D'Andrea, Michael and Judy Daniels. 2007. “Dealing with Institutional Racism on Campus: Initiating Difficult Dialogues and Social Justice Advocacy Interventions.” *The College of Student Affairs Journal* 26(2): 169-176.

We have two proposals. First, in addition to efforts currently underway to meet challenges of diversity and inclusion, we would like to see similar efforts directed toward racism on campus: specifically, an acceleration and intensification of administrative efforts to provide opportunity for productive dialogue--that is, dialogue that moves beyond formulaic accusations and admissions of guilt or the simple airing of concerns to contribute toward the implementation of meaningful institutional change. While we're not certain as how best to initiate and sustain dialogue of the sort we are calling for, we do know several things. We know that, as things stand now, our "one size fits all" approach to welcoming students on campus does not adequately address historical or contemporary realities of racism in our society, nor does it address the distinctive situation of students of color or the pressing need to educate students, faculty, and staff of all backgrounds about race and racism, including its "colorblind" varieties. We know that disproportionate service obligations for faculty of color, especially those on the tenure-track, are a well-documented fact of academic life, and that faculty should not be asked to bear additional, often invisible, burdens that come with committee work, mentoring students of color, or otherwise serving as the face of the College when it comes to diversity.¹² And we know that with the recent hiring of Mariana Cruz as Interim Director of the Multicultural Resource Center, we have someone on staff with the professional expertise and experience to begin this process.

Second, under the Provost's leadership and guided by the strategic planning process, we would like the administration to initiate a thorough review of the College's program to date when it comes to diversity and inclusion. We think it crucial that someone with a unique combination of professional expertise and "on-the-ground" experience implementing and evaluating diversity and inclusion initiatives in institutions like our own be brought to

¹² Lila Jacobs, José Cintrón and Cecil E. Canton, ed. 2002. *The Politics of Survival in Academia: Narratives of Inequity, Resilience, and Success*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

campus to lead this process. This person should be knowledgeable regarding “best practices” on other campuses; well versed on outcomes research with regard to such practices; professionally aware of ways racism disrupts institutional efforts to diversify and become more inclusive—someone, in short, who can assess what we’ve put in place, evaluate its effectiveness, and provide clear guidance on how to improve. (This person's work would incorporate efforts to promote productive dialogue, as described in our first proposal, and help ensure that this dialogue results in specific outcomes that address racism and racial exclusion on campus.) In the same way external reviews allow departments to review and assess their work and plan for the near- and long-term future, the review proposed here would serve as a most valuable resource in college-wide planning with respect to diversity and inclusion.

As we reflect on the events of Black Lives Matter Awareness Week, several things are clear to us. Demographic diversity has not translated, automatically, into an inclusive community. Racism is an established fact of campus life and generative of a pattern of injury occurring when it comes to students of color and to black students in particular. We are far from “best practices” when it comes to ensuring all our students are well served. We believe this situation must change.

Respectfully submitted,

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