

News, Views and Careers for All of Higher Education

Thursday

October 27, 2005

## Dumb and Dumber

By mid-October, the leaves on campus are turning, homecoming games are being celebrated, and — at any number of colleges — bigotry in one form or another hurts some students deeply.

The campuses and the incidents vary from year to year, but like clockwork, you can't reach this point in the academic year without flare-ups in which students have said or done things that left minority students (and many others) angry. In recent weeks:

- A group of students at the University of Chicago held a "ghetto" party in which some students dressed in stereotypical clothing. Photos circulated on the Internet, and the university is now organizing a town hall meeting and other discussions about racial insensitivity.
- At Colorado State University, a student group trying to protest a state referendum did so with an image of a lynching. After the use of lynching imagery angered minority students and led the president to send an e-mail to all students and faculty members, the group apologized.
- At Syracuse University, a student-produced television show — since killed — offended many with jokes about rape and cruel comments about the bodies of members of various minority groups. The students behind the show said that they were just trying to be funny.
- At Vanderbilt University, fraternity members left the head of a pig outside a Jewish student center. The fraternity said that the act was not anti-Semitic and that the intended target was the center's vegetarian café.

And Monday is Halloween, a holiday that has in recent years sparked controversies at numerous campuses after white students attend parties dressed as illegal immigrants, in blackface, or in various other ways that offend.

However sincere the apologies are from those responsible for these and many other incidents, they

raise the question of why — year after year — students are so hurtful about race, and are then surprised when someone is hurt. Experts on student life and race relations offer a variety of explanations and views.

Many say that the students who offend today aren't just younger versions of those who were doing racist things on campuses a decade ago or as some campuses first integrated. Rather, they say that today's students — and the ignorance many of them display — are the products of an unusual time in which minority culture is omnipresent, but more and more white high school students have no significant interaction with anyone of another race.

"We all assume that more progress has been made than has really been made," says [Beverly Tatum](#), president of Spelman College. A psychologist and the author of *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria and Other Conversations About Race*,

Tatum says: "While colleges and universities are more diverse today than they were 20 or 30 years ago, that isn't true for public schools, many of which are more segregated. So you have a lot of young people growing up in racially segregated schools and their only exposure to other groups comes from stereotypes in the media."

Popular culture gives these students — many of whom are clueless about those who are different from themselves — a false sense of race relations, says [Charles A. Gallagher](#), an associate professor of sociology at Georgia State University who studies white attitudes about race.

"People who are 18 to 20 have been raised in a cultural environment with 'Cosby Show' re-runs, hip hop, identifying with black characters, they have gone through the multicultural training — for whatever it's worth — in school," he says. "They have the perception that they are not only not racist, but they share a kind of social space with non-whites through the media, so they think race doesn't matter anymore, which just isn't the case."

"These pranks reflect the students' idea that we are in a post-race society and we can make fun of everyone, and make fun of everything," Gallagher says. "So they don't see the difference between a 'ghetto' party and a toga party."

Not only are students unaware of the feelings of minority students, many have so little sense of history that they don't know instinctively that images like lynching aren't going to be looked at casually by black people. And for all the talk about how colleges these days focus on multiculturalism, experts points out that most white students never study minority history in a sophisticated way or have any sustained focus on race relations.

"It's true that colleges do a lot more than they used to, and that's a good thing, but at most places, those efforts aren't as extensive as you might think," says Amanda Lewis, associate professor of African-American studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago and co-author of [Challenging Racism in Higher Education: Promoting Justice](#). "Maybe they do something that first weekend during orientation.

But for most students, they come in, go to the diversity session, and then move on with their lives.”

Even students who seek out information about minority groups know very little going in, she says. Lewis teaches a 200-level course on racial and ethnic history, and many students start with a “very superficial” knowledge of key events, she says. In elementary and high school, “they learn a little about slavery and a little about Martin Luther King,” Lewis says, and their overall “historical amnesia” means that they don’t understand why race matters.

While Tatum, of Spelman, agrees that many students are ignorant, she also says that there are students who intentionally seek to hurt. “Certainly there is thoughtlessness,” she says. “But we’re also in a climate in our society that is supportive of harassing events. Listen to talk radio. We are at this moment in a time when people feel free to make these kinds of comments.”

Caryn McTighe Musil, vice president for diversity, equity and global initiatives at the Association of American Colleges and Universities, also sees societal changes playing a role in the campus climate. “We’ve gone through a political period in the country where we have drifted away from a focus on social conscience and social responsibility,” she says. “We have been counseled from a variety of locations — political, corporate, elsewhere — to think about what I am and what I need, not about others. I think that feeds into it.”

Others point to other kinds of context in understanding these incidents. George Kuh constantly reviews data about student attitudes through his work with the [National Survey of Student Engagement](#), which is conducted by the Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research, which he directs. Survey results indicate that students become less comfortable as they enroll at colleges “where the racial complexity increases.” While their comfort level increases over time, that’s not the case initially, he says.

In such an environment, some students spend their social time with people like themselves. Those who are most likely to start one of these incidents, he says, are male, are in their first two years of college, and are in fraternities or other groups where there is “peer pressure to act out on those who are different.” Add alcohol, and these incidents aren’t that surprising, he says. (Jon Williamson, executive vice president of the North American Interfraternity Conference, says he is “not aware of any studies or data” that show that these incidents are more likely to involve fraternity members and calls that suggestion “a stereotype.”)

Adds Kuh: “There are a lot of things colleges can control, but can you control what happens at 2:30 in the morning? Not any more,” he says.

