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Racism, Reaction and Resolution:
Proposal for the Eradication of Bigotry at Lehigh University

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Although the outburst of racist, often misogynistic, attacks on campus following the presidential election came as a shock to some, neither the attacks themselves nor the reaction that ensued surprised me. While my lack of astonishment may initially seem crass, allow me to clarify why I would make such a statement.

First and foremost, the constant effort throughout both the primaries and general election to cast Barack Obama as an outsider was certain to result in some sort of backlash. The campaigns of Senators Clinton and McCain were solely focused on winning, and seemed to give little thought to the potential effects of their libelous attack ads. In the month leading up to the election, these consequences were already being made evident as McCain supporters voiced their lack of trust in and contempt for Senator Obama. Therefore,

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one must understand that the reaction was largely prompted by fear, and not merely the disappointment inherent in every election.

Secondly and sorrowfully, racism has cast a pall over my experience at Lehigh. During the time I have spent here since the fall of 2004, I have heard countless racist jokes and ignorant comments from white students. The Greek system of the Hill also tends to encourage social segregation, and frequently promotes racism and misogyny with theme-parties such as “pimps and hoes.” Additionally, similar large occurrences have almost invariably taken place at some point every year, and are met with the same responses of anger and condemnation by some and skepticism by others. However, these reactions are always fleeting, and eventually the subject of racism on campus returns to ostensible quiescence.

Based on these two assertions, I agree with the institution of a mandatory class proposed in the “List of Resolutions Presented to President Alice Gast and the Council for Equity and Community (CEC) by a Group of Concerned Black Students” at the town-hall meeting. This class could exist as one of the freshman English courses, and should focus on the history of slavery and racism in America and violent/nonviolent reactions to the systematized oppression of Blacks in America. Therefore, the goal of this class would be to educate and expose students to why racism exists in the United States and the myriad of forms it has taken throughout our country's history. Furthermore, by incorporating both violent and nonviolent responses to racial oppression, the class would aim to illustrate the shortcomings of violent action, and encourage

students to engage in nonviolent forms of protest on campus. Ideally, this course would make interest in resolving racism a continuous force on Lehigh's campus. If unwavering concern and awareness existed it would emphasize to accepted African-Americans that Lehigh was truly concerned with becoming a more diverse institution, and that people of all races were welcomed and respected here. Although the institution of such a class was proven controversial and highly criticized by some people at the town-hall meeting, it is my opinion that it could dramatically alter the understanding and combating of racism on campus if properly constructed.

Much of the resistance voiced that the establishment of a class focusing on racism would not be possible for many students, particularly engineers, due to an already jam-

packed curriculum. This fear is understandable since students are attending Lehigh in order to get educated in particular fields, and do not want to sacrifice some aspect of their education for a topic that may seemingly have nothing to do with their career path. However, racism is omnipresent within American society, and will undoubtedly be encountered in one's work environment — one cannot separate the oppression of Blacks in the United States from any field. Therefore, we must modify this line of thinking, and should view the education of Lehigh students in this respect as paramount to every career path. We do not allow engineering majors to graduate without an understanding of calculus, or computer science majors to get their degrees without a firm grasp of programming — this is no different. By allowing students to leave Lehigh ignorant of why and how racism functions and how to counteract it, we are doing them a great disservice; we send students into their respective fields unprepared to deal with a problem that they will unquestionably be faced with. Should such a course exist, Lehigh students would indubitably become enhanced agents of social justice rather than those who unwittingly propagate further injustice.

If the course were to exist as one of the freshman English courses, nothing would have to be sacrificed from any student's curriculum. Students could read first-hand accounts of the brutality of slavery by Frederick Douglass or Harriet Jacobs, as well as reports of the shortcomings of reconstruction and post-emancipation racism by T. Thomas Fortune, Charles Chesnut, or W.E.B. Du Bois. These works, when coupled with the writing of Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr., would provide students with a sound knowledge of the history of racism in America and how to confront it nonviolently. Moreover, a study of the speeches and literature by these great progressive thinkers would enhance close reading and interpretation skills. In-class discussion and peer review would improve articulation and writing skills, while also exposing students to

the opinions of their classmates. Additionally, by educating first-year students in the art of conflict resolution, all Lehigh students would be better equipped to write persuasive essays and engage in effective discourse. Nevertheless, the administration seems unsure about the installation of a mandatory course and it will take time for a decision to be reached. It would be highly irresponsible to wait for change to take place. Hence, I encourage all professors teaching English 1 or 2 to modify their syllabi, even if only to include a brief section on the aforementioned subject. By doing so professors would not only assist the progression of the atmosphere on-campus, but also demonstrate to students that they cannot idly wait for others to generate change.

