

## **Student Praxis of Multiculturalism: A Campaign for Campus Diversity, 2011-2012**

***Daniel Pneuman***

### **Introduction**

Today's college students are challenged by a plethora of issues such as graduate indebtedness, soaring tuition rates, discrimination on campuses based on gender, sexuality, race and immigration status as they search for ways to effect social change on campuses. After decades of higher education's efforts to become multicultural, diverse and inclusive, students also find the institutional rhetoric is way ahead of the reality on the quad. Students living differences, especially race, gender and sexuality, find that their campus may not foster respect for diversity in the curriculum or in the extracurricular activities of student life, perhaps because it fails to fit within a more corporatized university framework. At the same time, the majority of students seem to be unaware of the rights, privileges, and responsibilities with which they are empowered by law. That reality contrasts with the public perception that students today, like earlier generations, are eager to contest authority – on campus or against local and national government policies.

For a short historical moment it appeared that the image of numbers of socially active youth and students on the move might be happening. The 2011's Occupy Wall Street (and other US city business districts), and especially the occupation of Zuccotti Park in New York's financial district turned out to be a galvanizing but fleeting moment in time. I participated briefly in that event, and also in protests on my own public university campus which reflected some of the political energy of the time. In this essay, I examine that moment and the fledgling social change efforts on the State University of New York, College at Oneonta (SUNY-Oneonta) campus, where I was then an undergraduate. I emphasize the context of the Occupy Wall Street movement to highlight the observation that campus activism in the twenty-first century, like the occupy activism, is seen by commentators as ineffective, fleeting and leaderless, even neo-anarchist, despite us youth being adept at using social media.<sup>1</sup> The SUNY Oneonta case study of social activism examines our generation's capability for producing the changes it seeks. One question dominates: can campus protests achieve their goals? Can they have an impact on the policies and practices they find oppressive?

### **Student Protest in the Year of Occupy Wall Street**

In 2011, American students observed protests from the Arab Spring to the Occupy Movement which captivated the world. Some of us even joined in the movement which led *Time* magazine to name "The Protestor" its Person of the Year. As a college student, my campus peer and I followed and participated in protests. We felt not just responsible to take ethical stands, but believed that

there was work left undone from earlier generations. On the Oneonta campus, student concerns over issues of fairness and equity brought many students together. At a time when every US campus had mission statements about “excellence” based on diversity posted on their websites and dedicated offices of equity, inclusion and diversity, students on my campus were reminded weekly that “diversity was one of the five pillars” of the college’s mission<sup>2</sup>, but many also talked about how that was for public image making.

The national and international events occurring throughout the 2010-2012 period, together with the Occupy Movement, pressed my peers and me to rally around issues of rising tuition costs, access to higher education, issues of diversity and inclusion, and state cuts to educational programs. We became very concerned about continued access to college and also about student indebtedness. We saw that the University of California, Davis and Los Angeles campuses made headlines as did other campuses in the SUNY and CUNY systems. At CUNY Baruch students were arrested while protesting a vote that increased their tuition in November.<sup>3</sup>

On the SUNY Oneonta campus, there was an “Occupation of the Quad” rally, an Occupy themed teach-in, and several anti-hydraulic fracturing (fracking) protests that created a whirlwind of activism, heightened attention to student and local community issues on the campus, and seemed to alarm the local administration.<sup>4</sup>

While endorsing the premise that all politics are local, it is worth noting that national protests generated by the Wall Street and nationwide Occupy Movement, especially slogans about the top one per cent of American earners hoarding the nation’s wealth, bankers as the cause of lost pensions, lost jobs, and rising tuition costs, Oneonta campus political protest reverberated somewhat differently. Instead, racism, racial profiling and the failures of campus diversity goals laid bare student frustration and anger with contemporary higher education. This pressure point harkened back to a particular racialized history of the institution that was never completely acknowledged or overcome: its history of racism embodied in the “Black List of 1992.” Rather than anger at Wall Street, students identified how campus policies fostered a discriminatory present that remained entrenched in the distant past. Students of color and other minorities at SUNY Oneonta experienced many forms of “othering” as we navigated the campus and the town. Blacks, Latinos, Asian Americans all saw that there were few professors who came from their communities and experiences, and the curriculum rarely reflected perspectives from their cultures or experiences. On campus and throughout Oneonta, these students regularly talked about bias and discomfort, which increased feelings of insecurity and non-acceptance by the college, their white peers, and Oneonta townspeople.

This undercurrent of white privilege and racism was experienced every day by my fellow students of color: name calling and verbal harassment in

residence halls, frequent “tails” by downtown store personnel, and the local police. Anger and resentment simmered, but went un-channeled until a major incident occurred at SUNY Oneonta during the 2011-12 academic year. While experiencing these everyday denigrations, the SUNY Oneonta administration made several decisions that provoked students of color and supporters to communicate with one another, intensifying a pent up outrage as the decisions reminded them of the discontent with their everyday reality. This was particularly the case for members and supporters of the Multicultural Student Council, e.g., the Students of Color Coalition (SCC), Gender Equality and Rights Society (GEARS), the Gender Sexuality Association (GSA), the Muslim Student Association (MSA), and more.

