

Racial Conflict Spurs NCSU Survey

By JULIA LAMM
Staff Writer

N.C. State University officials, prompted by allegations of racially offensive speech in a class, have announced plans to examine racial tolerance on campus.

The offensive speech allegedly occurred in February before a law and justice class taught by Phillip Muñoz.

Before class started on Feb. 19, a black student at N.C. State allegedly got into an argument with a white female student that escalated into a racial conflict.

Paul Cousins, N.C. State director of the office of student conduct, identified the student as Najja Baptist. Baptist did not return calls to comment on the incident.

Muñoz said the black student, whom he refused to identify as Baptist, was arguing that the United States was a racist country during a dispute with a female student in the class.

The professor said he heard the woman's reply to the argument. "A white woman responded that if he didn't like it here he could go back to Africa," Muñoz said.

At that point, Muñoz said he intervened. "I heard the comment and immediately stopped the conversation, and I spoke of the need for more civilized academic discussion," he said.

A second incident allegedly occurred Feb. 21 in the same class.

In this incident, Muñoz said a different student allegedly called the same black student a "fucking yuppie."

On Feb. 28, Baptist responded to the events in class with a protest. "The black student organized a protest in my class, where 15 to 20 African-American students silently occupied the classroom," Muñoz said.

Muñoz said the student met with administrators but walked out of the meeting. He then filed racial harassment charges against Muñoz and several campus administrators.

In response to the events and as a result of earlier efforts to stabilize race relations on campus, N.C. State officials are planning to conduct a survey of the racial climate on campus.

The racial climate survey will take place in the fall to determine how pro-

lematic race relations are on campus, Cousins said. "(Administrators are) putting together an instrument to survey the community, both their attitudes as well as their experiences," he said.

Cousins said there have been minimal problems in the past. "I've been here for 12 years and there have only been a couple of instances," he said about controversial racial issues.

But Cousins said the controversy over the issue indicates that some racial tension might exist. "There is a problem, as indicated by the amount of debate around this situation raised by Najja Baptist," Cousins said.

He said the climate survey is the first step toward change on campus. "It ought to change people's understanding of what is happening on campus," Cousins said.

But he said there will need to be more changes implemented after the survey is taken. "What interventions will occur after that will be driven by results of the climate survey."

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UNC-CH Weighs Free Speech, Civil Discussion

By RUTHIE WARSHENBROT
Staff Writer

As a liberal arts university, UNC-Chapel Hill offers many classes that encourage discussion among students, but sometimes discussions can get out of hand and turn offensive.

Officials at N.C. State University are investigating racial tolerance after several offensive comments were exchanged in classroom discussions — an issue many UNC-CH officials do not think is a problem here.

N.C. State officials are looking into an incident in which junior Najja Baptist allegedly was the victim of a racially motivated verbal attack in a class discussion. The professor, Phillip Muñoz, said he encouraged the exchange to remain civil, although he said the dialogue became personal when he heard a student tell Baptist to "go back to Africa."

Even many on UNC-CH's campus say there exists a difficult balance between protecting free speech rights and maintaining civil, academic discussion.

Julius Nyang'oro, chairman of UNC-CH's Department of African and Afro-American Studies, said free speech is

fundamentally necessary in the classroom and can be maintained in a positive manner.

Nyang'oro said that even if a student's comments become offensive, there are ways to handle it. But being overly sensitive does not create an environment that is conducive to discussion, he said. "Once you make people walk on eggshells, that begins to stifle debate."

But some professors say they find the boundaries of appropriate classroom discussions difficult to establish and maintain.

Joel Williamson, a history professor teaching a course called "White Culture and Race Relations" this semester, said issues discussed in his class force him to be careful with his words. "You do have to be sensitive to the feelings of the people in the audience," he said.

Williamson said he uses a variety of words to describe the same race, like alternating between "black" and "African-American."

"It seems to work OK," he said.

The University also has policies in place to protect students' rights, even in the situation of a classroom discussion.

UNC-CH's racial harassment policy states that "It is the responsibility of every

employee and student in the University community to strive to create an environment free of racial harassment."

In the circumstance a student believes he has been racially harassed, the Instrument of Student Judicial Governance lays out a grievance process for the student to follow.

Archie Ervin, director of the Office of Minority Affairs, said the policies help protect students from attack. "Our campus does seek stability, respects individuals and understands who they are," he said. "(It) does not tolerate one being attacked on who they are or their beliefs."

Students also say it's crucial to be conscious of the impacts of statements made in classroom discussions.

Freshman Courtney Robinson, a journalism and political science major from Fayetteville, said people should be allowed to express their own opinions in classroom discussions as long as they are respectful. "You want to keep in mind that there are people with different backgrounds than you," she said. "You have to be conscious of who is around you."

The University Editor can be reached at udesk@unc.edu.

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