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Hinda Adele Barlaz
Adelphi University

Denise C. Bynes
Adelphi University

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The Phantom Menace Or Why College Campus Racism and Intolerance Will Outlive Us All

Hinda Adele Barlaz

Adelphi University

Denise C. Bynes

Adelphi University

“We cannot be passive; we must exercise a sustained sense of moral outrage, so as to be agents of change in our academic work environments.”

The prevailing attitude about campus racism and intolerance among many in the academic community is as follows: the college campus is a microcosm of society, the problem is overwhelming, it's like chipping away at a glacier, nothing we can do will really make a difference, racism and intolerance are permanent behaviors of people which really can't be changed, we should just find a way to live with these ills. This mentality is our phantom menace, whose presence is all the more likely because we live in a world of overlapping categories: people of color/white, old/middle aged/young, female/male, gay /straight, physically challenged/ physically unchallenged, immigrant/native-born American, English-speaking/non English-speaking. For many of us, it is possible to experience racism and intolerance in more than one category. Furthermore, the degree to which individuals within a given category experience racism and intolerance varies greatly. We can blame the perpetrators of racism and intolerance, we can blame college administrators for not taking bold action on racism and intolerance, but it starts with us. We cannot be passive; we must exercise a sustained sense of moral outrage, so as to be agents of change in our academic work environments.

College campus racism and intolerance has not received the institutional and public attention that it warrants. Does there need to be a mass shooting incident on one of this country's college campuses in order for people to take this problem seriously? The issues are complex as are the possible solutions, which involve a considerable expenditure of time, effort, energy, and resources. In 1993, at Adelphi University, a predominantly white institution, an attempt was made to address the problem of campus racism and intolerance, but a lack of institutional commitment greatly contributed to the failed efforts of the Prejudice Reduction Committee (PRC). What forms should institutional support take? And in the absence of such support, what can faculty, administrators, staff and students of color do, and what can enlightened white faculty, administrators, staff and students do?

Almost five years after the dissolution of the PRC, the authors of this presentation, who were the former committee co-chairs, have reflected on the experience and are in the process of presenting a proposal to the new University administration on the need to resurrect the committee's mission. We were encouraged by the May 1999 commencement address of President Matthew Goldstein when he voiced his concern about the "pathology of hatred" and stated that "violence is not far from the surface in matters of racism and ethnic differences. Everywhere we turn, basic human differences beget violence." We would like to share with you the lessons we learned and how we hope to proceed in the

near future.

As its mission, the PRC sought to foster effective programming aimed at specific constituencies in the area of prejudice reduction; develop specific training aimed at faculty, staff and administrators; effectively use current campus resources in combating racism and other acts of intolerance; and develop a response team, comprised of a cross section of the campus population, to handle the investigation and subsequent resolution of individual and collective acts of racism and intolerance. Embedded within the committee's mission was the awareness that violent acts of racism and intolerance do not only operate on a physical level, but also on emotional and psychic ones.

Forms of institutional support.

The administrators must make prejudice reduction a high priority for the University and its personnel. The president must give his/her active support to this committee; release time should be given to active community members; committee membership should be inclusive (administrators, faculty, students, staff). Funds should be available for the hiring of an external firm to conduct a comprehensive survey of the campus's racial and intolerance climate; for committee members to attend conferences and training programs; for the University to conduct training programs on campus; for the dissemination of committee information to the entire campus community.

Training Programs.

We participated in two powerful training programs, both of which made many committee members very uncomfortable. There was only one person of color on the Prejudice Reduction Committee! Most White members were not comfortable when they had to experience firsthand blatant racism and intolerance. The discomfort factor, unless addressed, will create division as to the committee's direction, and also lead to a decreased level of commitment and enthusiasm among committee members. It should be noted that committee membership had been assigned by the administration. The Long Island Colleges Project on Racial Diversity organized a two-day training retreat program, conducted by the National Conference of Christians and Jews, for the purpose of creating teams on each Long Island campus to address the issues of racism and bias on their campuses with an emphasis on being proactive instead of reactive. This first training program created more of a discomfort factor than the second program, and fewer members attended the second program because of their initial experience. The two-day Cultural and Racial Awareness Training Program, conducted by the Community Relations Service of the U.S. Department of Justice, was aimed at assisting participants in creating an environment that enables people within and across diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds and experiences to gain greater awareness as they develop a mutual resolution to conflict and reduce tension on their college campus. For maximal effectiveness, both training programs should be used together.

Regional college consortia and projects.

Working with the Long Island Colleges Project on Racial Diversity and the Westchester Colleges Project on Racial Diversity provided us with external support and access to resources. Of particular note is the Westchester Colleges Project on Racial Diversity, financed by the Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education. The presidents from this consortium of ten Westchester colleges were the first at their institutions to participate in training sessions conducted by the National Conference of Christians and Jews, and this contributed greatly to the success of the Westchester

project. In our seeking to resurrect the mission of the PRC, we still intend for the emphasis to be on training University personnel (faculty, administrators, staff) on the dynamics of interacting with a diverse student body. However, the mission needs to be expanded to include separate training for students on interacting with other students, as well as special sessions on student leadership training. Cultural and racial awareness training would benefit all members of the Adelphi community, both in their University and personal lives.

PRESENTERS:

Hinda Adele Barlaz has been the coordinator of Academic Learning Services for the Learning Center at Adelphi University since 1988, and an adjunct professor in the Center for African-American Studies Programs (CAASP) since 1989. From 1991-95, she also served as director and interim of Adelphi's Higher Education Opportunity Program. Throughout her career as an educator, she has developed, coordinated and directed academic support programs as well as state and federally funded opportunity programs, all of which have fostered the retention of undergraduate students, particularly Black and Latino students. Her research interests include African-American, African-Caribbean, Latino, and Asian American literature; diversity and cultural pluralism on the college campus and in the workplace; and learning and teaching styles.

Denise C. Bynes has worked in Adelphi University's Center for African-American Studies Programs (CAASP), since 1985, first as the administrative assistant for four years, and then as program coordinator for the past nine years. In addition to her program management responsibilities, she has served as faculty advisor for student organizations such as La Union Latina, the Christian Fellowship, CALIBER (Cause to Achieve Leadership, Intelligence, Brotherhood and Respect), Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, and the African Peoples Organization. Currently, she is working with students of color alumni to develop an endowment for CAASP. She is very proud to have been a founding member of the Long Island Forum of Responsible Educators to End Discrimination.