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Final Project: A Study of Race and Diversity at St. John Fisher College

Introduction and Theoretical Background

St. John Fisher College is an institution that calls itself diverse. The private and suburban college uses extensive advertising to publicly promote itself as a diverse entity. It claims that it strives to be diverse and that as a whole it is accepting of students of all walks of life, and its mission statements back up that sentiment. In actuality, there are issues with the diversity of the St. John Fisher campus, particularly pertaining to race. One problem is the mere fact that the undergraduate population at the College is racially disproportionate at approximately 90% white, 10% black¹. However, after conducting an in-depth study of race on campus through both a survey and interviews, I learned that Fisher's diversity issues go beyond its makeup and includes other aspects like tensions between groups. The results of this study can best be interpreted through the theoretical lenses provided by whiteness theorists, including George Lipsitz, Richard Dyer, and Tim Wise. They would tell us that while these issues go against Fisher's values, they do mirror aspects of society as a whole, reflecting the history of white supremacy in the United States.

In The Possessive Investment in Whiteness, Lipsitz explains white supremacy and what he calls "the possessive investment in whiteness" throughout his book, though he

¹ Dr. Arlette Miller Smith, Dean of the Office of Multicultural Affairs and Diversity at St. John Fisher

spends a lot of time setting the stage in the first chapter. He makes the point that white dominance in the United States does not solely tie back to conquest and colonialism, although of course it is related to that. He says that “contemporary whiteness and its rewards have been created and recreated by policies long after the emancipation of slaves in the 1860s and even after the outlawing of de jure segregation in the 1960s... Racism has changed over time, taking on different forms and serving different social purposes in each time period” (Lipsitz 4). Nonetheless, he argues that the root of the racism problem, which does have a long history, remains relevant today, as it continues to plague the United States. This can be seen in society as a whole, but also at the institutional level, even at present-day St. John Fisher College.

In his book White, Dyer discusses how the color of one’s skin can matter in American society. He addresses the fact that Western civilization has long valued brightness and the color white. He discusses a concept that the lighter a person’s skin tone, the better he or she is accepted in white-dominated society. He writes that “some people – the Irish, Latins, Jews – are white sometimes, and some white people are whiter than others” (Dyer 51). These ideas can also apply to Fisher, where lighter-colored students often feel more accepted according to my study.

Dyer notes that “white people don’t see their white privilege,” adding that “white people create the dominant images of the world and don’t quite see that they thus construct the world in their own image” (9). This is one of the reasons tension can develop between racially diverse groups. Tim Wise expands on this in White Like Me. He says that whites can get away with not thinking about race: “Race, after all, is a subject that, for the most part, we rarely have to engage directly in our lives” (9). He

adds that people of color see racism as a problem while whites do not, something my Fisher study also suggested. He continues, “to be white in America is to be so removed from the experiences of people of color, that it should come as no surprise to find whites unwilling to accept the versions of reality offered by those who are black and brown” (Wise 67).

Lipsitz says that many white people are ignorant of the conditions of people of color around them, something that my Fisher study also seemed to support. “Seventy percent of whites in one poll said that African Americans ‘have the same opportunities to live a middle-class life as whites’ ...Such optimism about the opportunities available to African Americans demonstrates ignorance of the dire conditions facing black communities,” he writes (Lipsitz 19). Lipsitz also refers to the idea of stereotypes, which some white students at Fisher seem to exhibit: “A National Opinion Research Report in 1990 disclosed that more than 50 percent of U.S. whites viewed blacks as innately lazy and less intelligent and less patriotic than whites” (19).

In addition to the idea of white privilege, Lipsitz says that some whites in American society practice something called “white resistance.” This basically refers to the white people’s ability to not follow through with certain race-based rules or laws of order, which they can get away with simply because they are the dominant group. It can be practiced individually or by larger groups. It is something else that my study showed is happening at Fisher, sometimes by students, sometimes by professors.

Lipsitz discusses in Chapter 2 of his book how white resistance has curtailed the impact of certain U.S. court decisions. In fact, he wrote that some decisions were so ambiguous in language that they allowed for resistance quite easily. Legislation in fair

housing, education and employment has all been subject to white resistance, and since the majority was indeed white, little could hold that in check. Resistance included everything from slowing down the implementation of laws to nearly discarding their relevance altogether. There seems to be a parallel between the historical lack of enforcement of court legislation and the lack of enforcement of regulations pertaining to race at Fisher, like the institution's mission statements or the student-governing document the Fisher Creed which states that all students are respectful, open-minded, and diverse.