Social action for change usually has a catalyst. The series of events that contributed to SUNY Oneonta’s student protest began immediately after the mid-September 2011 “Occupation of the Quad,” when one hundred twenty students joined with faculty and staff to attend an open campus forum (the majority were the usually invisible students of color) on racial discrimination at Oneonta and to view a short documentary film, the “Black List” produced by three alumni in 2008 as their senior project.<sup>5</sup> Student distress at that event became palpable as participants learned about SUNY Oneonta’s history of race relations, including the incident known as the Black List that involved police targeting of primarily black male students for investigation and interrogation after the campus administration provided a black student enrollment list to local and state law enforcement. Students were also inspired by Occupy Wall Street’s occupation of Zuccotti Park and learned from the tactics and language used by those protesters and applied it to address systemic racism on campus and in the local community.

### **The Black List**

Every fall since 1992, the Third World Students Association, later renamed the Students of Color Coalition (SCC), hosts events to commemorate the Black List. Students believed it is important that class after class of SUNY Oneonta’s students of color know the college’s history of racism. SCC believes this enables students to understand their situation in the context of historical events, the consequences of which still resonate today. In September 2011, the SCC decided to showcase the “Black List” a documentary film and hold a discussion afterward. Leading up to the discussion, the SCC President and allies authored several articles in the campus newspaper, *State Times*, and actively promoted the event throughout the multicultural student base. Several serious issues had occurred the semester prior which led many students to believe this event was an important step to organize around mounting frustrations.

"On September 4, 1992, SUNY's College at Oneonta (SUCO) entered the lexicon of American higher education as a metaphor for campus institutional

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racism."<sup>6</sup> That day, a man allegedly attempted to break into a home - which was occupied by a 77 year-old woman. Despite aggressive attempts by local and state police, no one was ever charged with the offense. Immediately after the crime report by the elderly woman, the commander of the area State Police, Major Robert Ferrand - requested a list of all black students from the three educational institutions in the area. Hartwick College and Oneonta Job Corps refused, but Leif Hartmark - the Vice President of Administration and acting President of the day, ordered the SUNY Oneonta computer technician to generate a list of all African American males through the same instruments that the college used for annual federal Affirmative Action reporting.<sup>7</sup>

During the several days between the release of the "blacklist" and Dr. Hartmark's September 9 admission of his "voluntary compliance," making the matter public knowledge, approximately 85 African-American male students were "interrogated" by the local police agencies, public streets, and at their jobs. Some were even take out of their classrooms and off of public buses. Campus Security and two State Police Officers dragged Michael Christian from his sleep, simply saying that they wanted to question him downtown, and demanding to see his hands (a clue in the case being that the alleged attacker was cut on the hand during the incident). Christian's roommate, Hopeton Gordon, was publicly humiliated by being questioned in front of other residents of their dormitory. Neither student was informed as to the reason for the questioning...In all, several hundred African American men in Oneonta were questioned.<sup>8</sup>

The victim later testified that she had not actually witnessed a cut on the hand of the assailant, leading the students' attorneys to deduce that overzealous law enforcement used such misinformation to rally the public into supporting its actions.

The impact on campus and the small college town was profound. Mass protests were held in the main quad in front of the administration building. National media flooded the SUNY Oneonta campus, and the administration was under a microscope. President Alan Donovan instructed Vice President for Finance and Administration Hartmark to send a letter of apology to every student directly affected, suspended him for a month, and demoted him (and keeping the same salary) to Director. Student outrage was far from placated. Only after national media attention descended upon the campus did the administration form a commission to reform its policies, including a review of processes for cooperation with law enforcement, trauma counseling for Black List students, and the establishment of a Center for Multicultural Experiences, among others.<sup>9</sup> In

the following years, according to staff on campus, the administration played catch up, never able to totally overcome the outrage over the Black List, but yet overly sensitive to racial issues and the people who brought attention to them. Priority always seemed to be placed on protecting the image of the campus and student enrollment.

The administration had effectively criminalized the bodies of students of color. Although many students stayed and graduated, others, both directly and indirectly affected, transferred to other colleges and universities or simply dropped out. Enrollments declined significantly over the subsequent five years, and for several years the administration had to lower admission requirements to attract enough students. The student organization The Third World Association, pledged to never forget what happened, passing on that history annually for nearly two decades, in part because of ongoing perceptions of administrative inaction and community hostility to racial difference.

### **Multicultural Students Rise to Protest**

After viewing the “Black List” documentary, the attendees discussed their personal experiences on the Oneonta campus and in the local community, detailing instances of perceived campus police and city police harassment, and perceived racial profiling. Many expressed the belief that the campus lacked meaningful diversity or concern about issues of racism, sexism, and the violation of basic student rights. The experiences that students described at this forum led many to express widespread feelings of isolation, exclusion, and betrayal. The documentary incited anger over what they perceived as little progress since the Oneonta Black List of September 1992.

According to student testimony during the post-documentary viewing, students of color continued to experience frequent harassment they called “dehumanization” by the police. In particular, many claimed that the police often did not take the complaints by students of color seriously, that they found themselves excessively tailed by police cars, stopped outside town bars, followed around in city stores and “stopped while driving black” on campus. On other occasions, students said they believed that the police followed an informal rule of “guilty before proven innocent.” Several students claimed that the campus police engaged in excessive profiling that led to difficulties with University Police and campus Judicial Affairs

The students argued that they still face many of the same violations of student rights as their predecessors and openly questioned whether the failure to properly address the “Black List” history contributed to the present campus environment, one described as failing to effectively address issues of diversity and inclusion. The SUNY Oneonta campus administration, municipal and State Police, and other responsible parties were spared judgment as the “Black List” civil suit languished and eventually resulted in an out of court settlement.<sup>10</sup> One

of the original requests of 1992 Black List students was for each victim to be granted the ability to give a scholarship to SUNY Oneonta to a family member or friend of their choice. However, no scholarship was ever established despite being included in a post-Black List "Needs Assessment." The Needs Assessment had been negotiated among the administration, faculty, and students and established action items that would help prevent the campus community from ever experiencing a recurrence of the Black List incident. Those recommendations mostly vanished from the consciousness of the administration and the college community after 1993, leaving action items only partially or never implemented.

