

Diversity becoming burning issue at UNL

By ERIN GIBSON
Senior Reporter

Last week, Chancellor James Moeser told the Academic Senate that students are insensitive at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

Students are not well-educated on cultural issues, he said, and many lack sensitivity to the differing cultural backgrounds of university members.

Moeser called on professors to help correct this educational deficiency by incorporating diverse cultural themes into their courses next year.

Moeser's comments were big news across the state and were reported in several newspapers.

But last September, such comments may not have been reported past the doorstep of the university.

Nebraskans, including university members, have since become more aware of racism at UNL and of the lack of diversity on campus.

A cross to bear

The start date for this heightened awareness was Jan. 27, the day the public learned of an incident that occurred four days earlier. That incident involved a pre-initiation ceremony of the Lincoln chapter of Sigma Chi fraternity.

Lancaster County Sheriff's deputies said they discovered about 30 Sigma Chi members engaged in a historical fraternity ceremony in a rural field south of Highway 33 and S.W. 58th Street.

No arrests were made regarding the ritual, which included the burning of a 6-foot cross.

The Lincoln and campus communities erupted.

Craig Vacek, Sigma Chi president, told the Daily Nebraskan that fraternity members did not mean for the act to connote racial bigotry.

"Our fault lies in the fact that we created the potential for this misunderstanding, and for that we are extremely apologetic," Vacek said.

At the time, it seemed all Lincoln-area leaders had heard about the incident and responded — all except those at the university.

The Monday after the incident, Lincoln religious and community leaders met at St. John's Baptist Church to demand the university correct racism at UNL.

The church's Rev. John Carter led the meeting, and said the university's slow reaction to the incident was unacceptable. The university had not yet officially reacted to the incident.

"If you can't say that it's wrong, then you're condoning the conduct," Carter said.

"It's wrong," he said. "That's the

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CRAIG VACEK
Sigma Chi president

bottom line. It's wrong.”

Such comments have since echoed throughout the Lincoln and campus communities.

The week after the incident, Chancellor James Moeser, issued a statement condemning the ignorance that led to the Sigma Chi incident. He said the university would not let the fraternity explain away its actions with a claim of naivete.

The Lincoln City Council, Mayor Mike Johanns, Gov. Ben Nelson and NU President Dennis Smith were among those who denounced Sigma Chi for its actions.

Bridging the gap

On Feb. 4, the Afrikan People's Union held a meeting in the basement of the Culture Center with Sigma Chi members, black community leaders and university administrators.

Press members were excluded from the meeting, but the people who emerged at the end said the meeting was a positive step toward cultural understanding on campus.

Everyone had agreed to work toward unity, they said, and Sigma Chi members had promised to atone for their actions.

One week later, university members of all races and backgrounds met with the Ethnic Minority Affairs Committee and vowed to end racism on campus.

The meeting called for action, not talks, attendees said. Afterwards, those attending held a candlelight vigil on the Union's south steps.

Each group member braved chilling February winds to state a personal commitment to improving the cultural unity of the campus. They sang "We Shall Overcome."

And, judging from the result of that first meeting, they meant it.

The Diversity Council, a group of students working to end racism on campus, has met at least once a week since the first union meeting. The group boasts accomplishments including helping to sponsor campus discussions.

The council also welcomes campus members of all races, sexes and

sexual orientations.

Change in conduct

Amy Rager, ASUN 1st vice president, said the result of such campus discussion could be a change in the Student Code of Conduct this fall.

A committee is being formed to review the code. They will then consider proposing changes, which could be voted on by the ASUN and Academic Senate this fall.

Changes could include a more specific and inclusive definition of sexual harassment, she said, and clarifying the university's jurisdiction when dealing with student groups.

The Sigma Chi fraternity wasn't forced to answer to any official judicial system — neither the Greek system nor the university system — for the cross-burning incident in January, Rager said.

As a result, the university's response was slow. Too slow for many campus and community leaders.

Legally, the university could not forbid hate speech in its code of conduct, Rager said. Student codes that forbid hate speech have been declared unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court, she said.

But the code of conduct could be changed to better define the system for dealing with future accusations of racist acts committed by student groups.

Currently, the UNL residence halls, the greek system and the athletic department have their own judicial processes. Student Code of Conduct infractions handled by any of those institutions may not fall under the jurisdiction of UNL's student judicial affairs.

"Our judicial process isn't clear," Rager said. "It seems sometimes that it's not equitable."

This fall, the debate over the Code of Conduct changes could keep efforts to increase cultural unity and awareness alive and thriving at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

Campus and religious leaders have said, although the Sigma Chi incident should not be projected in a positive light, the incident sparked perhaps the most impressive discussions on cultural awareness ever at UNL.

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