Lipsitz also writes that politicians find ways to dance around the issue of race. One example he referred to was "Nixon's tactic of affirming support for integration in the abstract while acting to undermine the mechanisms that made it possible in practice" (page 30). While at a less extreme level, since Fisher is not actively trying to avoid dealing with race altogether, this is similar to the ability of the College's administration to say one thing and get away with another, or not fully taking charge on enforcing something like the Fisher Creed. It has in the abstract what it needs, in what it is saying publicly and in official documents, but what is happening in practice, it can get away with something else without experiencing many, if any, repercussions.

As Lipsitz says, even a key court case that has been heralded as a huge victory against racism, *Brown vs. Board of Education*, was susceptible to resistance from the white majority. "The decision provided no means for dismantling the structures that crafted advantages for white students out of the disadvantages of students of color," he writes (Lipsitz 34). He continues that the court ordered for action to happen "with all deliberate speed," which left wiggle room for administrators to draw things out as long as possible and in some cases avoid taking action altogether. This is one of the key court

cases that the foundation of our education system in reference to race has been built.

With cases like this, and similar legal decisions handed down throughout the last several decades, open to white resistance, it should be no surprise that white supremacy and the white majority continues to reign in American society and American academia. These only reinforce stereotypes and the differences between groups, such as the case at Fisher.

Survey

I first discovered the problem of racial discrimination at Fisher after conducting an in-depth study of both diversity and race on campus in November 2007. That study began with a survey of 20 closed questions and a series of open-ended questions that 29 students took. The results clearly showed that racial tensions do exist at Fisher. Many minority students reported being discriminated against and it also became evident that white students' Fisher experience is different than that of minority students. I should add that going into the study I hadn't anticipated such a divide; I had actually thought of the campus as a much more accepting, respectful place.

The survey looked at perceptions of race and diversity at Fisher from the point of view of its students, 16 white students and 13 minority students. The responses between the groups were clearly different. This divide was in some ways alarming, as Lipsitz writes "the gap between white perception and minority experience can have explosive consequences" (20). Though that statement was referring to events surrounding the 1992 Los Angeles Rebellion, it should definitely put up red flags for a place like Fisher, where racial tensions do exist. Related to this, Fisher's Student Government Association President Jackie Morrison told me it is important for administrators to keep an eye on the

racial tensions, which she herself is much aware of, “so things don’t boil over.” The stark differences that I found between white students and minority students at Fisher were also reminiscent of the aforementioned work of white theorists like Lipsitz, Dyer, and Wise. White students had certain views, and minority students had other views.

Only one of the 16 white respondents strongly disagreed with the statement, “St. John Fisher is a diverse campus.” Eight of the 16 said they were either neutral to it or agreed with it. Whites averaged a 2.13 (on a 1-5 scale, 1 meaning strongly agree) in response to the statement, “St. John Fisher can do a better job in promoting diversity on campus,” so they somewhat agreed with it but didn’t feel too strongly about it. For the statement, “Minority students are treated equal to white students on the St. John Fisher campus,” white students averaged a 2.38 in their responses, meaning they far and large at least somewhat agreed with the declaration. As for the statement, “I am satisfied with the amount of diversity-based organizations on campus,” whites responded an average of 2.56, closer to a neutral sentiment. Whites were also neutral on whether or not they were content with St. John Fisher's representation of diversity and race on campus, responding an average of 3.06. Whites were predominately happy with clubs, organizations and events on campus, claiming they do allow for and encourage the fostering of relationships between diverse groups.

In the open-ended question section, five of the 16 white students, nearly one-third, said they do not believe race is a problem in the United States. One wrote in response, “(Only) in the south.” These responses reflected ignorance on the part of some white students, with some of which demonstrating the usual misconceptions about race like it only being a problem in the south, going back to Lipsitz’s discussion of stereotypes and

common white perspectives. Some white students noted that they have been mistreated at St. John Fisher based on their race, but these responses were all along the lines of reverse effects of affirmative action. “Financial aid, I got nothing,” one white student wrote. Another white student wrote, “I feel sometimes white students get overlooked because they feel bad for minorities and give things to them.” The rest of the white students wrote that they have not been mistreated based on their race at Fisher.