During the post documentary discussion students described faculty behaviors that harkened to earlier eras, e.g., being singled out and watched in class when race was discussed, being called upon to talk about references to race as the only black student in class. Students expressed feelings of being insulted and embarrassed in the classroom, threatened in the community, and scorned by townsfolk, all resulting in pervasive feelings of personal insecurity. In fact, feeling threatened and unsafe was the most frequent student comment.

Those who viewed the documentary "Black List" shown by alumnus Sean Gallagher questioned "Why is it that people were not held accountable for their behavior?" Many students identified with the past as portrayed in the documentary, saying it was similar to the present. In the September 21, 2011 issue of the campus student newspaper, *State Times*, Jared Gibson, an Oneonta student who had attended the video-discussion declared:

Being a Black male, the thought of an event like that (Blacklist) happening again makes me feel uneasy and insecure. At any moment, a crime can occur in which a black male may have been involved, and I will always have the feeling that I can be suspected, targeted, or expelled at any time for no reason at all. Honestly, I do not feel nearly as safe as I should at this school, where security is a given.

While the campus climate for students of color has been described as less than ideal, student frustration with their everyday experience did not boil over into protest until they felt undermined and degraded by a series of administrative decisions. In 2009, when the (first) Kente Graduation was organized by the Africana and Latino Studies Department, there were arguments against it, including an accusation in the *State Times* by a white student that the event was "segregationist," which was followed by push back from the Student Development office regarding the use of the word "graduation" even though academic departments and other entities long offered separate recognition ceremonies to students. The double standard and controversy rankled students

of color, especially as many so-called “allies” of students of color chose not to attend the first Kente ceremony. As an event that reflects the unique experiences and challenges of multicultural students at SUNY Oneonta, it is/was open to all members of the college community. The event's success over several years, in fact, led to permanent College funding in 2013. Proponents also noted that many college campuses throughout the country have created Kente Graduation Ceremonies.

In May 2011, the administration revealed it would not fund the annual (since 2005) Learn and Serve in Ghana program for 2011-12, a course that had been a source of pride and community building for students of color and their allies, many who also looked forward to enrolling during their senior year. Ghana program alumni and students who had planned to attend the trip since their freshmen year sent petitions to the College President and testimonials online, calling for re-funding the Ghana Program (it was not re-funded until 2012-13).

Soon a new issue emerged pertaining to the Diversity Pillars and the Office of Equity and Inclusion. One night at the end of September, someone vandalized one of the “Tapestry of Diversity Pillars” on the central quad, stealing the golden globe from the lead pillar. As a student activist and CSJ member I was identified by the administration as the first suspect because of articles in the college paper about campus failures regarding issues of diversity.<sup>11</sup> (The pillars are an abstract symbol of diversity, comprising six eight-foot-tall ceramic mosaic covered cylinders with a golden orb atop one of them.) The UPD officer investigating told me my name was the only one given to him to interrogate. My fellow students and many faculty members believed I was targeted due to my critique of the administration's diversity/non-diversity policies.

The Africana and Latino Studies (ALS) Department wrote a letter of complaint and requested an investigation into why the Office of Equity and Inclusion (OEI) and the campus police targeted and intimidated one activist student. There was no adequate redress of the problem or investigation by campus officials into why only one student who supported diversity would be questioned and subject to harassment by the Director and Office of Equity and Inclusion. No other students were questioned and the case remains unsolved. The \$200,000 investment in cameras for campus security prior to the vandalism did not yield any clues into identifying suspects according to the police. Activist students came to realize that little had changed in since 1992 in regards to security, equity, and inclusion for multicultural students, allies, and LGBTQ students. On the other hand, those students, used to suffering in solitude, found common cause with others. They concluded that “I am not alone” and that “I am not the problem.” They saw a common problem: that of institutional neglect at best, and racism at worst.

Spurred into action by the film and discussion, a dozen students met and formed The Committee for Social Justice (CSJ). Shortly after the SCC forum,

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over one hundred students attended the SUNY Oneonta Student Association (SA) general meeting on October 18, 2011 to express their belief that the organization must act to address racial harassment and exclusion on the campus since the SA was student-elected body accountable to all.<sup>12</sup> The CSJ members spoke and released a statement of both grievances and actions they expected:

- The development of a Student Taskforce on Law Enforcement with people who understand and experience these injustices to represent and protect students against UPD, OPD, the Sheriff's Office, and the State Police.
- A Students' Rights Forum that promotes dialogue on student rights and responsibilities on and off campus. We also require a legal advocate selected by the Committee for Social Justice and at least one committee member to be present at this forum.
- The Student Association should create a Committee on Diversity, Inclusion & Equity that specifically addresses this crisis of safety and works with the Committee for Social Justice to address student concerns.
- Development of a Bill of Student Rights that applies to students living on and off campus.

To maintain pressure on the SA, a number of students submitted articles to the *State Times*. The authors of these articles reported on the campus climate by analyzing the state of multiculturalism through the use of statistical data and, from a personal perspective. Students pointed to the gap between institutional declarations of support for diversity and the reality on the ground, in fact pinpointing that many faces of students of color on the college website were of those who had graduated one to three years earlier.

