

Responding to Hurtful Graffiti & Verbal Slurs: What Should We Do?

The appearance of racist, anti-Semitic, and sexist graffiti and the use of verbal slurs generate anger, fear, and concerns about lack of civility and respect within a college community. Many students, faculty, and staff believe that actions need to happen now to address these problems. The purpose of this forum is to develop ideas for preventing the use of hurtful racial, ethnic, and sexist words and symbols. We will also consider how to respond to such incidents when they occur.

A report published in the *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin* states that much of the graffiti in the United States, both urban and rural, contains messages of hatred and racism. For those who may not have access to other forums of expression, graffiti is an easy and effective way to communicate with a large audience. Graffiti generally falls into the following categories:

1. Junk graffiti messages that often have obscene, racist, or threatening themes, and
2. Gang related activities, including tagging.

According to C. M. Grant, the report's author, our society doesn't have a clearly defined response to graffiti because many people see it as falling into a gray area between crime and public nuisance. Public attitudes tend to fluctuate between indifference and outrage and the criminal justice system doesn't have a uniform response. While some combat the problem aggressively, others do very little or nothing at all to punish offenders.

Many higher educational institutions also struggle with how to handle this "grey area" when they are confronted with hurtful graffiti and verbal slurs on their campuses. At one school in Ohio, the focus is on the impact to the community. Although the definition of a hate/bias crime used by Miami University

(based on the U.S. Department of Justice's *Hate Crimes Data Collection Guidelines*) states "Any criminal offense committed against a person or property which is motivated, in whole or in part, by the offender's bias against a race, religion, disability, ethnic/national origin groups or sexual-orientation group," the focus is on the harm done to the community. Their "No Hate Initiative" is founded on the belief that any "hateful incident directed at an individual or group, owing to their difference" is "an attack on the entire community." An incident doesn't need to meet the formal definition of a hate crime to be considered harmful. According to officials there, "Even if the incident does not rise to a violation of the law, cases of harassment, verbal slurs, etc., can lead to more serious hate-motivated violence when the community fails to respond. Silence is acceptance. These behaviors tear at the fabric of the community."

There has been an increasing amount of attention generated by incidents in which individuals on our campus have been targeted with hurtful graffiti and verbal slurs. What should we do? During this deliberative forum, which is based on the principle that the people who live and work in a community must come together to address a common problem, we plan to develop some ways of addressing this issue. Through listening to each other's experiences and perceptions — and sharing our own — we can gain a more complete picture of what the problem is, figure out how to address it, and consider how to prevent future occurrences. In this discussion guide, each of the following approaches is based on a particular viewpoint. The three aren't mutually exclusive and so you might find yourself drawing some elements from each of them as we work together to find common ground for action.

Approach 1: Residential Life & Campus Safety need to act decisively.

The college/university is too lenient. Instead of swift and sure punishment, people who commit these acts know there is only a slim chance they will be punished. We don't do nearly enough to deter this behavior, to show perpetrators what the consequences are, and make them "face the music" if they do something wrong. We should reinforce law and order by making regulations tougher and by strictly enforcing existing laws and regulations.

Possible Actions

1. Residential Life needs to enact and enforce tougher penalties for these kinds of offenses.
2. Hire more residential life staff and campus safety officers from under represented groups.
3. Campus Safety and Student Affairs needs to educate its officers and staff in racial, ethnic, and sexual awareness and prejudice reduction.
4. The college/university needs to provide an immediate personal response to support targeted individual and publicly condemn the actions of the perpetrator.
5. Each incident needs to be vigorously investigated. The results need to be shared with the community in a timely manner.
6. Adapt the neighborhood crime watch model for use in the dorms. Education programs that teach students how to identify and describe incidents and communications networks (such as a separate telephone number or radio channel) should be offered so that reporting is quicker and more effective.
7. Students who are targets, or who witness or have information about an incident, should report it. All reports should be completely confidential.

Opponents Say

Since perpetrators are seeking attention, speaking publicly about the offense only rewards their actions. Investigations should be preformed in a discrete manner to prevent copycat incidents and to protect the victim. It also harms the reputation of the institution.

Approach 2: Strengthen community standards to prevent intolerant & aggressive acts.

When students live at home, community standards can assure civility, discipline, and respect for authority. Parents, family, and neighbors are present to enforce codes of conduct; cops "walk the beat;" and churches and schools provide spiritual support and a sense of discipline. However, too many students act out once they move to campus. Individuals who indulge in intolerant and aggressive speech and actions should not be tolerated at our institution.

Possible Actions

1. The campus community needs to be quickly informed about hurtful graffiti and verbal slurs. Administrators need to publicly condemn them. We need to support the victim and indicate to the perpetrator that we do not tolerate such actions.
2. These acts should not be excused by either friends or by Campus Safety as simply the actions of someone under the influence.
3. While we need to be clear that being high or drunk is not an excuse, alcohol and drug abuse education and prevention programs and psychological counseling should be required if necessary.
4. Regular community meetings should be held to foster open communication about divisive issues.
5. There needs to be campus-wide support and enforcement of rules that support civility and respect and timely and visible consequences for those who violate them.
6. Fund clubs that celebrate differences and support under-represented groups. Explanations about why such programs are necessary should be communicated in ways that avoid resentment.
7. Each student should be responsible for not going along when friends use verbal slurs, tell ethnic jokes, or brag about "scoring."

Opponents Say

This runs contrary to the right of free speech. What is offensive to some may not bother others. College is a time when students should be free to challenge community norms. They should be able to act and speak freely without fear of repercussions.

Approach 3:

Education is the key to challenging the pervasive cultural messages and creating a respectful campus climate.

Disrespect and intolerance seems to be everywhere. You can't turn on your television, listen to music, or even get into a conversation without encountering stereotypes and attitudes that mock or belittle people because of their identity. Sometimes it seems you cannot walk across campus, particularly on a weekend night, without hearing words like "gay," "slut," "nigger," and "dike." The attitudes are so pervasive that it begins to feel like it is "instinctive." But college-educated individuals should know how to think or act constructively when confronted with these kinds of attitudes and behavior.

Possible Actions

1. Whenever an individual hears verbal slurs or ethnic or sexual jokes it is up to that person to clearly indicate that it is offensive and not acceptable behavior at a college/university.
2. Encourage campus TV, radio, and newspapers to report on these offensive issues in ways that encourage open dialogue and responsible action.
3. It is the responsibility of each student, staff, and faculty to learn how to deal comfortably with racial, religious, gender, and other differences and help teach others to do the same. The college/university should offer regular trainings to help everyone acquire the skills needed to do this successfully.
4. Education is essential for improving the campus climate and providing students with the knowledge and skills they need to be successful in a diverse society. Academic affairs should take the lead in developing programs to educate students and faculty.

5. Administrators and faculty should study how communities similar to ours effectively addressed similar problems in order to learn from those efforts and adapt them for our own campus.
6. Launch a campaign to teach students to communicate skillfully about racial, ethnic class, and sexual differences. A quality education includes both knowledge and skills.

Opponents Say

Faculty and students are primarily interested in teaching and learning within the majors, not in being required to learn about social issues or community problems. The agendas of a few groups on campus shouldn't result in mandatory programs for everyone. Devoting time and resources to these kinds of programs detracts from the primary purpose for going to college, which is to earn a degree and secure a good job.

Sources

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