The minority students felt differently. These 13 respondents broke down further as seven black students, two Asian students, two Latino students and two who identified themselves as “other,” one being both black and white and the other not elaborating. This is important because I noticed that disparities between white and black students were even greater than the differences between whites and those of Latino, Asian, and other backgrounds. This may go along with Dyer’s concept that the lighter one’s skin color is, the more accepted they are in society.

Of the seven black students who took the survey, four said they strongly disagreed with the statement, “St. John Fisher is a diverse campus.” One Asian student and both “other” students also strongly disagreed with it. Nearly all minority students agreed with the survey’s final statement, “St. John Fisher can do a better job in promoting diversity on campus.” Minority students averaged a 2.08 to that statement, although black students specifically averaged a 1.29, meaning they nearly all strongly agreed with it. As for the statement “Minority students are treated equal to white students on the St. John Fisher campus,” minority students responded with a 3.54, meaning most of them disagreed with it. However, black students averaged a 4.00 on the same statement – once again reporting differently than Latino, Asian, and other minority students. Minorities

averaged a 3.62, compared to blacks' 3.86, to the statement, "I am satisfied with the amount of diversity-based organizations on campus." Minority students came in at 3.69 on whether or not they were content with St. John Fisher's representation of diversity and race on campus (so most were not), while blacks averaged a 4.00. As for whether or not Fisher's ad campaign accurately represents the college, minorities responded a 3.62 and blacks a 3.71, so they mostly disagreed with that. Most minority students disagreed with the statement that Fisher offers many opportunities for students of all races. Lastly, minority students were not happy with clubs, organizations and events on campus, claiming they do not allow for or encourage the fostering of relationships between diverse groups.

One open-ended question on the survey asked students if they felt any one race was superior to another. Nearly all minority respondents said no and moved on to the next question, though one black student said yes, and a Latino student refrained from saying yes or no and instead just said, "We're in a society that is capitalistic in every sense. Hence, society-wise, there is a superior race, however it is crap." In another open-ended question, all 13 minority students said they believe race is a problem in the United States today. A few put exclamation points, or wrote in all caps, to emphasis that point and to show how strongly they felt about it. One went further, writing "Always will be."

Five of the 13 minority students said they had been mistreated based on their race at Fisher. Two of the 13 skipped the question. For the other six, they said they haven't been mistreated based on their race at Fisher, but one added the word "yet" and two said that they know people at Fisher who have been mistreated. For those that said they've been mistreated based on their race at Fisher, three cited racial slurs, two cited staring,

one said being outcasted, one said snickering and two had more specific examples. One wrote, “My professor made an example by saying if she called me a nigga that is a way of racism.” Another student wrote, “I could not hand a paper in late and the rest of the students could.” This second response is an example of Lipsitz’s concept of white resistance described earlier – someone in power, who is white, choosing not to be fair to someone of another race.

In terms of being an instrument to accurately measure campus perceptions, one possible downfall of this survey was that only a small number of black students were represented, compared to white students, and an even smaller number of Asian, Latino and other groups participated. This may lead to some distortions in the averages that came out. If a larger number of these groups was surveyed, the disparities would likely have been much larger between whites and minorities, and whites and blacks, in my opinion. With such a small number of black students being surveyed, seven to be exact, the one black student that felt diversity was being represented on campus may pull more weight than he or she should. However, maybe it really is true that one in every seven black students on campus believes diversity is represented. It’s tough to say. Overall, it is probably not completely scientific, as it is random. However, the fact that it was random lends to it being more accurate than not though, so the results should be fairly precise and definitely practical for a study like this.

Finally, in terms of reception, most students regardless of race were agreeable to taking the survey, however some refused when they learned of the subject matter. This shows the sensitivity of the subject matter and how personal it can be. It is definitely possible that it was also an intimidating situation for some minority students, as I myself

am a white student (part of the majority), and that may have added an awkward element. Based on the results of the surveys, minority students definitely seemed to have a heightened awareness of the fact that most students at Fisher are indeed white. One Latino student perhaps said it best in the area for additional comments: “While I sit here taking this, I mostly see white males and females.” However, with regard to reception, I found it interesting that just about every minority student who did take the survey was excited to do so, and they were quick to thank me. One black female student told me, “This makes me so excited – just to know that someone cares.”