With student pressure about diversity mounting, in November 2011, the administration released the results of a 2009 Campus Climate Survey.<sup>13</sup> Important criteria revealed that the campus climate had worsened since the last survey in 2005, and other indicators showed marginal or no improvement. For example, the "percentage of students who feel classroom climate is welcoming for people from underrepresented groups" decreased 13% from 72% to 59%.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, "Respondents identifying as African American, American Indian, or West Indian/Caribbean reported feeling significantly less comfortable on campus than those identifying as white or Asian;" A majority of respondents indicated that they were "Not familiar at all" with the Affirmative Action office, Office of Equity and Inclusion, and the President's Council on Diversity.<sup>15</sup> While it should be noted that several faculty questioned the methodology used, the statistics do support CSJ claims and the failure of the administration to make public or effective the resource it employs to address the issues CSJ were raising.

The results of the 2009 Campus Climate Survey validated the conclusions of Dr. Troy Duster, of New York University and University of



California Berkeley, who was hired in 2009 as a consultant to assess campus progress with diversity. His presentation to the College Community reflected the passage of two years since the commencement of Strategic Action Plan's Initiatives. He highlighted many shortcomings of the campus and argued that we were currently between "Stage 2: Tolerance" and "Stage 3: Acceptance" out of 5 Stages, the fifth being "Inclusiveness."<sup>16</sup> During his oral assessment and a subsequent presentation to Department Chairs and the President's Cabinet, he recommended that the college implement cluster hires and working with campus stakeholders most knowledgeable and involved in diversity issues. He discussed with ALS faculty, how they had been systematically excluded and marginalized. Students of color also felt this way.

Despite the survey results and the student campaign in the SA and campus newspaper, the College continued to ignore the grievances and demands of CSJ throughout the fall semester. Instead of meeting with CSJ, the administration chose to work through the Student Association (SA). CSJ students pointed out to the administration directly and in the *State Times* that the SA had not demonstrated the capacity or willingness to adequately represent CSJ demands. Rather, CSJ believed that the SA sought to minimize the demands and to deny the extent of the problems described by the group. This came on the heels of a request by several Korean Students to form a club, but who were told to join the Japanese Student Association (JSA), a suggestion which reflected historical amnesia and insensitivity by lumping two distinct Asian peoples together.

Most "elected" representatives of the SA were white male students on a campus that is majority female and has a student minority population of 14%.<sup>17</sup> Many students in CSJ believed that because the racial/ethnic makeup of the SA was even less diverse than the student body, the SA needed to be fundamentally changed in order for them to adequately represent everyone.

As an initial response the SA restarted its long absent *State Times* column, assuring CSJ of their commitment to open communication. Key leaders of the SA also promised to work with the CSJ, and within a year created the position "SA Liaison for Multicultural Affairs," combining the events committee with the SA to enable it to better meet the needs of students. While the SA made overtures to greater cooperation and accomplished these two actions, the CSJ still felt that the SA response came up far short to the demands it originally made, and did nothing substantive on issues connected to the campus police nor with the major shortcomings to the Affirmative Action program on campus. Both issues had been raised at several SA meetings and throughout the year in the *State Times*.

The University Police Department (UPD) also began a weekly news column in the *State Times*. However, the UPD did not respond to any of CSJ's allegations against them or those against the Oneonta Police Department (OPD).

The CSJ and other students wondered if the administration had any meaningful meetings with UPD or OPD. By December 2011 CSJ students were frustrated that no critical policy change had taken place.

With the semester ending, it became broadly apparent to the CSJ that they were facing a campus bureaucracy founded in the politics of the status quo and white privilege. The administration avoided directly working with the CSJ through the fall, including in October when the CSJ made its first statements to the Student Association (SA). The administration chose only to address the situation through the ineffective SA and using a couple of faculty members as advisors. Although CSJ had requested meetings and open forums for a month and a half to discuss its statement, the administration did not meet with CSJ once (apart from one unofficial meeting with two CSJ members and the Vice President for Student Development). Campus officials demonstrated a continued lack of insight or realization of the seriousness of the deterioration in the campus climate and the ineffectiveness of the Office of Equity and Inclusion. The Director of Office of Equity and Inclusion concerned about her reputation and asserting no responsibility for the police investigating vandalism of the pillar, hired a private local attorney who wrote a letter to the Chair of the Department of Africana and Latino Studies requesting a public and personal apology for the departmental letter of concern that he wrote and sent to the OEI office earlier requesting that the office explain its treatment of me, one activist over the vandalized pillar.

It could be said that college or university students are an impatient group, but evidence from SUNY Oneonta does not support that. Students were becoming frustrated by perceptions of slow or no action by the College, especially the failure to see what students and faculty experienced as racial profiling. Faculty of color also spoke about being profiled on and off campus by police. The latter issue led the Division of Education to write a letter with two dozen faculty signatures expressing concern about student safety on this campus: "We believe our community's failure to ensure a safe learning environment threatens our college's commitment to equity and inclusion."<sup>18</sup> Their action was prompted less by student complaints, and more by testimony from fellow faculty members of color in the Education Department who described the racism they experienced. At the same time, the United University Professions (UUP), the union that represents faculty and professionals on this campus, brought up issues of diversity at a Labor-Management Meeting.<sup>19</sup> Feeling frustrated, we in the Committee for Social Justice called for a year of critical reflection and a renewed emphasis on diversity to mark the twentieth anniversary of the Oneonta Black List in September 2012. The CSJ also agreed with the constant refrain of SA President Evan Englander, "we must all work together to surmount the challenges we face to change the course of our history for our College and create a better future for our Community."