Another frequently espoused apprehension is that a course on racism would be incapable

assume that voting is the alpha and omega of democracy, and leaders should be expected to create change, rather than concerned citizens. However, the Lehigh administration is not an instrument of change, but like King's "white moderate," are "more devoted to 'order' than to justice;" they opt for "a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice." This is not a consequence of any fault of the members of the administration, but is caused by their necessity to regulate between the desires of the Board of Trustees and other alumni, current and prospective students, and faculty. Lehigh is constantly striving to improve its rank among other schools, and is subsequently slow to enact change due to fear of public opinion. Therefore, Lehigh is "in dire need of creative extremists" (King) that will dramatize tension

discourage matriculation from those who held intolerant, bigoted views. Conversely, the enrollment of African-Americans and other "minorities" would surely increase, as would that of white students interested in combating racism or simply looking to attend a school where diversity exists and is fostered. If a course were required, it would send a formidable message to prospective students about the type of community that exists on Lehigh's campus.

The need for a class that educates students in conflict resolution and Gandhi's nonviolent method — love in the face of hatred — was made highly evident in the town-hall meeting on November 11, 2008. Although the anger of everyone present was justifiable, questions and statements were often poorly directed and frequently demonstrated a failure to listen to the comments of others. The administration

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of changing the views of students who clung to ignorant, archaic attitudes and thus should not be mandatory. Although this trepidation is natural, it is also counterintuitive in a democratic society; it seems to imply that beliefs are unshakeable and inborn, rather than ever changing and acquired. Indeed, such an opinion would entail that debate is merely the futile clashing of opposing ideas, and does not produce any form of innovation or discovery. This perspective is also akin to the viewpoint presented in the "Public Statement by Eight Alabama Clergymen" to Martin Luther King Jr. that "a case should be pressed in the courts and in negotiations among local leaders, and not in the streets" (Carpenter). Undergraduates of this university, like too many members of my generation, possess the jaded outlook that public protest is ineffectual and cliché. They

on campus and force the administration to act; students must bring problems to the fore, so that the administration has no choice but to solve them or witness the waning of public opinion. By doing so, students will undoubtedly improve the ranking of this institution, and, if they do not act, problems will remain cloaked and dormant until further incidents of bigotry occur.

The aforesaid belief that the class should not be mandatory also connotes that if such a course existed but was not required those who are interested would either enroll in it, or already know the material. However, dozens of such courses do exist and are rarely full, and few Lehigh students completely comprehend the systematic and economic nature of American racism. Additionally, by making a course in racism a requirement, the University would

was bombarded with misplaced anger, and was constantly placed on the defensive. Students wanted to attack people rather than the problem, and we were subsequently unable to "discuss underlying needs" (Conflict Resolution Network). Ergo, we must change the nature of "conflict from adversarial attack and defense, to co-operation" (ibid.). By advocating a "win-win approach" and "creative response" to first-year students, we would also reify to the faculty and administration that "errors can be regarded as splendid opportunities for learning" (ibid.); in the process of improving Lehigh, we must take chances and mistakes will surely be made, but they will ultimately be the means for enlightenment and improvement.

The hostility that existed at the town-hall meeting was indicative of Lehigh students' current inability to perform Gandhian



nonviolence. Tempers flared, and though people were not physically violent, many spoke with anger and frustration; it was an exhibition of “a negative state of harmlessness” (Gandhi 101). Students, and even faculty, must be taught that true nonviolence is not simply the absence of brute force; “it is a positive state of love, of doing good even to the evildoer” and “means conscious suffering” (101). While simply teaching students what comprises nonviolence will not make them masters in its practice, (even Gandhi admitted that the “ocean of compassion” he preached was not always possible due to the human desire to respond to hatred with more hatred (101) it will hopefully lead to its implementation by organizations such as the Movement who seek social justice on campus. Nevertheless, “it is an ideal which we have to reach”, and must be strived towards constantly (104). With a thorough knowledge of nonviolence students will be more likely to understand that ignorance is not a fault of the individual, but of the system; we must separate the evil from the evildoer. Racist and sexist ideology is generally provoked by fear and misinformation from outside sources (e.g. attack ads). By compassionately seeking to educate and inform students who demonstrate a lack of knowledge, we are able to perform simple “experiments in the practice of truth and nonviolence” in our daily lives (49).

