



The Dartmouth Review

Dartmouth's Only Independent Newspaper

Tolerance at Dartmouth

by Steven Menashi

Wednesday morning, February 21, in something called the "Good Morning Message," an e-mail newsletter that circulates among students, appeared a letter signed by "Anonymous," which detailed her shock at hearing some students at Psi Upsilon fraternity chanting "Wah Hoo Wah! Scalp 'em!": "As I neared Psi U, the shouting ceased for a moment, and then started up again. Except this time, the 'men' screamed 'Wah Hoo Wah!' 'Scalp those bitches!' 'Wah Hoo Wah!' 'Scalp those bitches!' As a woman walking alone in front of this fraternity house, I was suddenly overcome with shock, fear and disgust. I couldn't think of anything to do, save to yell back "Psi U is so cool!" only to be assaulted with a series of insults, which I did my best to ignore as I kept walking by," explained Anonymous. "I am ashamed that 'the old traditions' of racism and sexism are alive and well on Dartmouth's campus."

The e-mail quickly darted around campus, and students seized upon the incident to launch the usual charges of racism, attacks on the Indian symbol, and calls for eliminating the Greek system—vomiting column after column onto the pages of the Daily Dartmouth.

"This latest incident was not only embedded in this school's racist treatment and ideology of native peoples, but is another statement about a school that continues to support spaces and structures that empower white men," sneered Eleanor Leahy '01. She wants the administration to ban Dartmouth Indian apparel.

"The problem is pervasive and exists much deeper than what we are giving it credit for. It exists, and flourishes, when groups of men come together, close their doors, add some beer, and get going," charged Lauren Foley '03. "Yes, yes, not all brothers are like this," she added, but "When they come together a frenzied mob results."

Brooke Lierman '01 and Kathryn Oliviero '01 focused on the presence of Dartmouth Indian jackets on campus: "to the Native American community and other concerned students the figure on these coats is as offensive as if one wore a swastika to a synagogue."

As it turns out, there were only two Psi Upsilon brothers on the house's front lawn, and two in the window, chanting as "Anonymous" walked by—so attributing their sentiments to the entirety of the Greek community, let alone to the whole college, is a bit hysterical. Equally ridiculous is the belief that chanting the old Dartmouth football cheer, "Wah-Hoo-Wah! Scalp 'Em!" proceeds from a racist belief in the inferiority of American Indians.

Dartmouth's Indian symbol—similar to the profile on the buffalo nickel—isn't degrading to Native Americans. "You have Indians on the nickel. And you also

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have presidents of the U.S. on the nickel,” notes Ralph Dana, governor of the Pleasant Point Passamaquoddy Reservation in Maine. “It’s meant to be an honor.” Which is why most tribal chiefs nationwide support the symbol. “I was very disappointed when Dartmouth got rid of the Indian,” Truman Jefferson, Secretary of the Crow Tribal Council, once told The Dartmouth Review. “There’s nothing wrong with pride in one’s past.”

Most American Indian colleges, such as Dull Knife Memorial College in Montana, boast Indian symbols similar to Dartmouth’s. It’s a recognition of the identity and history of the school; Dartmouth, after all, was founded as a school for Indians. The College still maintains that Indian tradition through special recruiting efforts, the Native American Program, and the Native American Studies Department.

Presumably, all of Dartmouth’s students and alumni have a common claim on our history—but that’s precisely what is now being denied.

Of course, the screaming students on the porch of Psi U were acting silly, and obscene language is never pleasant, but one needs to keep in mind their actual offense: they spoke words. They were words, to be sure, that many people don’t like—Dartmouth has been debating the Indian symbol and cheers for a quarter-century, and there’s no excuse for shouting expletives in public—but they were words nonetheless. One student heard those words as she walked, unmolested, past the house. And until she yelled at the brothers they did not direct any words at her. No one disputes those facts.

Still, Psi U quickly issued a public apology: “The actions of the members involved are inexcusable and unacceptable. No matter what the two brothers who were chanting meant to convey, their conduct was clearly offensive,” wrote house president Michael Holick ’02. “The entire brotherhood of Psi U would like to apologize,” he said, for the “heinous incident.” The chanting brothers have been stripped of house officerships, banned from fraternity events for the remainder of the term, and prohibited from living in their house next term. They were also subjected to chastisement and name-calling, after issuing individual public apologies—even as “Anonymous” cowers behind a veil of namelessness.

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Additionally, the Coed, Fraternity, and Sorority Council, along with Dartmouth’s Office of Residential Life, has launched an investigation into the “incident,” and has promised swift punishment. “I assure the Dartmouth community that this incident will not pass without action from the council,” wrote Shihwan Chung ’02, president of the CFSC, in a public letter.

But the Psi U students didn’t violate any rules. Dartmouth’s student handbook even shields them from any official sanction: “Freedom of expression and dissent is protected by Dartmouth College regulations. Dartmouth College prizes and defends the right of free speech,” reads the handbook, which even provides that “Protest or demonstration shall not be discouraged so long as neither force nor the threat of force is used.” Dartmouth, as a private college, may not be bound by the First Amendment, but the student handbook represents a binding contract between the College and the students.

“There weren’t any specific rules per se in the CFSC handbook that were necessarily violated,” Chung concedes. “But as with any organization or any individual on campus, we are held up to standards of the Dartmouth Principle of

Community, and clearly that was broken in this case.” The Committee on Standards has ruled, however, that the Principle of Community cannot be the basis of a disciplinary hearing—a fact that’s noted in the student handbook. The Principle represents general values that the Board of Trustees endorsed in 1980, and Dartmouth regulations provide only that students are “expected to be mindful of it in pursuing our own interests.”

The Principle of Community, while cute, is very vague. One could envision Dartmouth’s Star Chamber sitting in judgment as to whether a student has been sufficiently “appreciative of the diversity of the community,” and condemning him on that basis. It would be outrageously arbitrary and oppressive, charging people with crimes of thought and opinion—a practice all the more disgraceful in an academic community.

Informally, though, that’s what Dartmouth is building. Since the “ghetto party” uproar of 1998, the hubbub over Alpha Chi’s “luau party” two years ago, and assorted controversies over “offensive” T-shirts, what has been in evidence on campus is a regime of intimidation in which students are chastised for unpopular speech and expression, and keelhauled into publicly confessing their ignorance and pledging loyalty to regnant ideologies.

Now, it seems, the administration is officially getting in on the act, with their investigation of the Psi U speech incident.

Though charges of racism are typically overblown, much of the controversial expression has been puerile, even offensive. But part of living in a diverse community is coming into contact with people whose opinions and rhetoric are different, unsettling, and, yes, even offensive. To restrict what can be thought and said, however, is to destroy the free expression of ideas on which liberal education rests. Ultimately, free speech is meaningless unless it protects the speech that we hate. Agreeable speech doesn’t need protection.

Surely, we can criticize others when they’re wrong, misguided, or imprudent—and the Psi U brothers have been resoundingly criticized—but to punish students for speech represents an intolerance of dissent and honest discourse which threatens academic freedom.

Learning at a liberal institution requires a respect for the rights of others to express themselves according to the dictates of their own minds and conscience. And students need to appreciate others’ right to free speech, even when they violently disagree. That’s truly being “appreciative of the diversity of the community as providing an opportunity for learning and moral growth.”

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"Far better it is to dare mighty things, to win great triumphs, even though checkered by failure, than to rank with those poor spirits who neither enjoy much nor suffer much, because they live in the gray twilight that knows neither victory nor defeat."

-Theodore Roosevelt

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