With pressure from many quarters, but only after the Education faculty letter, the President finally scheduled an open forum with students on December 7, 2011, immediately before final exams. She also promised to hold another one with faculty in the following semester. Over two-hundred students attended the President's forum, a crowd larger and more diverse than the first meeting held by SCC and surprisingly large as most students were studying for finals.

### **Students' Voices: Systemic Exclusion based on Race, Sex, Gender, and Class**

A wide variety of issues emerged at the forum, but primarily it was issues of racism, sexism, and homophobia. A number of students in attendance expressed frustration with the marginalization of the Center for Multicultural Experiences. Not only the geographic location, but the physical conditions within the CME were criticized, something I, as a CME student manager, knew well. Students lamented the run-down physical state of the building, the only site to highlight cultural, ethnic, gender and sexual diversity. Its facilities consisted of a kitchen, one large "Great Room" downstairs, and a second floor room with a very small computer lounge, and a small library. The rest of the building was rented out to a New York state agency thereby reducing space for student organizations. One student stated that the CME's location and condition epitomized the College's lack of commitment to diversity. Others concurred that the College takes pride in its facilities and the upgrading of older buildings which left the unimproved CME emblematic of the College's conflicted approach to diversity.

A number of students identified the lack of serious and detailed discussion of race and culture "diversity" and gender and sexual "difference" topics within the curriculum, saying that material reflecting racial, ethnic, sexual minority experiences were absent outside curricula within the Africana and Latino Studies and Women's and Gender Studies departmental offerings. Some students argued that because professors need to maintain high student evaluation scores, they shifted discussion topics in class to non-contentious issues and they provided explanations that a majority agrees with. In turn that leads to greater isolation or disenfranchisement of members of the multicultural community. The larger student community, rooted in white and hetero-normative privilege, perceives the limited number of issues discussed in courses as sufficiently diverse from their perspective and within the context of their homogenous home communities. In other words, a sub-minimal and unacceptable floor and ceiling for diversity are set by campus practice. Most members of the Oneonta academic community, including the faculty and staff, become complicit by paying lip service to diversity, but remain silent about their role in perpetuating the status quo. Students' criticisms mentioned that peers and faculty alike treated mission statements and goals written in strategic plans

as realities. Meanwhile, the five-year goals set by the Strategic Action Plan (SAP) remained elusive. The 2010 SAP incorporated the 2007 goals and aimed to increase AALANA faculty by 25% and AALANA students by 20% from a baseline of 2006-07. With a baseline of one African American male in 2006-07 (retired in 2007) that would mean two African American male professors by 2015. Since the beginning of desegregation at SUNY Oneonta (1969-70), the obstacle to hiring historically underrepresented minorities is the unwillingness to offer competitive salaries for faculty in high demand.<sup>20</sup>

Speakers emphasized that marginalization of departments, programs and office spaces of those concerned with racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual difference communicated a secondary status. The small GSA office was at the east end of campus. Several students observed that the CME, located at the bottom and far west end of campus, was unknown to most students and many faculty members despite its programmatic importance pertaining to diversity, the only 'pillar' on the periphery. Other students expressed concerns about the administration's commitment to women and gender inclusion. Numerous descriptions of daily harassment of women were cited. Others noted the difficulty of locating the Women's and Gender Studies (WGS) Department, hidden at the rear of the library, something Women's and Gender Studies faculty said students have complained about for two decades. Unless enrolled in a WGS course, students said that it is rare to find any feminist or queer studies material in the curriculum of most other departments. LGBTQ students spoke about discomfort in classrooms where instructors made insensitive remarks. One student described being pushed to correct her sentences in Spanish, to not identify her partner with a feminine pronoun, but a masculine one, when her partner was female.

Throughout the semester, and during the President's forum, students also challenged Oneonta's commitment to Affirmative Action. CSJ argued that the goal of Affirmative Action for student admissions should ideally match New York's demographic profile, or at least match other SUNY's such as SUNY Plattsburgh, Cortland or New Paltz. CSJ students began to collect and collate a portfolio on diversity and affirmative action over the next several months and found that SUNY Oneonta ranked dead last among all SUNY comprehensive colleges, e.g., .17 whereas SUNY Plattsburgh was .27 and SUNY New Paltz .40. The scale measured the probability that a student would meet someone of the same racial background excluding non-US resident students. Therefore, as a fractionalization index, it ranges from 0 to 1 with 0 being the least diverse and 1 being the most diverse. Under such a scale, a historically black or Latino serving institution, as well as a historically white one like Oneonta, would rank low on the diversity scale.<sup>21</sup> The faculty percentages were even worse. An African American Professor reflected upon this in his April 2012 Letter of Resignation, "It is embarrassing for a college in a state as racially diverse as New York in 2012 that

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professes not to be racist to have one African American male professor, a handful of African American woman professors, and zero tenure-track Latino American (born in the US) faculty."<sup>22</sup>

Students bemoaned the lack of serious discussion about race and class in courses. An African American male student headed to graduate school for architecture expressed contempt for an Art History class, covering Artists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, for its entirely Euro-centered curriculum which did not cover a single artist of color. He expressed frustration that he had to take it upon himself to study the art of Harlem Renaissance period for his final project, but noted that worse yet, the rest of the class was left with the impression all artists must be white and Western. A white student expressed dismay that he hadn't taken a class with any content or foundation in social difference until he was forced to by his education major, but only during his senior year. That student and several others suggested it should be a requirement for all students in their first year of study as some other SUNY college's do.