Student Interviews

In addition to the surveys, I also interviewed several students to get a better sense of student perceptions of race and diversity on campus. I interviewed both minority students and student leaders for this part of the study, generally people who did not take the survey, and I did so in both formal and informal settings for the purpose of this study. For some of these discussions, due to the nature of the topic, students preferred that their names be kept anonymous, so I will honor those requests.

In one interview, a black male student told me flat out, “This school is not diverse at all. It says it is, it tries to be, but it falls short.” He continued, “Just look at the type of events it brings to campus - rock, pop, hypnotists. It’s clear who their audience is.” In response to this assessment of events on campus, a common complaint by minority students at Fisher, Morrison admitted that student organizations like the Student Activities Board (SAB) does often put on campus events primarily geared toward white students. “A lot of it depends on funding, a lot of it depends on leadership,” she said.

“It’s also a fact that these groups don’t have enough diverse people.” As for SAB specifically, which does the majority of student-run campus programming, she said simply: “Let’s be honest. SAB is pretty much all white.” Morrison added that having more minority students in these organizations would definitely help, or even just more people who would be willing to represent those groups, but that in itself has been a problem. “It’s hard for these groups to offer things for other students if they don’t have the perspective needed,” she said.

Besides the lack of events geared toward minority students, Vassana Praseutsinh, vice president of the Asian Student Union, said that ignorance among students is also a problem. “A lot of students here at Fisher aren’t aware of what they say and how they say it,” she said. “Some of the things the majority of students say are very offensive and those who have an ethnic background see it as the majority’s way of pushing them down.” Praseutsinh added that minorities tend to stick with minorities socially, not because they want to exclude others but that’s where they feel most comfortable and they have things in common with these people. “A lot of people roll their eyes or get upset about people of ethnic background getting loud,” she said. “Not to be racist myself, but everyone gets loud and rowdy; only at Fisher, ethnic groups get frowned on more because they don’t fit the social norm.”

Prejudices on campus certainly aren’t limited to race, though that is the main focus of this study. Even so, a member of Fisher Pride was helpful in providing some insight into discrimination that exists in other forms on campus, and how the issue of diversity at Fisher is a much larger one than just black versus white. “I can’t speak for the other groups, but I feel that discrimination based on sexual orientation is a huge problem

at Fisher,” said Shane Saddlemire, vice president of Fisher Pride. “I hear negative comments made about homosexuals everyday.” Saddlemire added that people who are different, at almost any capacity, are often mocked at Fisher, as there is a social norm for most students. “It’s disappointing,” he said. “Fisher needs to take more time to educate every student about the importance of accepting people for who they are.”

It would be unfair to say that all minority students believed diversity was a problem on campus, as there were a few that I talk to who disagreed with that. One Asian student, a leader in the Asian Student Union, was among those. “I think the campus is very accepting,” she stated. “The opportunities are there (for minority students) – a lot of students just don’t take advantage of them.” However, opinions like this from minority students were definitely a minority in their own right. One black student strongly disputed that sentiment, saying “One of the biggest problems is there aren’t many opportunities. For the ones that there are, people don’t know about them. There must be something wrong with the system.” This coming from a black student, this could once again go along with Dyer and his theory that the greater disparity from whiteness, the less accepted one will be, so black students are those who feel the least accepted. I must also say that I found the last part of this student’s comments interesting – “the system.” Clearly, there is a system at St. John Fisher, and at least in the minds of most minority students, it leaves them out – or at least disadvantages them to some degree, whether intentional or not.

In my interview with Morrison, she went out of her way to say that she was not at all surprised with the findings of my study. “More and more issues have been brought to my attention,” she said. “Some segments of the population are not as respectful as others.

