

Humboldt Takes Action Against Bias on Campus

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A day after Halloween, junior kinesiology major and catcher for the Lumberjacks softball team Courtney Hiatt returned to her black Hummer parked in the College Creek lot to find “Fag” spray painted on the side of her car with an arrow pointing to the H3 logo. Two weeks before that vandalism incident took place, Hiatt’s car was egged.

A two-and-a-half-year organized effort by faculty and staff to tackle bias-related incidents — like those experienced by Hiatt — has led to the formation of the Bias Response Team, the first of its kind on a California State University campus. Although the response team did not exist on campus when Hiatt’s incident took place, she said that had the outlet been available, she would have contacted the response team.

“I’m from Southern California and diesel trucks are common there. Hummers have a reputation of being gas guzzlers and Humboldt is a ‘green’ and earth-conscience community,” said Hiatt. “I really think that its reputation is what caused it to be a target. Hummers are no longer being manufactured because of vandalism from environmentalists.”

Several universities throughout the country have already created a response team, including the University of Oregon, which helped train 27 Humboldt State faculty and staff members to become advocates. Advocates are members of the team who are assigned to incident reporters and help them find a solution. This can be achieved through counseling or other methods. Advocates work in departments on campus including mail distribution, the MultiCultural Center and every dean’s office.

“In selecting advocates, the team investigated members of the Humboldt staff that faculty and students felt comfortable talking to already. It really is a cross-cultural selection,” said Bias Response Team Coordinator Jennifer Eichstedt, an HSU sociology professor.

Newly appointed Interim Chief Lynne Soderberg of the University Police Department was also trained as an advocate and has been involved since the response team began organizing two years ago.

Eichstedt said the response team is a confidential and collaborative outlet created for students, faculty and staff. It is there for people when they feel they have been a target of a bias-related incident. Incident reports can be filed anonymously and include the option to take action on the matter or report it without taking action.

The 2010 Clery Report, an annual report to which UPD submits crime statistics, stated there were no hate crimes reported to the University Police. However, bias-geared discrimination was present on the campus according to surveys and first-hand accounts of students reaching out to faculty.

Mona Mazzotti, a Bias Response Team Advocate and the Outreach and Social Justice Programs Coordinator for the center said, “the staff at the MultiCultural Center have been taking incidents unofficially on a daily basis, but there’s never been a formal action in place on what we do from there.” She added, “it’s only natural that we here are advocates for students.”

Last October, Rutgers University freshman Tyler Clementi jumped to his death off the George Washington Bridge after learning that his roommate posted a video online of Clementi and his male

partner having a sexual encounter. In September of 2010, 13-year-old Asher Brown was found dead in his stepfather's closet after shooting himself in the head. His suicide followed relentless taunts and abuse from his classmates. Brown, who identified himself as homosexual and came from a Buddhist family, decided that he would convert to Christianity to ease the tormenting from classmates in his Texas community before ending his life.

"We encourage anyone who is being harassed to file a bias response report because we may be able to connect them with the support they need," Eichstedt said. "They're experiencing fear. They're experiencing despair."

Advocates are trained to console students in these situations. However, the main priority for advocates dealing with students contemplating suicide is to find them immediate professional counseling support.

"If they're suicidal, then it's our job to keep them alive," Eichstedt said. According to Eichstedt, some students who do not share or practice favored political or environmental beliefs are targets as well.

In addition to intentional bias incidents, the most common types of incidents reported are microaggression incidents. Professors will sometimes use stereotypes or single out students of a certain group, not because they intend to offend, but because they are uneducated about these stereotypes.

According to Mazzotti, microaggression incidents commonly take place in the classroom. In these circumstances, an advocate would bring the student's concern and discomfort to the professor's attention while withholding the student's identity.

"Every year there have been incidents which have created concern among staff, faculty and students that are disruptive, anxiety producing, fear causing and sometimes incidences that are like grains of sand in your shoe that create a rub that make it constantly uncomfortable for people," said Eichstedt.

With the formation of the Bias Response Team, students, faculty and staff now have a confidential outlet to express the concerns and discomfort experienced by themselves or peers.

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