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Racial tensions high at CCSU

By: FRAN MORALES, Herald staff
10/29/2007

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NEW BRITAIN - Students and faculty at Central Connecticut State University plan to protest Wednesday in response to ongoing tension stemming from race and discrimination issues on campus.

Students passed out fliers on campus Thursday announcing the demonstration, which will be held between the Student Center and campus cafe Wednesday from 1 to 4 p.m. A copy of the flier with an obscenity and racial slur against blacks written on it was mailed to one of the professors in the African Studies program.

Vice President of Student Affairs Margaret Toston told the university's president, Jack Miller, that two students and a professor discovered another flier for a conference on racism defaced with the same slur. Miller condemned the perpetrators and called for an immediate investigation.

"We do not know who committed this despicable racist act, but the university police have been notified and are aggressively investigating," Miller said in an e-mail to faculty and students. "Calling attention to this indecency, unfortunately, gives it more power to wound, but Dr. Toston and I do so here to express our solidarity and sympathy for those who have been hurt or felt threatened by such hateful words. As a community, our highest calling is to treat each other with respect and dignity and to behave with civility."

The vandalism shows a climate of discrimination still clings to the campus, said Serafin Mendez, a communications professor at the university. Last month, students and faculty were dismayed by a comic strip in the student newspaper, The Recorder, about geometric figures talking about urinating on a 14-year-old Hispanic girl. Minority groups called it an example of "hateful speech," but said it was just one example of discrimination at the university.

They also complain the administration has been unresponsive on other issues, and that there is not enough diversity on campus. Moises Salinas, chairman of a campus diversity committee and an associate professor of psychology, said the Sept. 12 comic strip was just a starting point for discussing diversity problems.

The school senate's Diversity Committee surveyed 121 faculty and staff for its 2006-07 report. The report found an increase in offensive incidents reported by ethnic and other groups since last year.

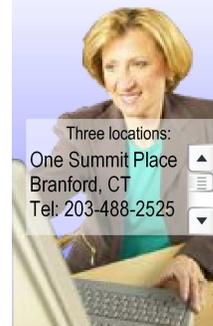
While 64 percent of white respondents said they had never faced discrimination, only 14 percent of blacks and 9 percent of Hispanics could say the same. About 5 percent of the university's 9,600 undergraduates is Hispanic. Among full-time and part-time students, 2 percent is black. Nearly all black respondents reported discrimination by their supervisors, with 86 percent saying they were frequent victims of discrimination and 14 percent saying it was occasional. Among Hispanics, 73 percent reported frequent problems. Among gay or lesbian faculty and staff, 29 percent said they felt similar tension. Salinas said he's gotten numerous complaints from faculty and staff about the

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unwelcoming climate for minority groups, including Jews and Muslims. A straight, white teacher said she got hate mail after announcing a study of bisexuality. Last month, an African-American professor received documents on Connecticut State University letterhead with pictures of black teachers speaking in black minstrel dialect, identified by slave names or African-style names. Their hairstyles are mocked and one professor is made to make reference to "guilt-ridden honky liberals."

Students and faculty have said Miller does not do enough to foster diversity on campus. A Journalism Integrity Task Force was formed after The Recorder published an essay saying rape was "magical" in February, but history professor Matthew Warshauer said Miller's diversity initiatives are all talk and the task force has not met since last year.

"When he tells one of our colleagues, a nationally recognized expert in African diaspora slavery, that his work is not important because it isn't national and international in scope - a statement that is flatly wrong - it is demeaning and disrespectful," Warshauer said.

"When the president states in an opening of the university address that there are always some faculties who complain and at another address that criticism doesn't bother him, he is really saying that he doesn't care what we think. That is demeaning and disrespectful."

"A good leader does not always have to agree with criticism, but a good leader reflects on it and a leader tries to alleviate the concerns that generate it. President Miller does not do that," Warshauer said.

The teaching staff's senate passed a motion Oct. 22 calling for a faculty vote on whether there was confidence in Miller's leadership. The vote was to take place by secret ballot within 30 days of the senate vote.

The motion to hold the wider vote passed by a slim margin - 32-30. Two members of the faculty abstained.

Miller's spokesman Mark McLaughlin said Wednesday that the president respects the right of the faculty to pursue the vote.

"He is looking forward to hearing from a broad cross section of faculty," McLaughlin said.

"As always, this door is open and he would readily meet with any faculty members to discuss these and other substantive matters or work with them in advancing the many good initiatives at the university."

The invitation has been dismissed by faculty members who question Miller's response to issues such as the cartoon.

Many wanted Miller to support a harder line against The Recorder's editor-in-chief, Mark Rowan, who has been in charge during publication of the cartoon and "rape" essay. There was a call for Rowan to step down, but he has refused to step down, apologize or identify the cartoonist.

The Foundation for Individual Rights In Education supported Rowan and The Recorder, saying in a Sept. 20 letter to Miller they were concerned about any threat to free speech in response to the cartoon.

"Let us be clear that the content in question - a cartoon about a triangle, square and a character named 'Juanita' provided in a humorous context, might offend members of the campus community, but it is unquestionably a protected expression under the First Amendment," said Adam Kissel, director of the Individual Rights Defense program for the foundation. "The cartoon involves no threat or intimidation and it even includes a disclaimer - which would not be required - making clear that no threat of any kind is implied."

Salinas, who met with Miller and other diversity groups Thursday, said Miller has recently tried to reach out to constituencies and is beginning to diversify the school's curriculum and faculty training. The university is also looking to fill a president's executive assistant position to help promote and integrate diversity in the campus.

"We can't all point the problem at the administration," Salinas said. "We all have to participate and work toward the solution."

Fran Morales can be reached at fmorales@newbritainherald.com or by calling (860) 225-4601, ext. 306.

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