

News Analysis

Spotlight shines on diversity disparity

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The bright light of diversity glared into the faces of UNL students, faculty members and staff this year.

Though light shined on many issues, the broad issue of diversity blinded many to the areas that needed focus — the areas that were different in nature, but not in concept.

Some of these areas included the homophobic epithets chalked on campus sidewalks during Coming Out Week, which was a different problem than the uproar over a suspended English professor's allegedly racist e-mail.

Even though all the events contributed to making the under-represented feel unwelcome, all issues were different and should have been dealt with as individual issues.

And perhaps this was the problem. Junior N. Omar Valentine said most of the issues were talked about as black vs. white.

No matter what the incident was, whether it was looking at how to help the Asian students during the Asian market crisis, or dealing with the homophobic epithets, the university responded within the same race relations model. Administrators could have sent out the same press release, with different names, every time something happened.

"All those incidents come up, and we're going to have a forum talking about race relations," Valentine said, predicting the response.

And the sad thing, Valentine said, is that many students started to believe this blanket approach was the appropriate way to deal with the issue at hand.

The problems and the way they were addressed caused some students to leave the university.

Oscar Baeza, a former student at UNL, transferred to his home state of Texas during the spring semester because of money problems and, he said, a sometimes unwelcome campus climate.

"I almost gave into the pressures of being a racial minority on a campus that is 90 percent white — those kinds of pressures that make one drop out or leave," he said in a letter to the Daily Nebraskan.

Student apathy toward diversity also was frustrating to many who were involved.

"I think it's the same 10 percent that are involved in everything," Valentine said.

Students at a forum to voice opinions on the allegedly racist e-mail sent by Assistant English Professor David Hibler reverted back to the same race relations argument. This forum was an anomaly in generating a crowd, as most forums have even lower attendance.

"More people were mad when Coca-Cola lost to Pepsi," Valentine said during the Hibler forum.

Keri McTaggart, a junior education major, said her lack of involvement in forums and related activities was not because she didn't care.

"I don't see there was anything I could do about it," she said.

Some people did, and they're trying to break the form.

The Diversity Players, a skit group that started during the spring semester, are forcing students to speak about the issues in a different way.

"There's such a reluctance on the part of UNL students to address issues of race, class and gender," said Deanna

"I almost gave into the pressures of being a racial minority on campus that is 90 percent white — those kinds of pressures that make one drop out or leave."

OSCAR BAEZA
former UNL student

Zaffke, Diversity Players coordinator.

"They have a real reluctance to speak up."

But the talk and the action may have caused more people to listen.

Sophomore Eric Fletcher said he has heard a lot more about diversity this year than last.

Fletcher said people can put too much emphasis on diversity and may ignore other important issues because of it.

Often, the complaint is that people are interpreting instances to have a racial intent when one may not have been intended.

January was the one-year anniversary of the Sigma Chi pre-initiation cross burning. To the fraternity members, the cross burning symbolized Emperor Constantine's calling to join the Crusades.

To others, it was deemed racist and insensitive.

The morning after, when police deputies had found the cross' charred remains in a field outside of Lincoln, the press was all over campus.

"Instantly, everybody knew it was a big deal, and everyone would jump to the wrong conclusion," Sigma Chi President Jack Baker said.

Similarly, students in Hibler's class had the same reaction to the uproar over his e-mail, which many others considered racist. The e-mail contained the word "nigga."

"I knew that he would get attention, and I knew that people would take it wrong," said Justin Kallhoff, one of Hibler's students. Many people criticized the university for its initial handling of the Hibler incident with silence and press releases. The press conferences were called by Hibler and not attended by the university administration.

The university also did not win any diversity points in the way people interpreted its initial rejection of the Martin Luther King Jr. proposed holiday.

After the Academic Senate voted against recommending a day off for Martin Luther King Jr. Day, an uproar ensued.

Though the reasons behind the senate's decision dealt with the inconvenience caused to laboratory classes

and other academic concerns, people called it insensitive to King's accomplishments.

