Despite Hardships and Fear, Huskies Persevere and Remain Hopeful

By Artemis Allison

HOUGHTON, Mich. – After the response from Rick Koubek, Michigan Tech’s president, in regards to the Trump parade that had started on Michigan Tech’s campus on September 27th left many students feeling unsure about how Michigan Tech would handle the problems of hate speech directed towards Tech students and their feelings on safety, especially with the only denouncements coming from the University Senate and from the staff who ran the Center for Diversity and Inclusion. During most of the fall semester, many of Tech’s minority students, alongside the fear that they were experiencing from living during a time of a global pandemic that many feel Tech is similarly mishandling, they found a reprieve not within from Michigan Tech’s administrators, but from their fellow students in rolls that saw them working with the Center for Diversity and Inclusion such as the Society for Hispanic Professional Engineers, the Undergraduate Student Government, and from the residential assistants around campus who were already struggling with the pressures that a semester of struggling with COVID-19 would leave them with.

Maritza Gonzalez, a second-year student who is also the RA for one of the two fully gender-inclusive halls on Tech’s campus, felt that because of these things, her job “has been made infinitely harder”. At the height of the uncertainty during the election, she had several students decide it would be easier and safer for them to just leave Tech’s campus and return home for the remainder of the semester than it would be for them to try anything else. The continual communication issues that Michigan Tech faced students with, from changing how things like how the COVID-19 statistics were reported to the general student bod, alongside the continual uncertainty in messages from the MTU Flex team has left students feeling frustrated this semester as their trust in Tech’s administration wavered. Some students sardonically lamented the fact that a report titled “MTU One of Just a Few US Universities with Highly Robust COVID-19 Testing Plans” was reported by Michigan Tech itself in an attempt to paint the measures as safe, even as students voiced their concerns about coming back for the fall semester both at Tech and at other universities in the Upper Peninsula, such as students in Marquette who successfully petitioned Northern Michigan University to delay the start of in-person classes by two weeks to allow for quarantining and testing to begin. Northern Michigan University finished their semester on November 29th, maintaining face-to-face classes all throughout, unlike Michigan Tech, who, despite painting themselves as well-planned from the start, had to return to completely remote classes at the start of October and then ask for students to not return after Thanksgiving break, much like the University had done back in March. Though the University had tried to paint the plan as safe, it hadn’t worked and only left students feeling stressed, confused, and unsure.

Though Michigan Tech’s administration often tries to paint itself as apolitical, to do so leads the university ignores both the growing trend of science’s roll in our politics and the safety of the minority groups on campus; an apolitical environment leads to the needed benefits of groups like the Center for Diversity and Inclusion in the Hamar House on campus being joked about as unneeded and useless, even around students who rely on the services they provide. Though a look at the voting rate at Michigan Tech may lead to the appearance that the student body is apolitical, with only 26.9% of the student body voting in 2018 according to NSLVE’s campus report for the University, this stands only ten percent below the national average and still firmly places the university well above the bottom line.

Michigan Tech’s issues with politics is not a recent issue, either: while other colleges around the United States stood in protest against the Vietnam draft, numerous professors have noted the fact that Michigan Tech held protests in support of the war. The attempts to keep an apolitical veil over the Tech campus simply ignores the efforts put forward by student-lead groups and the CDI to speak up about the issues that minority students face and the problems of the world that we live in; the attempt at an apolitical veil is, perhaps, the reason why to some students, such as those who began their time at Tech during the 2016 election, would end up feeling as though the effects of politics only got louder as they spent more time at Tech. “In 2016, there wasn’t much campaigning around campus,” says Katherine Wang, a recent Tech graduate, “compared to my last year, where groups involved with the CDI were speaking out more on campus about social and political issues. Tech isn’t becoming more political; politics are just becoming more prominent as social issues become more politicized. There is more incentive for our generation to be involved since many of us believe that the older generations are not handling it properly, and social media makes it easier to be informed – hell, even TikTok can help inform you about politics now.”