These examples reveal some of the structural impediments students face in acquiring an education inclusive of all American people and intellectual traditions. Culturally diverse perspectives remain peripheral to an educational experience at Oneonta. This prevents black, Latino, other minority ethnic groups, queer groups and women from discovering their intellectual and cultural history while Anglo Americans concretize the contributions of the (for the present) dominant culture. It prevents the majority from obtaining a cultural competence that creates greater global awareness of social justice issues which could contribute to a better campus climate.

These statements by students in the *State Times* compliment those from the forum:

In Oneonta, I'd never thought I would be a victim of racial profiling until I was stopped by a UPD officer on three separate occasions and threatened to be thrown in prison on another. Was it a case of 'driving while black?' I may never know the motives for that particular officer's infractions against me. All I know is that on each occasion I felt as if my skin color made me a suspect in Oneonta... (*State Times*, 26 Oct 2011)

...I realized that [mine] and my housemates' rights were violated... I feel that in the city of Oneonta, the police tend to disregard the fact that they don't have automatic entry into student homes once they knock on the door. I think about what would have happened if we denied them entry into our home, and I don't think it would have gone well because the OPD (Oneonta Police Department) are so used to students allowing

them to violate that right. The OPD consistently takes advantage of their powers and the fact that students don't exhibit knowledge of their rights... I am fearful of the reaction these officers might have in response to this (*State Times*, 26 Oct 2011).

One lesbian white student, a junior, related how the police asked her, a victim, for advice on how to proceed investigating an incident. Other women students provided examples of stalking and a pervasive culture of sexist harassment that included frequent rape jokes and deeply offensive statements on tee shirts worn by members of unrecognized fraternities and sororities that were largely ignored by the College administration and community.

Numerous complaints were levied about sexist, homophobic and racist graffiti found in campus bathroom walls and on "white boards" in residence halls. Two students described a frightening incident. On a white board, a RA wrote, "Before I die I want to\_\_\_\_\_" inviting students to finish the sentence. Two students of color encountered the sign one evening, which had been completed with: "Before I die I want to lynch a nigger." When they informed their hall's Resident Assistant (RA), the RA told them: "It's ultimately up to you if you want to file a report." This placed the reporting burden on people experiencing the bias. The RA, who was in a position of authority and purportedly trained to handle issues of racism, chose not to follow the protocols noted in the College discrimination policies that urge immediate reporting. Subsequently, dormitory residents demanded that the RA and police investigate the incident.

Another African American emotionally described how she was humiliated by being portrayed as a monkey on a white board on her room door. As the only student of color in a residence hall's "triple" room, she was confronted at Halloween with a drawing of a pumpkin, a ghost, and a monkey. The message was clear to her, and again she reported the insult to her RA who did conclude this was "racial." While RAs are not trained to investigate or mediate alleged discrimination, they serve as a resource person and first-responder. However, this RA also failed to immediately report the incident as a bias act despite their training.

This situation was mishandled in three ways. First, the RA sought to minimize the incident. Second, the Resident Director (RD) failed to call for a meeting "to mediate the discomfort nor were there preventative measures taken to avoid it."<sup>23</sup> The case was finally sent to the Bias Action Response Team (BART), a newly formed (2011) committee of campus police, Student Development personnel and faculty. The Vice President for Student Development along with the Residence Hall Director saw that the student was moved to another residence hall where she would feel safer and less humiliated. One RD stated that incidents like this happened before and this was not new. The student was dismayed that her roommates, most likely responsible for the

incident, were never held accountable. No grievance procedure was made available to this student from OEI. Those responsible were not moved, yet the victim was, which did not send a re-assuring message to other students of color. The Office of Student Development argued that it should protect someone by offering other housing, but without evidence of who was responsible, it could go no further. Responding to this incident, one RA at the President's forum said that the "diversity training" RAs receive is not taken seriously by participants and is very short lived and cursory, although in theory, the training does cover race, gender, and sexuality.

Another student reported on racism in class; a professor stated, in class, immediately after the 2011 Japanese tsunami and Fukushima nuclear plant explosions that the destruction and the fate of the Japanese people was an act of God punishing them for their lack of belief in God and sinfulness. This insensitivity affected the class in general, and specifically a Japanese student enrolled in the course, walked out of the class in protest and reported the incident to the department chair. Since the chairperson told his superior, the Dean, a closed-door meeting was arranged, and the offending professor was required to make a public apology. However, when he made an in-class apology, he further offended students by stating that he did not understand its necessity. It is unknown if the instructor was accountable in any other way, nor was it stated in the *State Times* (April 27, 2011) that the complainant was ever informed of his/her options for using the established grievance procedures.

Repeatedly, student testimonials illustrated that the Oneonta college community has a diversity problem; it is one that fails to acknowledge and address racial, sexual, gender, and class bias and conflict. Diversity remains inadequately infused into the curriculum at SUNY Oneonta and it is not seen as integral. The descriptions of concrete experience by the students in the forum contrasted sharply with the goals of the Strategic Action Plan/SAP and the statements in the Affirmative Action/AA Plan which claim adherence to Federal, State, and SUNY guidelines.

