

Welcome Remarks – Let’s Talk About Race, Gender, and Identity Symposium
November 16, 2013

President Donald Christian, SUNY New Paltz

Good afternoon. I am pleased to join in welcoming everyone to this afternoon’s symposium and to welcome our guest presenters. We appreciate your being here and look forward to our work together. Today’s event is an extension of a “Let’s Talk About It” discussion that a previous Student Association President and I organized in November 2011. That event was prompted by the posting of racially offensive material on the campus that semester. After that, student association leadership secured funding through a grant from SUNY and began planning this symposium, in consultation with administrators, as a way to build on that initial discussion. I want to acknowledge the great work that Student Association President Manuel Tejada and his colleagues in planning and organizing this symposium.

We are all aware of recent racial postings and writings on this campus. These are examples of the kinds of offensive, obnoxious, ignorant, and hateful speech that occurs on college campuses across the country. New Paltz is not alone in these experiences, but our response to such events is strong and rooted in our values of diversity, equity, and inclusiveness. We do not claim to have attained these ideals. Indeed, this symposium and other efforts across campus are part of our ongoing work toward those ideals. An example of those efforts is the important step we took recently of expanding our non-discrimination policies to include gender identity.

Policy or structure will not prevent the kinds of speech or writing that has caught our attention. One of the most powerful responses to such speech is more speech -- instructive, thoughtful, respectful speech that unifies rather than divides us. Letting the utterances of one person armed with a felt tip marker divide us, or harm our community, yields immense power to evil or ignorance, and I don’t believe any of us wants to give the perpetrator of these acts such satisfaction. Our intention today is to come together as a community to learn and to develop new ways of thinking about and behaving toward each other.

A residential college campus in the 21st century is not a bubble isolated from the world around us, but reflects the varied strengths and ills of a broader society. People come to this campus from diverse backgrounds and experiences, sometimes for the very first time living, studying, and working with people of different race, religion, cultural background, national origin, gender and sexual orientation, gender identity, or other dimensions of diversity.

It is unrealistic that everyone knows when they come here how to engage others well and appropriately. It is perhaps inevitable that people say or do things that are difficult to understand -- sometimes unintentionally, sometimes carelessly, sometimes without good understanding of their impact on others, and sometimes for perverse motivations.

Those hurts can be subtle. Students of color on another SUNY campus reported that blatant, in-your-face acts were not the most pervasive sources of hurt. A more common experience was a sense that people were staring at them, another a subtle sense that people changed their course ever so slightly on campus sidewalks and hallways to avoid walking close to them.

Our campus climate survey indicated that LGBTQ students and employees were much more likely to have observed harassment and negative comments, and also that they experienced subtle hurts – being made to feel invisible in some respects, or to feel excluded from the fabric of the community, for example, work or study groups.

Understanding such behaviors and their impact on others is part of our challenge. Through my earlier experience at another university in a process called “Dismantling Racism,” I learned that increased knowledge, awareness, and insight can lead to changes in individual and collective behavior. I also learned that this is a slow and difficult process of change that includes continuous conversations that challenge people to face what makes them uncomfortable about race and other dimensions of diversity.

That complexity is coupled with the challenges presented by the special attention that college campuses pay to academic freedom and to constitutionally protected

free speech. For better or for worse, our first amendment protects the right to make many types of ignorant, provocative and harmful statements. And we don't have a constitutional guarantee that protects us from that speech. That is part of our challenge as a society, and these are topics worthy of their own separate discussion.

These recognitions are not to condone harmful or hateful acts and speech, but to direct our efforts as a learning community toward collective, educational work to help us learn about ourselves and each other, the different privileges and responsibilities we carry, the impacts of our actions on each other, and how to build a community that is truly equitable and inclusive.

To do that, we need to learn to understand, live with, and support people different from ourselves. And in doing so, we need to find common ground that brings us together so that we are one university community, not atomized into separated segments. Today's symposium is one step in that journey. There will be more steps in the future.

In our 2011 Let's Talk About It discussion I shared an Aesop's fable, the fable of the bundled sticks. It's relevant for us today as well.

A dying man called his sons to his death bed. His sons could rarely agree and were always squabbling. He handed the eldest a tied bundle of finger-sized sticks and asked him to break them. He could not, nor could each of the younger sons in turn. The man then instructed his sons to unbundle the sticks, and to see if they could break the individual sticks, which they readily could. He pointed out the clear moral of the story – that we are stronger together than we are apart.

I hope we carry that lesson with us today, and in the coming months as we take steps to become a better community. The actions we take must be owned by the entire community. No one individual or group can be responsible; our sense of community must guide this work.

I will end with one final observation. I commend those who are here today. You are clearly committed to learning and talking about these issues, and are willing

to invest five hours on a Saturday afternoon to do so. It is an unfortunate reality that those who are NOT here may be the ones who might benefit most. This afternoon I hope you will think about ways you can carry today's lessons and messages to your fellow students, friends, colleagues and co-workers, and neighbors. I hope we can expand the net of those working to improve our community.

Thank you, and thank you again for being here today.