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Elizabeth A. Daniele
Syracuse University

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Cover Page Footnote

I extend my thanks to Dr. Dawn M. Dow for a conversation that helped me develop this case study.

Fostering Student Community while Respecting Diversity, Inclusion, and Individual Rights: A Case Study

Elizabeth A. Daniele, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY

In the era of the Black Lives Matter social movement and protests against racism and behaviors perceived to be racist on campuses across the nation, this case study presents a divisive tension that emerges from framing personal expression as free speech or racist hate speech. With questions about how an Office of Student Life should most effectively respond to diverging views about racism and free speech on campus, this case study explores the responsibility of administrators to foster community while respecting individual rights. The scenario presents a student who wears a blackface Halloween costume at a small liberal arts college. Subsequent reactions from members of the college community highlight underlying attitudes toward race as well as tensions about differing understandings of racism throughout the campus community. On the premise that campus race relations are too often under-addressed by college administrators, questions prompt the reader to imagine serving as Dean of Student Life tasked with addressing rifts in the student body. This case study urges the reader to consider how framing dialogues is important to maintaining a sense of community at an institution of higher education.

Keywords: Blackface costume, campus racism, student life

Contextualizing the Case

The Black Lives Matter movement serves as a backdrop for campus protests in autumn of 2015, a fall semester that saw a surge of student-led activism around issues of racial inequity. At the University of Missouri, protests and demands by an activist group as well as a graduate student's hunger strike ultimately led to the resignation of the university president, who had failed to respond to a number of racially charged incidents on campus that fall. News, photos, and expressions of support began to pepper social media landscapes as rallies held in support of Missouri protestors occurred across the United States. With aims of exposing, addressing, and combatting systemic racism on their own campuses, students nationwide organized, petitioned, chanted, staged walkouts, occupied buildings, and submitted demands at a number of schools (see Pauly & Andrews, 2015). As Nossel (2015) eloquently summarized, students "are bent on eradicating the vestiges of overt racism, as well as the prejudices and inequities that fuel it, and are demanding that the leadership of their institutions join the push" (para. 13).

Importantly, rhetoric around such protests frequently frames these as struggles between what Op-Ed columnist Nicholas Kristof (2015) calls “two noble forces...concern for minority or marginalized students and faculty members, who are often left feeling as outsiders in ways that damage everyone’s education...[and] the other noble force in these upheavals — free expression” (para. 1-2). Specifically, the quest for justice for racial minorities was often pitted as oppositional to free speech of other members of the university community. Such frameworks were adopted by major media outlets such as The New York Times, The Atlantic, and The Washington Post as well as by college and university stakeholders like current students, alumni, and faculty.

Institutional Context

Oakley is a selective, private liberal arts college nestled in a small town in the Northeastern United States. About 3,500 undergraduates study at Oakley, most of whom live on campus. Oakley College features a single graduate degree program that offers a masters in counseling, which brings a small population of approximately 50 graduate students to the campus community. Graduate students tend to live off campus and have very limited interaction with undergraduates. The current president of Oakley College is relatively new, having held the executive position for two years during which she has been establishing her reputation as a champion of diversity. For example, she has made a priority of improving retention of racial minorities on campus who have a second-year-return rate significantly lower than the college average.

Oakley is 35 miles away from the nearest metropolitan area and there are no Greek Letter Organizations affiliated with the school; a great deal of student social life happens on campus. The Office of Student Life oversees all parties even when these social events are planned and hosted by various student organizations. Every fall, the Office of Student Life holds a very popular annual Halloween party for all enrolled students of Oakley College. Broadly, the work of the Office of Student Life is to create and implement programming that fosters personal growth and self-discovery among students while advancing development of community on campus. The office seeks to encourage student leadership and cooperative spirit along the axes of five key institutional values that are interrelated and integral to the school’s mission: Learning, Respect, Wellness, Freedom, and Justice.

Current Problem

This year, a white female student arrived at the Saturday night Halloween party donning a wig and blackface makeup to portray herself as media icon Oprah Winfrey. The Graduate Assistant (GA) who works for the Office of Student Life asked the student to leave the party without issuing any citation for violation of college policy because he did not identify that any college policy had been directly violated.