There's a lot of tensions between minority groups too." She continued, "You see the separation in the dining hall, you notice it in the classroom, and those are probably signs that we're not where we should be." Morrison said she believes one of the reasons for the divisions is that the College and some student organizations are trying to be more diverse, and it could be making students uncomfortable, so they keep going back to their old ways. "A lot of students discredit what minority students say, and that's a big problem too," she said. At a more personal level, Morrison spoke about one situation of white resistance when she tried to work for the rights of minority students as SGA President. One of her goals as president was to create a new position on student government executive board for a diversity chair, someone who would be solely focused on issues of diversity and making the campus more diverse. Those efforts were shot down when she proposed the change to fellow executive board members in the summer. She said she was seen as "a crazy white student" who was fighting for those things and it would not be in the best interest of the organization. Not coincidentally, Morrison argued, the majority of the board was white.

One of the biggest complaints that constantly resurfaced in my discussions with minority students was that they feel they are not being heard. They are not happy with the state of the campus, but perhaps worse than that, they feel that they have nowhere to go to voice those concerns. Those they have talked to have often dismissed them. A common theme was that there is not a clear protocol for who to go to if one experiences an act of racism and how that will be dealt with. Some students who have gone to authorities said they felt they were not listened to, and they have seen that in itself as a

prejudice act. One possible problem is the authority figures these students go to are themselves white, and so it is hard for them to understand what is truly happening.

The College's Point of View

The College's administration has been aware of diversity problems at Fisher since at least 1999, when a campus climate study found race to be a problem on campus². Many of the issues I discovered in my study echoed the same problems found to exist back then, so many of the issues seem to remain unresolved. Among the findings of the 1999 study, there was a disconnect between Fisher's mission statements about diversity and what was actually being carried out ("as at most universities" the document pointed out several times). This data echoes what my 2007 study ultimately showed.

Morrison, who is a member of the Campus Diversity Advisory Board at Fisher and frequently works with members of faculty, staff and administration, shed some interesting light into where the College is coming from and what is being done to work on issues of diversity. She said that it must be first noted that, like any college, Fisher is very interested in two things when it comes to minority students: recruiting them and retaining them. She said that the school has some problems with recruiting. "We're not in a location that's idealistic for minority students. A lot of them like more of a city feel," she said. She said that advertising has also been an issue. Both white students and minority students criticized the school's advertising campaign in my survey, as it seems to overuse minority students in comparison to Fisher's current student population, and Morrison said the school is aware of such complaints. But from the administration's point of view, she says the campaign comes down to promoting diversity and trying to

² Survey on Campus Climate: Race and Ethnicity Final Report (<http://home.sjfc.edu/diversity/cap.asp>)

attract underrepresented students. “If you put all white students on a billboard, what message does that send? Students want to see people like them at school,” she said. Morrison said Fisher has been making strides in recruitment in recent years, as it’s gone up from 5 percent minority students to 7 percent, and currently the number is around 13 percent, an estimate that Dean of the Office of Multicultural Affairs and Diversity Arlette Miller Smith confirmed in a separate interview. “It’s good, but we feel we have a long way to go,” Morrison said. As far as retainment goes, she said that’s a whole different issue, and it has been a problem for the College. “There’s a lot of data, so sometimes it’s hard to make sense of,” she said. “The bottom line is we have to keep doing a constant examination of where we are.”

Since the climate study in 1999, Fisher has taken some steps forward on the issue of diversity. It formed the Campus Diversity Advisory Board (CDAB) in the fall of 2005, a board referred to earlier which Morrison is a part of, to look at ways of alleviating the problem. The board includes members from all walks of campus life, from administration, staff and faculty to students and trustees. It works together to collect data, process it and presents recommendations to decision-makers as to how to create a better, more open-minded environment at Fisher. It also has a relationship with a college of comparable size and composition, Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, which itself has been taking significant strides to improve diversity on its campus. It is working with Loyola Marymount to gather further information and feedback on how to improve Fisher’s situation, and it is even working on sending a small committee to visit the school in the near future to continue its quest of learning more,

building a bond with that school, and later making more recommendations back to the board at Fisher.

