

Diversity problems must be addressed on this campus

Incident renews call for awareness

by Dan Zehr

Normally, this column would be titled "What are you getting for your educational dollar?" Money does not seem all that important in comparison to this issue.

Everyone at Penn State Harrisburg seems to have some sort of opinion about the campus. Usually it is apathetic or sarcastic, but it is always strong. Whether discussing the equipment, the activities available or the atmosphere, the argument over where the fault lies could rage for days. Most often, the correct answer to the debate is everyone.

This certainly stands true in one glaring example - discrimination. PSH has earned a lousy reputation among the community concerning diversity issues. This legacy is not the school's alone but its students as well.

The most recent example of why we have gotten such standing was the defamatory remarks written on two of the Black Student Union signs. The scrawl included some

choice words: one four-letter word beginning with "f" and, on another sign, a more derogatory word starting with "n." With less than a little imagination it is easy to see the community's beliefs may be justified.

Dr. Bob Scott, coordinator of the Harrisburg Campus' Educational Equity and Diversity Committee, has been dealing with these problems for most of his career. He is very concerned. "There has historically been a negative view of Penn State," Scott said. "Just when things get better, a bad incident occurs and ruins the hard work."

Racial epithets, like the one found this past weekend by two PSH students, are more graphic samples of where our reputation comes from. But they tend to be random events. Scott is equally concerned with the more subtle forms of harassment that plague the school on a consistent basis.

Problems arose, like the time a professor asked how "black people pronounce" a certain word or phrase. The lengths of discrimina-

tion workshops have been heatedly argued about, but the participation of tenured professors is virtually nil. Even simple conversations with no malice intended can be offensive. "I hear three to four concerns every day," Scott said, "one of which is justifiable."

One valid complaint per day is not a statistic most universities would be proud of. It is also an obvious indicator of why many people do not want to come to Penn State. Scott's daughter, for example, decided to go to Vassar. She did not want to deal with the discrimination here, he explained.

This is not just a black - white issue. Many others already here are fed up with the cold shoulder they are receiving. The library and maintenance staff has felt consistently ignored by faculty, administration and students alike, Scott reported. Even tenure versus non-tenure insensitivity has occurred.

However, the news is not all bleak. PSH is making some progress thanks in part to a concerted effort by Dr. John Bruhn, Capital Campus provost and dean. He has made his position on any

type of discrimination perfectly clear. "I put out two letters to staff and faculty reemphasizing Dr. Spanier's (PSU president) position and the university's position," he said.

He has told his staff that anyone violating the policy will be removed immediately and without discussion. In addition, he works closely with the diversity committee giving them his "full ear." Scott applauded his efforts saying, "He is speaking out and students should follow suit."

Some are indeed taking the first steps. Staff discrimination training is scheduled for next month, and clubs have scheduled meetings to discuss discrimination in all its forms. Scott has urged discussion in the classroom as well. However, forums such as these are limited.

The most work needs to be done on an individual basis. Scott suggested a few things everyone can do, beginning with, "examining yourself and where you are." Try to discern the values you have, remembering you can easily offend and be unaware of it.

Next, talk to other, different

people. Find out how they feel about the issues at hand, and listen when they answer; answering honest questions is important. "We must talk both ways," Scott reminded.

Also, follow the old cliché practice makes perfect. "If you say it in a homogeneous situation, you will probably say it at the wrong time," he warned. In the global marketplace, everyone must watch what they say.

Last, but most important, Scott said remember Elie Wiesel's statement, "Silence is a form of endorsement." Speak out when you see something wrong, he added, and tell a person if they are being offensive.

Many studies show 5 to 7 percent of the population will not change their attitude toward such prejudice. But by failing to address the issue, we are opening the door for that statistic to increase. They will not grow if they are confronted.

At PSH, we need to reach a position we can justify, Scott said. "If we are committed to quality education and relationships, and maintaining the ethics we talk about, this problem must be improved."

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