The GA who works for your office had been alerted to the fact of a person wearing blackface when a group of students of color exited the party noisily objecting to the costume as offensive. According to an email he sends early Sunday morning, your GA located and approached the young woman costumed as Oprah, and asked her to go home,

which the student did complainingly but without major incident. The GA's message states that he did not issue any citation to the student because he did not identify the decision to wear the costume as explicitly violating the college's non-discrimination policy, which has clauses that expressly forbid bullying and discriminatory harassment. Furthermore, because no write-up was done in the moment, the GA does not know the student's name. The GA's message concludes with a statement that he hopes he did the right thing in asking the undergraduate to leave, citing the fact that the costume clearly upset other undergraduate students. He states that the incident actually troubled him on a personal level as well due to the history of blackface in the U.S. as a tool for enacting and reinforcing stereotypes about African Americans.

By Sunday afternoon, the situation has rapidly become a wildly popular and hotly debated topic on the anonymous social media site, *YikYak*. Most comments range from posts in defense of an individual's "right to dress up as they please on Halloween" to explanations of the offensive nature of wearing blackface given the American history of minstrel performance to degrade and debase African American people. There are also declarations online decrying the overly sensitive nature of students at this college, which is often characterized as a left-leaning campus when compared to the surrounding community; demands that the administration take action against the student; and a few posts with blatantly racist and hate-filled language.

Sunday night there is a link to an online petition sponsored by the Association of Black Students at Oakley (ABSO) circulating on social media sites and via email. This petition calls for immediate and decisive action from the administration. The petition states that the college administrators have an obligation to protect students of color who come to Oakley to learn and live, tasks which are exponentially more difficult in the current campus climate, which they describe as rife with fears for safety, undercurrents of hatred, and ample amounts of ignorance. The ABSO petition signors demand that the college formally denounce the offensive costume, eliminate *YikYak* from its server, and work arduously to prevent such offensive actions in the future; they want Oakley to start with institutionalization of mandatory curricular requirements that address struggles for diversity and inclusion on campus.

Monday afternoon the regional newspaper publishes and releases online an open letter from Libertarian Students of Oakley College (LSOC), and addressed "To the Community of Oakley College and Beyond." This letter asserts the fundamental importance of free speech and rights to self-expression in the context of individual sovereignty and in resistance to "the cult of the omnipotent state" (Libertarian Party, 2014, para. 6). Noting that college campuses are not excepted from the principle that governance tends toward oppression of rights and labor, the LSOC letter highlights local history dating back to colonial-pioneer eras as having a tradition of defending personal liberties against intervention by the state. This letter explicitly protests the ABSO demands as restrictive, overbearing, and unreasonable. It concludes by exhorting administrators not to bend to whims of angry students as such actions would be a betrayal of the free-thinking and pioneering spirits of Oakley's founders.

Key Stakeholders & Tasks

As Dean of Student Life at this small college, you are charged with creating community among students – oftentimes for groups with divergent interests. Highlighted by the publication of LSOC’s letter by the local gazette, this issue is rapidly being framed by different constituencies as a case of hate speech versus free speech. In part because your office is the institutional umbrella for both ABSO and LSOC, the president of the college insists that this is a student life issue.

She tells you to address the potentially tremendous rift that she sees developing in the campus community by charging you to compose a message which will be emailed to the entire campus community and also published in the weekly campus paper. The president suggests that your message should address the challenges of, and opportunities for, creating community in the face of adversity without alienating students who are members of ABSO or LSOC.

- What points would you make in your letter to the college?

In addition to composing the email, the president has tasked you with creating a sequence of public forums to help the community communicate on these issues of speech. She believes that bringing the issues and concerns of members of the campus community into public arenas will help minimize the divisive nature of debates currently circulating.

- Decide what type of advertising and/or incentivizing strategy will be used to ensure wide participation by many segments of campus community.
- How will these forums be facilitated to maximize benefits in the sense of (re)building campus community? Discuss pros and cons of at least three forum formats.

Finally, the president of Oakley College has asked you to spearhead as co-leader, along with the director of the Multicultural Affairs Office (MAO), an action-oriented committee tasked with assessing extant college non-discrimination policies and improving them as they pertain to diversity, inclusion, and student conduct.

- What will your approach be for your first meeting with the director of MAO?
- What do you see as an appropriate strategy for such a committee?
- What are your goals for this group?

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Correspondence for this case study should be addressed to Elizabeth A. Daniele at edaniele@syr.edu.