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Bias on Campus: Fighting the Problem, Embracing a Solution

By Dr. Thomandra Sam, Psychologist / Diversity Specialist

The long history of our country has demonstrated that persons who identify as members of, or even allies to, particular groups often may be treated unjustly or harshly. Recent events in our country, particularly within higher education, demonstrate that harsh treatment towards members of traditionally marginalized groups (cultural, spiritual, sexual preference, gender identity/expression, etc.) is prevalent and potentially gaining strength. It is imperative that Western Carolina University coordinate its efforts to demonstrate that we do not condone or endorse the thoughts and/or actions of bias incidents and we will act against such hatred and injustices occurring in our community.

To some readers of this article, the question may arise: what is a bias incident and how can I truly play a role in stopping such injustice?

“A bias incident is any conduct, speech or expression motivated, in whole or in part, by bias or prejudice,” according to Tolerance.org. Differing from a hate crime, a bias incident does not involve criminal activity. Similar to a hate crime, both actions adversely impact the learning environment. However, such incidents should not occur and can be dealt with through the utilization of grievance procedures and ethics committees hosted by members of the University community. Therefore, all hate crimes are bias incidents, however all bias incidents may not constitute a hate crime. Bias incidents include, but are not limited to: slurs and epithets, hate/inflammatory symbols, target(s) believe the incident was motivated by bias, and/or a pattern of incidents in which the targets and perpetrators are members of differing groups.

Although not illegal, bias incidents demand a unified denouncement from our community and its leaders. In its 2005 National School Climate Survey, the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) found:

- 75% of students heard derogatory remarks such as "faggot" or "dyke" frequently or often at school.
- 89% reported hearing "that's so gay" or "you're so gay" frequently or often as a means of identifying something or someone as useless or stupid.
- 17.6% of students had been physically assaulted because of their sexual orientation while 11.8% of students reported it due to their gender expression.
- The average GPA for LGBTQ students who were frequently physically harassed was half a grade lower than that of LGBTQ students experiencing less harassment.
- LGBTQ students who experience more frequent physical harassment were more likely to report they did not plan to go to college.

GLSEN's 2004 State of States Report revealed that LGBTQ students who did not have or were not aware of policies protecting them from violence and harassment were 40% more likely to report skipping school out of fear for their personal safety.

Notwithstanding, North Carolina, as of June 2009, is one of fourteen states in the USA with a law that addresses hate or bias crimes but does not address sexual orientation or gender identity as a means for bias. At Western Carolina University, however, students do have the ability to file a bias-related complaint no matter its relation to culture, spirituality, sexual preference or gender identity. This action can take place in person at either the Western Carolina University Police Department (in emergency) or with the Assistant Vice Chancellor's Office.

In learning to advocate and create a more inclusive community, there are some actions and resources that can help to facilitate such proactive change by individuals. Below are three tools that may prove helpful in energizing one's self as an advocate of justice.

1. **Gentle Identification of Bias.** Identifying a behavior candidly may help someone to better hear what they have really said or are saying. Therefore, in the goal to communicate, loaded terms are the least helpful. When identifying behavior, however, avoid labeling, name-calling or the use of loaded terms. Describe the behavior; don't label the person. For instance, "Jane, what I hear you saying is..."
2. **Enforce Your Boundaries.** You do not have the power to control other people; the progression towards social justice is still about acknowledgment of each other's rights. With that, everyone has the right to control their own space. Persons advocating for social justice and fighting against bias cannot control another person, but you can say, "Please don't tell racist jokes in my presence anymore. If you do, I will leave." Or, "My workspace is not a place I permit such remarks to be made. I can't control what you say outside of this space, but here I ask that you respect my wishes." Then follow through. Bob Carolla, spokesman for the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill believes that, "even if attitudes don't change, by shutting off bad behavior, you are limiting its contagion. Fewer people hear it or experience it."
3. **Be Vigilant.** It is important to remember that change happens over time, however it is important to stay prepared and continuously speak out against injustice. The greatest risk to justice is silence in the face of injustice. Ron Schlittler, acting executive director of the national office of Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, states, "There's a sense of personal disappointment in having not said something when you felt you should have."

To discuss such matters, faculty and staff members in the Western Carolina University community are encouraged to consult or seek support from Intercultural Affairs, Counseling and Psychological Services, and/or fellow co-workers who have been identified as advocates or allies in other areas. We especially need to remember to point our students toward these resources if they express a concern about bias or if we recognize a problem. For more information on how to be a more active agent for social justice and to help to stop bias incidents in our WCU community and your personal surroundings, the following resources are recommended:

Human Rights Campaign: <http://www.hrc.org/>

Equality North Carolina: <http://equalitync.org/>

Southern Poverty Law Center (main): <http://www.splcenter.org/>

Teaching Tolerance: <http://www.tolerance.org/>

Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN):

<http://www.glsen.org/cgi-bin/iowa/all/educator/index.html>

TransYouth Family Allies: <http://www.imatyfa.org/educators/index.html>

Stop Bullying Now – U.S. Government site: <http://www.stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov/adults/default.aspx>

Remember that "if you don't speak up, you're surrendering part of yourself." (Carolla)

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