The Office of Multicultural Affairs & Diversity Programs (OMADP) provides much of the framework for diversity initiatives at the College, although in itself can only do so much. Among its duties, it outlines on its website³ that its mission is “to promote the multiple dimensions of diversity, particularly race, age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, socioeconomic level, religion, and physical ability through education, celebration, evaluation and affirmation.” It adds that it is “committed to building an enriched academic community that embraces and acts upon the values forwarded in our Fisher Creed.” While the OMADP has other duties, as it is outlined, race is a big part of its make-up and it is likely not a coincidence that race is listed first in its mission statement. Arlette Miller Smith, dean of the Office of Multicultural Affairs & Diversity, said that there are definitely problems pertaining to diversity on campus. “There are holes, there are gaps, absolutely,” she said. “Fisher is not unlike other places of higher education. When things happen nationally, there’s going to be reverberations and fallouts from these things. There’s going to be shockwaves from things like Jena-6.” She added, “Some of the tensions arise because we’re too careful. Some of them arise because people say things and don’t have an idea how they’re interpreted by another race.” Miller Smith cited her office’s many initiatives as to ways Fisher is taking steps forward, which includes the aforementioned relationship with Loyola Marymount University in California. She added that her office and the College in general is constantly examining the state of diversity on campus and making recommendations to the College. Miller

³ Office of Multicultural Affairs & Diversity Programs website, <http://home.sjfc.edu/diversity/about.asp>

Smith added that some preliminary work is being done in possibly putting together another climate study, as the last one done in 1999 is becoming a bit dated.

Miller Smith said she was not surprised by my study's findings. "When you're a smaller percentage of any particular group, yes, it's going to make you more heightened to what's happening around you," she said. Dean of Students Dr. Rick DeJesus-Rueff also said he was not surprised with the findings. "It is consistent with the anecdotal reports I have heard over many years at many colleges and universities, as well as my own personal experience," he said. "Unfortunately, I have witnessed racial discrimination on many of the campuses at which I have worked, including Fisher. However, sometimes that discrimination is unintentional – that is, a person says or does something that they do not consciously recognize as discriminatory. And it mirrors what happens in society at large, so I don't think it is unique to college campuses."

Moving Forward

My study is helpful in assessing the current state of our campus when it comes to diversity, and it is evident that there are some problems in that regard, but all of this prompts the question: what should be done about it? Students differed in their responses to that. In the surveys, suggestions from minority students were wide ranging. These included "increase interaction between groups," "encourage minorities to apply," "promote more diverse groups," "make the campus more attractive to all races," and "become less expensive." With so many different responses, and few repeated responses, it may be the case that there is no right answer or at least that there is no easy answer. However, combined with the interviews, where this same question came up a few times,

the suggestion that was most commonly brought up was to have more diverse campus events. Educating students about the importance of being accepting of all people was also high on the list of many, and it was even suggested by one student that there could be a mandatory class specific to diversity that all freshmen would take.

Then there's the idea of white students fighting for the rights of minority students, and based on the composition of Fisher, this could be one of the best options to improve the situation in my opinion. If enough people do this, it could prove very effective. Morrison said that she as a white student has long fought for the rights of minority students at Fisher. She co-founded Four Freedoms Week and said that her fight for underrepresented students is one of the reasons she was motivated to organize the week. She said that the issues won't solve themselves and white students specifically must be involved in the process for things to work out long term.

Lipsitz writes that the current world we live in is not just known for its divisions, but it is also known for its sense of unity. New forms of technology and communication are bringing the world together, yet at the same time it is true that ethnic, religious and racial differences are putting people at odds with each other. Mass media and politics in the U.S. continue to support white supremacy. Lipsitz goes so far to say there is "evidence of a fundamentally new era for the possessive investment in whiteness, fueled by ferment over identity politics" (67). None of this bodes well for where the world may be going; it does reinforce the differences between races on the Fisher campus.

These differences will need to be addressed going forward if Fisher wants to avoid the potential for tensions "boiling over" as suggested earlier. One positive sign is that Fisher administration appears to be aware of the issue, and that is the first step. The

emergence of the Campus Diversity Advisory Board and the work of the Office of Multicultural Affairs & Diversity is commendable, as is the work of some campus organizations like Students With A Vision and the minority-based groups which have been referred to briefly in this essay.

The problems are real, and it seems the College is beginning to take steps to address them. That is all well and good, but in terms of short term solutions, or Fisher students having a good grasp on what is happening and being able to fix it in the near future, that is more abstract and uncertain. Action on administration's part can only do so much. This is something everyone on campus must be aware of and work on. It needs to be a community project, and it is also a fight that will likely last for a long time to come. It is my hope that my study will help educate people about the shortfalls of Fisher's quest at being a diverse, all-encompassing institution and it will help point the campus' future in the right direction.

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