

Minutes

Senate Consultative Committee February 20, 1992

Present: Thomas Scott (chair), Mario Bognanno, Judith Garrard, Sonja Hoheisel, Paul Holm, Norman Kerr, Stanford Lehmborg, Tom Lopez, Karen Seashore Louis, Burton Shapiro, Charlotte Striebel, Denise Tolbert, James VanAlstine, Christine VeLure, Jeff Winker, Shirley Zimmerman

Guest: Josie Johnson

1. Review of Agendas

Professor Scott convened the meeting at 11:00 and reviewed with Committee members the items on the dockets of the Campus Assembly and University Senate.

2. Discussion with Josie Johnson

Professor Scott next welcomed Dr. Josie Johnson to the meeting to discuss hate crimes. He noted that there had been discussion with the President about re-issuing the letter of last year from the President, Professor Ibele, and Mr. Towle; President Hasselmo suggested that it would be useful to have a conversation with Dr. Johnson before doing so inasmuch as she is working on the issue of hate crimes and the University response.

Dr. Johnson thanked the Committee for the opportunity to join it and began by observing that if the faculty are not committed to what she is doing, nothing will get done. At present, she told the Committee, she is on leave from her position as senior fellow in the Department of Educational Policy and Administration to work on all-University diversity issues. She is eager to share information with the Committee, she said, but does not yet have it in a form that can be distributed.

Last year, she noted, the faculty had said there was a need for more conversations, in groups, about hate crimes and why they occur. It seems, she said, that there is a ten-year cycle of intolerant behavior against people who are different; recently, however, they seem to be occurring more frequently.

This year thus far there have been meetings with external groups (internal meetings will take place during Spring Quarter); one recent group she met with, she related, was of media representatives. They said that the University is a central and vital institution in the society--but they don't hear about what it is doing, and whatever is done gets started and stopped. They don't believe the University is as vocal as it could be or have action associated with its statements.

Dr. Johnson said she had a few things to suggest, but observed that whatever is done must be carried out in the context and culture of a university. Much of what has been done has been outside that culture--but the University should not try to become another Urban Coalition or Anti-Defamation League, or to become arms of such groups as those. Rather, it must say that it is unique and it will "do things the way we do it as a university functions."

There should be more involvement of all units of the University in dealing with hate crimes, not just the Senate Consultative Committee. There is a need for all units to take an active responsibility in expressing anger and outrage at what is happening to students. Students have shared letters with her, she said, that threaten them; there are letters from the Klan that include names and other identifying comments in the text--so the authors clearly know who the individuals are--that threaten bodily harm. These letters are scary, she said, and the students who receive them feel isolated and do not see anyone coming to the rescue. We as faculty, staff, and students can speak to these issues in our various groups, over and over again, so that it becomes woven into the fabric of the institution. Letters alone are not sufficient.

There need to be more one-on-one conversations with colleagues--something not often done, perhaps because of "Minnesota nice": we don't talk about unpleasant things.

There also needs to be a report and evaluation of the "time out" of last year; we don't know what happened afterward.

Dr. Johnson said she recognizes that in dealing with hate crimes and hate speech there is a fine line between academic freedom, the First Amendment, and expression of outrage at intolerance. The Committee can help, she told it, by informing the academic community of its responsibility to talk to students. Some of them, she related, are afraid to wear t-shirts that identify them as belonging to a particular group; others are afraid to walk alone at night. The Committee needs to seek the help of the faculty in dealing with these problems within an academic culture.

Dr. Johnson also told the Committee of a recent meeting between African-American and Jewish student groups; they considered three questions: What has been their experience in America (not in Africa or Israel), what strategies have the two groups developed to deal with and cope with their experiences, and examine those experiences and strategies to see how they affect their view of the world.

One Committee member said it would be useful for the Committee to see examples of these letters; he hears that they are sent to students, but it is so far beyond his ken, so incredible, that ANYONE would send or receive such mail that he wants to see them. Dr. Johnson agreed that this might be instructive and said she would provide samples.

Another problem, noted one Committee member, is that many students who receive such mail may not report it; if a learning experience is to be created from these events, the units have to KNOW about them. One can take up the matters in a seminar; it is even more useful to be able to say "a student in this department. . . ." But people may be reluctant to report because, like sexual harassment, it is humiliating. Dr. Johnson agreed that this can be a problem; they don't want to admit it is happening to them and justify it as something else. Discussing the issues in small meetings may be one way to address those individual reservations.

Another Committee member expressed doubts about whether a letter from the Consultative Committee serves a useful purpose, and related the activities that have taken place in her department and college.

How students can be of help is not clear; neither Dr. Johnson nor the student members of the Committee had concrete ideas about what might be done beyond expressions of general support. Students at Bailey Hall, one Committee member related, have taken vigorous steps to create an atmosphere of awareness about hate crimes. It was suggested by another that the Greek system, often perceived (whether accurately or not) as a source of some of the problems, might seek advice on dealing with intolerance.

Among the media people with whom she met, Dr. Johnson recalled, several were members of minority groups. Their image of the University is one of a very lonely place for people of color; individuals express concern but minority students do not feel it. That, however, is probably true of MANY students at the University--and likely some faculty as well--the environment is a major issue that must be dealt with. Each unit has a culture, Dr. Johnson observed, and the size of the overall institution should not stop each department and unit from handling these issues in the context of its own culture. She is also trying to establish a clearinghouse, she added, so departments can learn what others have done.

A discussion with Paul Tschida, the newly-appointed Assistant Vice President for Health and Safety, might be useful, it was suggested; he would very likely be sensitive to these concerns and willing to work on them. His office should also be in a position to give advice to students who receive threatening mail, for example. The most important step to be taken is to assure faculty and students that they will receive a sympathetic hearing and that they SHOULD go to that office.

Dr. Johnson thanked the Committee for its time; Professor Scott thanked her for joining it.

The Committee adjourned at 12:00.

-- Gary Engstrand