

Racist signs at SUNY New Paltz lead to vast outcry

Officials desire discussion of issues as cops investigate

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NEW PALTZ — The posting of several racist signs at SUNY New Paltz has triggered a police investigation, a call by the administration for soul-searching and a proposal by the Black Studies Department that the incidents be used as a "teaching moment."

A sign reading "Colored only" was found posted over a drinking fountain in the Humanities Building Nov. 8. The sign was removed and posted on Facebook by outraged students.

Following the incident, college President Donald Christian issued a lengthy memo to the campus community condemning the note as being antithetical to the college's values of "equity, mutual respect and inclusiveness."

Christian promised an investigation by campus police; later in the week, three more similarly racist signs were found in LeFevre Hall.

On Wednesday, Christian sent another memo to students and teachers decrying the incidents and proposing a college-wide forum to discuss the incidents Nov. 30.

Junior Jonathan Espinosa was one of the first students to see the initial post. He called it an expression of ignorance that didn't surprise him.

Espinosa said he hoped students of color could "create a bond" among themselves in coming days by increasing their awareness of hate crimes.

New Paltz campus police Chief David Dugatkin said Wednesday the investigation has turned up several potentially strong leads on and off the campus.

Karanga Keita Carroll, chairman of the Black Studies Department, joined Christian in urging discussion of the incidents by students and faculty members.

A day following the first incident, the department issued a letter to Christian. In it, associate Professor Major Coleman said the department didn't believe the sign was an isolated incident and that it could be used as a "teaching moment" for the college.

Coleman noted while New York has the country's highest black population, SUNY New Paltz's undergraduate student body is only 5 percent black, according to the college's own 2010 Student Profile.

"It is our hope that over the coming weeks and months your administration will use this tragic event to begin the process of what Martin Luther King Jr. called 'substantive equality,' which is so desperately needed on this campus."

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