Some faculty, too, are beginning to openly comment on Michigan Tech’s lack of initiative towards handling the political problems that minority students feel as though plague the campus. “We have taken leadership on handling one of the pandemics that face us, but we haven't taken leadership on the pandemic of bigotry," noted Professor Robert Hutchinson during an emergency University Senate meeting that took place on December 9th as part of a discussion on a University measure to both properly denounce the Trump parade that had occurred on Tech’s campus back in September as well as to fund more diversity measures to make Michigan Tech a safer climate for its student body. University Senate meetings, however, are very rarely sat in upon by students, due in part from the lack of communication that these meetings occur. In fact, some of the University Senate members even report that they themselves are put under pressure to not be involved in the University Senate by their bosses and coworkers. These diversity measures, however, don’t affect a key area where minority students often feel unsafe as well: the local community.

During the Trump Parade, which was composed mostly of local area residents, a student who remained to wish anonymous noted the fact that, for just walking down the street during it and looking even slightly gender nonconforming, they were called various homophobic and transphobic slurs as well as a communist. “I had my headphones in and my head was down, I wasn’t doing anything, I was just walking,” they said, and felt that the Tech was “really just trying to forget and move on. Pretend it never happened, and if it did, there was nothing that could have been done. I doesn’t matter that now I flinch at revving truck engines and car horns.” Trump, who ran as the forerunner for the Republican party once more alongside a vice president who endorses so-called “conversion therapy” in which queer individuals are sent by their parents and tortured to no longer be gay, stands at the head of a party that, according to the Republican party’s platform for this year, wishes to overturn the 2015 Supreme Court decision that allowed for gay marriage to exist and for marriage to exist as not exclusively between “one man and one woman”. “I know that this whole thing has been taking a toll on the queer students at tech because of the language people would use to refer to us,” Maritiza said in support of her students, “a targeted threat based on someone’s Gender or Sexual orientation is really hurtful.”

Over the course of this semester in the midst of a pandemic, however, political uncertainty that an “apolitical” campus tried to ignore was not the only reason that Michigan Tech students felt unsafe in the local area up here: the local county communities behavior towards the pandemic was just as disheartening to many students. “I haven’t left the Keweenaw since I got here in august, and I’m constantly seeing people in the grocery store not wearing their masks,” said Maritza, who’s statement on how people were wearing masks in the Houghton County area was mirrored by several other students. Much of the ire of the local community was levied at Michigan Tech, even, as COVID-19 cases continued to rise in the local community, for what felt like a hasty plan to reopen with a system whose only praise seemed to be coming from the University itself.

Thus, with Tech’s administration struggling to address the sources of fear within the Tech community about the local environment from both pandemic and political related struggles, it was on the shoulders of students to try to successfully make change and create a welcoming environment via the way of student government and student-lead clubs and organization. In some ways, many student organizations made a better transition to the remote environment that Michigan Tech was forced to adopt than university-lead initiatives did, such as classes. Organizations like Keweenaw Pride, Swing Club, the Daily Bull, Mitch’s Misfits and fraternities such as Alpha Phi Omega alongside many other clubs and organizations transitioned immediately into online meetings and lessons, allowing for students to have resources to connect with and foster friendships that might have been impossible for them to form without the efforts of these groups. Despite that, many clubs still struggled to maintain the usual level of enthusiasm, which was a problem also noted by RA’s around campus, who were unable to get a level of student involvement and engagement that would have normally occurred for students. For first-year students in particular, this poses difficulties due to the transitional shock that they might experience, due in part to the fact that the Orientation program, Michigan Tech’s primary student retention program, both had its time cut into due to University Senate measures to start the semester early as well as being completely remote.

