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Undergraduate Essay Contest

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“Are the goals of fostering freedom of speech on campus and of fostering a welcoming environment for all students incompatible?”

“Welcome to Wisconsin!” Those are the words I had heard about one thousand times during my first few minutes in the state of Wisconsin and then a thousand times more during my SOAR orientation. After that it was all about the “Wisconsin Welcome” and becoming a badger. It is no doubt that the University of Wisconsin-Madison strives to make its campus a welcoming environment for all students. Initially I did feel “welcome” considering that I was a black woman with a weird first name coming in as a first-year student from a major city at a university in the mid-western United States. But those feelings of acceptance and inclusion quickly dissipated as the semester went on. They were outweighed by the words of my peers, professors, and others on campus that reflected the truth about, not just Wisconsin’s, but America’s perception of my identity. I am “other” here. I am constantly reminded that my race, gender, socioeconomic status, physical and mental ability are not the norm and in fact inferior.

One of the rare times I did feel welcome on campus was during a march up State Street to the capital building with my peers as we stood in solidarity with black students at the University of Missouri. We were unashamedly exercising our right to free speech, chanting *“Black Lives Matter”*, *“we gon’ be alright”*, and my personal favorite *“racism is at Mizzou, it’s on my campus too”*. This event was met with several reactions from fellow students, media outlets, and the UW system. The reaction that may have stirred the most controversy was that of Chancellor Blank who stated in an email, “While individuals are always free to express their own beliefs, no one is entitled to express them in ways that diminish others, or that devalues the presence of anyone that is part of our Badger community.” Chancellor Blank was accused of violating constitutional rights to free speech and inhibiting the exchange of ideas on campus, and on the other hand praised for voicing the university’s unapparent disdain for hate speech towards marginalized badgers. The discussion gets even more complicated considering that the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that under the First Amendment “offensive” speech is protected as well, erasing the line between what was once considered hate speech and free speech. It is apparent that there is no clear consensus or resolution on how to balance making students feel welcome on campus whilst simultaneously fostering free speech, but with an objective examination of power and a conscious allocation of resources, the two are not incompatible.

The University of Wisconsin-Madison is a white space. As much as some would like to believe, this campus is not one of racial diversity. It was built for white people. White faces, bodies, and voices are most common and most prized here, sometimes intentionally and sometimes not, regardless with this whiteness comes privilege. This privilege comes at the

expense of students of color, and that is racism. The UW Board of regents, UW faculty, and UW authority figures like to use politically correct lingo to tip toe around the fact that much of the “hate” and “offensive” speech that occurs is racially motivated. One look at Wisconsin’s history reveals a multitude of events in which folks were racially marginalized; many of these events include instances of speech. When Vel Phillips was elected as the first black woman alderman on the Common Council in Milwaukee in 1956, she experienced hate speech from her white male colleagues based on her race and gender. This speech was not too different from some of the hate speech black students on this campus receive today. A simple conversation with a black student here will reveal experiences with words used to diminish and devalue their existence and presence on this campus. The Posse Program, one of the largest minority scholarship programs on this campus, held their annual retreat this year, which I attended, with the title “Sticks and Stones”. During this retreat Posse scholars and other students from UW-Madison, majority of color, unpacked and analyzed their experiences with language on campus. After hours of emotionally charged conversation about offensive speech, the same dead end was reached. Under the First Amendment and rulings by the Supreme Court many white students are protected in their use of hate, or “offensive” speech even when the speech is identified as verbally abusive. This being said, there is nothing that can necessarily be done to silence individuals that decide to voice their controversial opinions about an aspect of one’s identity under current guidelines. But there is something that can be done to empower and further uphold the First Amendment rights of students whose identities are systemically and historically oppressed.

If the University of Wisconsin-Madison decides to acknowledge that more needs to be done to make marginalized students feel heard and safe amidst speech encountered on campus, and if that acknowledgment is accompanied by an allocation of resources for this purpose, there is no reason why a welcoming campus environment and free speech would ever be incompatible.