In the spring semester of 2012, students continued to voice their experiences of discrimination in various media and forums. Rebekah Kramer described, in a *State Times* article titled "To the Boy", how a male student yelled repeatedly at her from behind the drapes of his open dorm window, "Hey! Hey you! .... You're a whore and you know it!"<sup>24</sup> She went on to analyze the reason for and ramifications of his action for herself and all woman students, stating "I grew up believing that I was a lesser person because of what your penis symbolizes in my culture ... it still counts as a marker of power; as an inherent right to abuse, subordinate, ... dehumanize me." She concluded with an invitation to speak with her, stating, "I will turn to you this time, so that maybe I can educate you about who I am and my experiences as a woman so that you can explain to me how you know me well enough to call me a whore. We will have a

conversation, hopefully, of mutual reverence as we can both participate in dialogue this time.”<sup>25</sup> As a result of her letter of protest, a couple weeks later a public panel discussion on sexual harassment was held with Kramer, women faculty and an administrator, drawing well over one hundred students.

As promised, President Kleniewski hosted a forum with faculty on February 8, 2012 to listen to faculty and staff experiences regarding racial, gender, sexuality and class inclusion, marginalization, and physical safety; approximately one half dozen faculty members spoke in a jam packed conference room in an atmosphere of palpable fear.<sup>26</sup> On March 1, 2012 another forum was held for international students to voice their concerns with campus representatives of the PCOD (President’s Council on Diversity). A number of students of color attended as well and this culminated in several CSJ identified students walking out in protest after student Orlando Williams exasperatedly declared, “Enough talk! Enough meeting! I’m tired of it. We want action. This talk is just to wear us down!”<sup>27</sup> Transfer students complained about how much better it was on other campuses, citing Binghamton, Stony Brook and Princeton. Muslim students complained of widespread ignorance and insensitivity, lack of attention to their needs, and no dedicated prayer room on campus. Asian students and other international students spoke of frustration and academic worries over the lack of ESL classes and lack of attention to their needs as well as the exhaustion of being “stared at” 24/7 on and off campus.

Finally, during final exam week in May 2012, the President held another open forum about the police which was attended by the new Oneonta City Chief of Police along with campus officers that was predictably poorly attended given the inadequate advertising and time of the meeting at semester’s end. Most in attendance were CSJ men of color who said they experienced much police targeting or harassment and several arrests by city police that semester for off campus noise violations. A white woman student noted that she attended a party not far from the three young men of color arrested one recent night, yet the police simply told the white students to “keep it down.” Black male students in particular, but all CSJ students had also been deeply affected by what was understood as racial profiling, the Feb 26, 2012 shooting death in Florida of seventeen year old unarmed Trayvon Martin by neighborhood watch volunteer, George Zimmerman.<sup>28</sup>

Some student actions continued into the following year. In the October 11, 2012 issue of the *State Times*, student Michelle Hymowitz wrote about multiple examples of institutional heterosexism. Ms. Hymowitz is a woman who often dresses in clothes not deemed “female” by American society, and was misgendered by dining hall staff. While this was not the point of the meeting with President Kleniewski, she decided to reference it in conversation with Hymowitz anyway. During the meeting, Hymowitz and Gender and Sexuality Alliance members presented a petition with over ninety (90) signatures requesting



LGBTQ classes to be taught on campus.<sup>29</sup> She quickly redirected Hymowitz to the Academic Provost for this request, but as the meeting ended, President Kleniewski's lack of understanding and empathy for these issues was revealed when she challenged Hymowitz's assertion that the Dining Hall staff had acted inappropriately. "Dr. Kleniewski brought up how I was mis-gendered last year in the dining hall; one of the most traumatizing experiences of my life... I walked away ... and was stunned."<sup>30</sup> After public exposure in the *State Times* by Hymowitz, Kleniewski & the Provost, the Vice President for Academic Affairs, asked to meet with the GSA late in the semester. At that forum, the students made no specific demands, but again requested LGBTQ courses and staff dedicated to teach them. By summer 2013 nothing had happened.

### **Student Cooptation**

On March 29, 2012, following most forums, the President announced "The September 4 Commemoration Committee will convene this semester and work through the summer to prepare for the event."<sup>31</sup> In a press release, the President stated:

The Black List represents SUNY Oneonta's low point, reverberating even now as we continue to address issues related to campus climate... And while the institution affirmed our shared commitment to equity and inclusion in 2010 by incorporating diversity as a pillar of the strategic plan, we shall never forget the events of September 4, 1992, and their impact on our college. (*The Daily Star*, 29 March 2012).

Two African American CSJ members were chosen to participate on this committee which also comprised of one ALS faculty member, student affairs staff and administrators. By handpicking two black students from CSJ, both graduating within six weeks, to serve on the committee and refusing to acknowledge the demands by the CSJ, the administration could be said to have effectively co-opted the movement to reform the college campus, especially as the motivation for protest related to the Black List. The administration appointed a Distinguished Service Professor, a black woman, to co-chair a committee to create a program of atonement and celebration of the progress that the College made over the past two decades. Many students, including CSJ students, saw this as further tokenization, especially since one of the two hand-picked black students had suggested to the President that the committee be open to volunteers and those interested in making it a meaningful event.