Kuh stresses that these demographic explanations in no way limit the moral responsibility of those who engage in racist acts. “These things are appalling,” he says. “I’m not trying to be an apologist, but in understanding these events, you need to look at the circumstances,” and many of these incidents involve “18 and 19 year old men who aren’t in a position for reflective thought, who aren’t very good at thinking about putting themselves in the shoes of the other.”

Another key thing to remember, Kuh says, is that colleges’ student bodies are changing every year, so there is never a moment of success when administrators can feel that everyone understands all of

these issues. "On a typical campus, about 35 percent of the people every year are brand new, and that is a lot of people to teach," he says. "Every fall you are going to bring in a bunch of people who are feeling their way in terms of how to interact in a strange environment with others who are different."

Kuh and others say that colleges need to beef up their orientation activities and the curriculum as it relates to issues of diversity.

Anne D. Neal, president of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, is skeptical of dealing with these incidents by changing what students study. "How these incidents relate to the curriculum is not clear to me," she says. But Neal says that colleges do have a chance — when incidents like these happen — to have discussions about ideas of tolerance of different people and different ideas.

With courts and public criticism limiting the use of speech codes — a trend Neal applauds — colleges can be constructive, she says. "When things are in bad taste and bad judgment, simply shutting them down without further discussion can potentially encourage more of these things, whereas taking the opportunity to talk with one another can be positive."

The University of Chicago is trying to take such an approach. Stephen Klass, vice president and dean of students, says that one of the things that surprised him, when the "ghetto" party became known, was how common they are. (Someone suggested that he Google the term, and indeed a search indicates that the parties are everywhere, and offending people all over the place, too.) This suggests that lots of students don't understand, not just those who organized one poorly thought-out event.

Klass says that the incident has led to broader discussions of issues of race, ethnicity and class in which minority students feel misunderstood. The university is planning a campuswide open meeting, to be followed by symposiums on relevant topics, and Klass says that he is proud Chicago is responding in a way that is consistent with its academic values.

"You find young, inexperienced majority students who just don't understand," he says. "We're trying to help people understand."

A broader focus — not just on those who engage in racist acts — makes sense, says Tatum. There are likely always going to be some students who might engage in these acts, and others who never would. Whether the acts take place or not may have a lot to do with the other people in the room when someone gets an idea to do something hurtful. Good college programs, she says, will let the student who is in the room know that there's an obligation to say "don't do that" or "that's wrong" instead of just thinking it.

But Tatum says that such changes aren't happening fast enough, and asked if we'll continue to see racist incidents on campus, she says, "the sad answer is yes."

"I am an optimistic person. I think there are lots of ways our society has improved and we can see opportunities for improvement," Tatum says, "But at a certain level, there are still lots of young people being exposed to stereotypes and unless we are really intentional about interrupting that, it's going to continue."

She quotes the saying: "If you do what you always did, you get what you always got."

— [Scott Jaschik](#)

## Comments

### Here we go again!

Here we go again! First we admit students that want to spend their lives partying, and then we find a way to employ people that 1) pretend to analyze it; and 2) make a living letting other people declare that they are "offended."

I am sure many people have parties mocking me, but somehow, I just don't care.

**Larry**, at 7:17 am EDT on October 27, 2005

### Irony of Kuh's comments

There is an irony that Kuh's comments are included in an article addressing how stereotypes continue to cause students pain, but yet he stereotypes fraternity members and their actions.

I applaud Inside Higher Ed for being thoughtful enough to include Williamson's comments. There is some truth to the "where there's smoke, there's fire" analogy with the troubles Greek organizations have faced over the years, but the fact these students are in regulated student groups simply shines a much brighter light on their "smoke" than Joe Non-Greek Student's identical activities.

In fact, if you follow Jaschik's advice and Google "ghetto party" only one of the results on the first page is associated with a Greek group. This is far from a scientific example, but it would be interesting to see how close this is to the actual percentage of such culturally-insensitive events originating in Greek and Non-Greek students.

**Devin Mathias**, at 8:15 am EDT on October 27, 2005

### Question Assumptions

The article — and most of its interviewees — appear to have the remarkable talent of divining exactly what the offending students were thinking when they did what they did.

Why is it the default assumption of the egghead set that every peurile attempt at humor is really an outrageous racist assault? What evidence do we have, outside the opinion of the professionally offended, that these students are actual bigots and racists?

Shouldn't the response to a genuine bigot be different from someone (or some people) involved in a tasteless joke? Of course doing that means the diversity office would lose both its opportunities to be

righteously indignant and the attendant right to parlay that into loads program fees.

[Stu Gittelman](#), at 8:19 am EDT on October 27, 2005

## Great insight, President Tatum

"Certainly there is thoughtlessness," she says. "But we're also in a climate in our society that is supportive of harassing events. Listen to talk radio. We are at this moment in a time when people feel free to make these kinds of comments." — President Tatum of Spelman College

The attitudes of students on college campuses only reflect the general attitudes of the wider society.

However, it is very disappointing that intelligent people think it is necessary to personally attack each other without any good reason.

Many people have little respect for the differences between each other. They spend so much time locked into their own social groups that they consider it ok to openly disrespect someone else.

Legislation on the college campus will do nothing to quell the flames of racial insensitivity because all of these actions are just manifestations of a state of mind.

If a man's thinking is shallow and he considers it an honor to disrespect someone else then putting limitations on his actions will change nothing.

Great insight, President Tatum and may you continue to lead Spelman College to the heights of excellence.

Regards, Donnell Duncan, Founder and President, The Cracked Door, "If the Door is Cracked, the Door is Open"

[Donnell](#), Civil Engineering (Structures) Graduate at Georgia Institute of Technology, at 8:26 am EDT on October 27, 2005

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