To some students, student organizations being better set up and prepared than classes were was not the only way that the student body was outperforming administration efforts. Michigan Tech’s undergraduate student government, lead by Larkin Hooker-Moericke, noted in an email sent to every undergraduate student at Michigan Tech after September’s Trump parade that while some of the core values of the Tech community may be a spread of ideas, the “disrespect of Huskies on the basis of race, religion, color, national origin, sexual orientation, or gender identity should not be part of anyone's Michigan Tech experience. Students have reported that derogatory terms were directed towards them during the rally. This disrespect and use of this language is unacceptable. Our differences should be embraced so that Michigan Tech can be a diverse and thriving community where everyone feels safe and respected. I am committed to creating an inclusive community. The first step is to educate myself about the challenges that minority students face. From there, I will work with Undergraduate Student Government and other groups on campus to ensure a safe and welcoming campus community.” Her attempts at trying to create a diverse and accepting community mirror sentiments slightly shown within Richard Koubek’s email to the student body four days after the Trump rally – and like his, refuses to explicitly state that the problematic event in which Tech students were harassed and called slurs was a rally in the explicit support of then-president Donald Trump – but shows a clear attempt to explicitly state that what happened there was not okay and should not have happened, something that Koubek’s email to the student body refused to acknowledge happened. To some students, they were glad that at least someone was making an effort; to others, they were disappointed that the efforts to fix things seemed to be on the shoulders of students who were already struggling with remote classes and other pandemic-related measures.

With the election of Joe Biden in November, however, many students feel as though things might get less politically tense around campus, as well as the news of the several coronavirus vaccines in various stages of public testing and production for the general public helping lighten fears about how much longer the Tech community will have to deal with their coronavirus-related struggles in learning, friendship, and community. Most of the minority students agree that, while Biden winning wasn’t their first choice, it was better for them than the alternative was. “I’ve been ecstatic since Biden was declared the winner,” said the anonymous student who had been harassed by Trump supporters on the September 27th rally. “He was never my first choice, but I feel he’s still a decent human being which is more than we’ve had the previous four years. I’m still nervous though for how the country can move past the last four years but I’m hopeful that this is a step in the right direction as a country.” The support of the Biden victory during the 2020 presidential election by some of Tech’s student body and of Tech’s faculty and staff stands in stark contrast to the county that Michigan Tech finds itself in, where on the same day that much of the mainstream media had called the election, a Trump rally was parading once more throughout downtown Houghton, flags waving. “I fear how locals and others may react,” said Bee Kellogg, a sixth-year medical lab science student, “in general I do not think the students will act out much though, we aren't that large or lively of a campus.” Though protests occurred downstate as a response to the Biden victory, including threats levied against the Secretary of State, Houghton county did not experience similar scale of protesting, something several students were thankful for.

In the last week of classes as well, Tech students who had tuned into the University Senate meeting to find out about the pass/fail measure that USG had put forward – a measure that, though passed, was noted by the University Senate to have been put in front of the senate rather late in the semester and necessitated an emergency meeting to vote on – would be the end result of the University Senate’s attempts to gather information about what exactly had happened during the Trump rally in September that had shaken many queer students at Tech: Resolution 41-21, titled “Embodying University Values: Condemning Hate Speech, White Supremacy, and Ethnically and Racially Motivated Intolerance”, which had served as an expansion upon Resolution 7-20, Emergency Resolution: Sense of the Senate to Condemn Hate Speech, Hate Crimes, and Ethnically and Racially Motivated Intolerance” which had been proposed a year before in September of 2019 after an anti-Semitic hate crime defaced a local synagogue. “We have borne witness to the experiences of our harmed constituents, seen and heard the hateful propaganda that ails our community, and listened to the pleas of our students and it is our charge, as university leaders, to embody the university values,” the recent resolution states, and gives the students who had been left frustrated by the apparent lack of response from Tech as a whole some mild recourse towards the entire situation.

For Tech’s minority students at the end of a difficult, highly-politicized semester, the acknowledgement and decision by the University Senate to set funding aside to be better, followed by Amy Howard’s denunciation of the three anonymous senate members who voted against the measure to do so, is a bittersweet relief to them. It comes during a meeting that exists beyond the knowledge of most students with a resolution that already has people concerned about just how much impact it may have, especially with how much the resolution threatens to change. Biden’s election brings a similar hollow victory as a candidate that did not promise the change that other candidates had promised, such as former president’s Barack Obama’s campaign that rallied on change. To the minority students at Michigan Tech, though they’ve been able to breath a sigh of relief as they finish up with their finals and no longer have to immediately worry, many already have realized just how much of a fight still lies in front of them.