The frustration expressed was symptomatic of not only fear and anger, but also demonstrated the difficulty of battling an unseen, unorganized group of people. However, we should take the opportunity afforded by the current tension to modify our own beliefs instead of concerning ourselves with those of others. As Kofi Appiah-Nkansah '09 stated at the town-hall meeting, we should all have friends of different racial backgrounds. Education should not only exist in the classroom, and associating with a diverse group of people ensures that we will encounter scores of distinctive perspectives. The current campus climate is ripe for meeting individuals we may not have otherwise. Students should take this occasion to step outside of their comfort

zones and seek new friendships by attending events focused on multicultural activity, such as CEC meetings. Furthermore, when students are confronted with racist jokes or comments they should not shy away from conflict, but must utilize the chance to modify another's ideology. As James H. Kavanagh states, “The distinctive effect of ideology is not theoretical but pragmatic, to enable various social subjects to feel at home, and to act (or not act), within the limits of a given social project” (Kavanagh 314). Therefore, by not speaking we connote to everyone present that such action is acceptable and appropriate; whereas by confronting prejudiced statements we illustrate that it is offensive and intolerable.

An instruction in nonviolent action will also educate students that there is no way to attack racism on campus in its entirety. Instead, it would be more beneficial to “chunk” the problem into smaller, more specific parts, and then set goals in regards to that facet of the predicament — the participants in the 1960 Nashville lunch-counter sit-ins utilized this aspect of conflict resolution. Those brave students knew that they could not simply fight segregation on a whole, but could dramatize an explicit element of the system of segregation. As I stated briefly, one of the commonly criticized portions of Lehigh's campus is the Hill. Although this is not a condemnation of the Hill in and of itself, it does systematically preserve social segregation and there have been numerous accounts of Black students being refused access to parties. Therefore, it may prove advantageous to conduct fraternity party “stand-ins,” where numerous African-American students attempt to gain admittance at specifically targeted houses that are reputed to refuse entry. The students would have to make sure the parties were open to the public and that they were properly attired. Unlike the Nashville sit-ins, interracial, mixed gender groups would be encouraged, and the groups would have high girl-to-guy ratios so as to increase the likelihood of admittance (*A Force More Powerful*). Should the groups be turned away or told to “come back in half an hour,” they would calmly wait

adjacent to the house, and return after thirty minutes. Hence, if declined entry a large multicultural group would be located outside of the house, demonstrating to other students that the given fraternity discriminated right of entry based on race. Based on the results of these “stand-ins,” students could lead boycotts of parties. Parties with racist or misogynistic themes could also be boycotted. If well conducted, “stand-ins” and boycotts on the Hill could potentially dissolve much of the social segregation caused by the Hill.

In conclusion, a single class and the resultative action that it might cause would dramatically alter the climate of Lehigh's campus. By teaching first-year students the history of racism in the United States and encouraging nonviolent action on campus, the interest in “diversity” would be less likely to be contingent upon racist attacks, and may possibly flourish as a self-sufficient movement. Moreover, prospective students that were discouraged from attending Lehigh due to its largely homogenous student-body will also be more likely to accept admittance once they realized that such a course existed. Experiments in truth such as “stands-ins” and boycotts of parties can also contribute to the atmosphere on-campus by dramatizing, and thus teasing out the tension that already exists. A required course in nonviolent conflict resolution will also dramatically improve students at forming and articulating persuasive arguments and essays. Although the resolutions I have prescribed would surely lead to Lehigh becoming a more open, accepting community, the ultimate power lies in the hands of every individual on-campus. Students, professors, and the administration must struggle, both together and separately, to ensure that no one feels discriminated against.

by Patrick Murphy