In September 2012, the committee hosted a day of events to commemorate the Twentieth Anniversary of the Black List, titled "Beyond the List: A Teach-in: Remembrance and Reconciliation."<sup>32</sup> This "Teach-In" lacked an

often critical aspect of such events – the cancelling of classes. There were lectures, including one scheduled at the last minute by the lead attorney in the Black List legal case, Scott Fein, and several faculty led discussions throughout the day. However, there was no concerted effort made to invite victims of the Black List in 1992, and ultimately only one “Brother of the Black List,” an Oneonta resident, attended. During the “atonement” in the quad, President Kleniewski stated “the Black List was regrettable” (not an actual apology), and then planted a tree (which cannot be easily identified). The commemoration was capped off by an evening speech from Dr. Cornel West of Princeton University on race relations and student empowerment.<sup>33</sup>

The actions taken over the 2011-12 period by SUNY Oneonta College President Kleniewski were positive in that she did eventually respond to student protests and several concerns about the campus climate, but stand in contrast to those by Oberlin College President Marvin Krislov. In March, 2013, when antigay, anti-Semitic, and racist messages were escalating at Oberlin and their students felt threatened, Krislov immediately cancelled all classes and convened a “day of solidarity” to confront the “month long string” of what he called “hate-related incidents and vandalism” to engage in “a different type of educational exercise”- one intended to hold ‘an honest discussion, even a difficult discussion.’<sup>34</sup> The entire Oberlin campus community engaged in discussions of their campus climate. In contrast, SUNY Oneonta’s “commemoration” of the victimization of over one hundred men involved one day of teach-in style sessions in which all participants were volunteers, classes were not cancelled and capped in the evening by a general lecture from academic superstar Dr. Cornel West. In fact, due to a commemoration program constructed in the final weeks of August and as classes just began, most students were not even aware of the program and its rationale. Furthermore, discussions in the residence halls that week only addressed campus climate insofar as it relates to student life, and did not substantively address significant policy issues as they relate to affirmative action, grievance procedures, bias response, and hiring of historically underrepresented faculty. When one compares SUNY Oneonta’s response to racism and discrimination with Oberlin’s, it looks as if the former’s efforts failed to address the underlying issues in a way that would engage and transform student and faculty perceptions and practices.

While far from transforming the campus climate, the work in 2012-13 of the Bias Acts Response Team (BART) demonstrates some critical progress in responding to acts of bias on a case by case basis. After the first report for the 2011-2012 year, the most recent report indicates significant increases of many types of incidents of bias. “The committee met 10 times on a regularly-scheduled basis during the 2012-13 academic year. The increase in the number of incidents compared to 2011-12 is likely the result of more publicity and programming about

the reporting process and the increased diversity training of residence hall staff in 2012-2013.”<sup>35</sup>

**Conclusion: Student activism and CSJ ‘s contribution to the campus**

Over half of the core members of the Committee for Social Justice graduated in May 2012. During the entire academic year of 2011-2012, CSJ students were progressively disheartened by administrative stonewalling, and the absence of significant progress in policy. Much like the Occupy movement that largely dissipated after the destruction of the encampment at Zuccotti Park, SUNY Oneonta CSJ students’ critical attention to these issues dissolved before or with graduation, leaving few critical voices at the time of the Black List Commemoration. The administration had correctly calculated that students, transient both physically and in mental attention, would move on. The timeline of Occupy Wall St. paralleled that of student protests at SUNY Oneonta. The high-energy protest moments lasted through the 2011 fall semester. Thereafter, CSJ members grew jaded, worn out by the endless “venting” opportunities not followed up by action, and eventually a few were somewhat swayed by the promise of recognizing the harm of the Black List with the planned Sept 4, 2012 commemoration.

However, just as the Occupy movement succeeded in making public the language and reality of wealth inequality (“99% vs.1%”), CSJ students brought issues of diversity and bias to the fore of campus discussions on reforming its policies, where it remains today. There would have been no Black List Commemoration or acknowledgement whatsoever without the CSJ’s protests, despite the tight control levied over it by the administration. Nor would there have been a mildly reformed Student Association and public discussions about the experiences of racial, ethnic and gender minorities. While never acknowledging the righteous contribution of CSJ students and faculty allies, the administration eventually responded with several actions in addition to the Black List day of commemoration. Faculty, staff, and student diversity trainings increased significantly the following year after sending some staff for “diversity training for trainers” with the Anti-Defamation league (ADL). Although of limited utility other than as evidence for the administration’s policy implementations, trainings serve as important reminders of civility and legal prohibitions about biased behavior. Additionally, the Director of OEI resigned (who CSJ deemed very problematic), and after a several year absence, a new Affirmative Action Director, part-time, was hired. The administration heavy and inefficient “tri-partite grievance procedure” has yet to be changed, but reform is also hamstrung by the SUNY system suspending local change while they consider alternatives. Most important, the Chief of University Police Department (UPD), in place since the semester after the Black List, who was regarded as a cause of harassing police practice by students and faculty, as well as an obstacle to policy change, moved

on, presumably retired. The BART committee instituted a record keeping system of bias reports that was decades overdue.

Focused hiring of faculty members who are from historically underrepresented groups, and home communities from which SUNY Oneonta students hail has not happened. The less expensive alternative the campus pursued in 2012-13 was doubling the number of temporary pre-doctoral dissertation fellows (from one to two year) who are assigned to different departments.<sup>36</sup> There still is not one single African American male professor on a campus for 6,000 students. Finally, the Africana & Latino Studies Department was granted a tenure track hire for 2014 in US. Latino Studies, a request going back to 1970 and the founding of the Black-Hispanic Studies Program.<sup>37</sup> A designated space for prayers and ablution (*wudu*) for Muslim students is still unfulfilled, as are necessary multilevel ESL classes for international students. A more diverse, inclusive, and welcoming campus is still waiting, hopefully in the wings, to make an appearance. Student activism, though, could be said to be effective in pushing college administrations to do what outside consultants and faculty over many years failed to effect. Since we students have been refashioned as customers, we have been somewhat effective, despite our perceptions of not being heard, in pushing one campus into the twenty-first century. Therein rests hope for the future.

#### End Notes

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