Eventually the senate approved the recommendation, as did the NU Board of Regents.

The NU Calendar Committee voted to accept a day off for the King holiday.

Though criticized for being slow to act, Chancellor James Moeser's focus on diversity this year is more than many former chancellors have done. Jimmi Smith, Multicultural Affairs director, said Moeser won't ignore issues.

"That doesn't seem to be the nature of the chancellor," Smith said. "He doesn't seem to be one to let things fizzle away."

It was tacitly permitted for instructors to excuse students from classes for activities planned on the King holiday by student government and other organizations — the first time the university has held activities for the day.

The campus saw the resolve of some students for diversity in how they lobbied for the King holiday. Other, lower-profile issues also were advanced by students.

A nonexclusive Latino fraternity, Sigma Lambda Beta, has joined UNL's greek system. A group of students is looking at bringing a Latina sorority to campus as well.

The two groups will contribute to diversifying to the mostly white greek system, which is seen by many as not welcome to minorities.

Kappa Alpha Psi, a traditionally nonexclusive black fraternity, also is reactivating on campus.

The university was host for the Big 12 Conference on Black Student Government, organized by the African People's Union. More than 1,000 students from the Midwest came to Lincoln for the four-day event.

While the black students are to be commended for making their voices heard, this year also saw the increased voice of many quiet minorities.

The Asian Student Alliance was formed this year, and the first Asian American Awareness Week was held in April.

The University of Nebraska



LANE HICKENBOTTOM/DN

TOP: JAY TERREL, representing Salem Baptist Church in Omaha, pours his voice out in song during the Gospel Extravaganza that kicked off the Big 12 Conference on Black Student Government in February.

SCOTT MCCLURG/DN

ABOVE: HOMOPHOBIC CHALK MESSAGES were scrawled on City Campus sidewalks during Coming Out Week in October. The chalk was washed away, but the impact on students was not.

Intertribal Exchange won an award at the Chancellor's Leadership Recognition Reception this spring for its powwow in December.

But even though this recognition and the new activities occurred, it didn't automatically mean the added voices would change the entire campus' view on diversity.

"Those things are healthy. But they are only healthy to the extent that they are included inside of the university," Smith said.

Administration took its time in addressing the Mexican American Student Association's boycott on the Multicultural Affairs office.

MASA finally was able to lift its four-year boycott on the office. The boycott was spurred by insensitivity issues, hiring practices, lack of structure and lack of student input into the office's services.

Although it shouldn't have taken four years of boycotting the office to do so, considerable improvement has been made in each of these areas.

Hiring also was addressed within the Teachers College. The dean, James O'Hanlon, sent a memo out that stated one of three final candidates for a position must be a minority. Opportunity hires also were encouraged. Though these statements were criticized by some for looking too much like "quota hiring," the administration remained committed to having a more diverse faculty.

Last semester, university officials drafted a diversity plan. The plan outlines goals to assist the university in creating a more diverse faculty, staff and student body.

Two drafts have been created; the first was criticized for excluding certain groups such as the disabled and homosexuals. The second has been seen as more inclusive.

The university was encouraged to do even more after coming under the supervisory eye of the federal government this past month.

Prompted by unofficial complaints and bad press for the university, the Office for Civil Rights came to the campus and talked to various students, faculty and administrators about the campus climate.

In a preliminary report, the office recommended the university look at three areas: racial policy, investigation of racial harassment and diversity training.

Through all of these efforts things have been accomplished. But not enough.

The epidemic facing UNL wasn't going to be solved with talk. It needed to be solved with action.

But it was a beginning. Smith was an undergraduate at UNL in 1967, "before diversity was even a term in our literature and in our textbooks," he said.

"I can remember when the university would say, 'Oh, we can't do anything,'" Smith said.

Now, the university has said numerous times, but in not so many ways, it will do something.

In addressing diversity, the university needs to diversify.

No more formatted racial incident responses.

No more blanket statements. The opportunity is here to act.