Hate Crimes on Campus

In times before, America has always shown that it needs changes to its system. Historically, laws have had to be absolved, reworded, or ratified to bring about toleration and/or equality of others. Discrimination and racism have been deeply rooted in the history of this country, whether they are blatant, subtle, or even unknown by those perpetrating it. And today’s world is no different. There is still racism, anti-Semitism, homophobia, Islamophobia, and other types of phobias still living strong in the minds of many Americans today. Historically, ethnic and racial minorities have had to fight to win policy changes to bring about equality at least at the judicial level, and it seems that today is no different. We live in times in which minorities are still fighting for their rights to level out the playing field. In particular, Muslims have been put into the spotlight since September 11th, 2001, and have been working very hard to combat the negative stereotypes that have arisen through the media and bigoted hate mongers who portray Islam in a negative light. Many Americans today are misinformed about Islam because their main source of the religion is the media which gives them a misconstrued perspective, and as a result they form such misconceptions in their minds. Because of all of this, hate crimes against Muslims in this country have gone up by 1600 percent since September 11th (according to the FBI) and continue to rise. Hate crimes, harassment, unreasonable arrests, and other civil rights violations have risen all over the country due
to suspicion against Muslims and it shows that there are still deep levels of mistrust and hatred toward minorities. It shows that America is in need of proper education about not only Muslims, but many different groups in the US and how to deal with those who are looked upon as “the other”.

What our group has done is that we have taken this topic of hate crimes in America and divided it into different parts to research in depth the effects of racism, the conditions that facilitate it and how perceptions of “the other” are formed in the mindset of Americans, how minorities have been victimized and marginalized, and more specifically how Muslims have felt the backlash of discrimination in recent years and their general reactions. On a more local level, we decided to research how other minorities on campus have felt being at this University, how local Muslims perceive racism on campus, what role the University administration plays to stop acts of intolerance and educate faculty and students, how local and University police deal with hate crimes and acts of intolerance in the Urbana-Champaign community, and what is being done to protect those who feel victimized. The subject matter is very broad and there are many different aspects to cover with the particular topic of hate crimes. One can go very in depth, and ascertain much more. By no means is our research a complete analysis or end-all to the subject. There are multiple ways to approach the topic at hand. What our group has done is take a step in one, trying to educate ourselves about the subject a little more and two, bringing about awareness to those who have been, or will potentially be affected by this project. We hope that our work will be utilized and built upon in the future.
What I have done for my particular part of the research project is interview administration officials and housing officials to see how the University handles the process of dealing with hate crimes that have been committed on campus. I developed a list of questions for my interviewees. My focus was to see how detailed the University is in particular when it comes to reporting hate crimes, their procedures of recording and following up with students who have been victims of hate crimes, what actions they take to investigate the crimes and protect the victims, their own personal feelings about what racism is and how it affects the general University atmosphere, and other similar items.

In asking these questions I was able to find out a lot more than I had expected. Something I learned in all of my interviews was that I did not have to stick to a strict format of questions. My interviewees at many times would give lengthy answers that would answer multiple questions. I was also able to formulate new questions based off of their answers. All of my interviews flowed very naturally and would turn into conversations by the end. Unfortunately I was only able to conduct four interviews, two with deans and two with housing administrators. I had tried to setup interviews with other deans and administrators, but I was unable to because of their busy schedules. My portion of the project was such that I could only interview a limited number of people. I had originally planned on interviewing counselors as well, to see how they deal with students who are victims of hate crimes. However, after talking to one of the deans, I was told that the counseling center deals with very few, if any students, who are victims of hate crimes. In addition I realized that interviewing counselors from the University was not as prudent to my research, as I was trying to ascertain the general system of how hate crimes are reported and whether they are dealt with properly. I did however find out
about the Educational Organization and Leadership (EOL) Program that University has, which trains future resident assistants and teaches them about diversity, discrimination, and other essential topics to properly educate them on how to deal with hate crimes and acts of intolerance when they happen. Unfortunately however, I did not find out about this program until very late from one of my colleagues. I tried to setup an interview with an EOL director, but without any success since it was so late. However, I do feel that the four interviews I had were extremely beneficial and I was able to get a sufficient amount of information from them.

Each interview that I conducted did teach me a lot. My basic questions for both deans asked about how students report hate crimes and what happens once they are reported. I thought these drier questions would lead to the more juicy questions about their personal feelings about racism, how they felt the climate on campus was, and also whether they aligned themselves with University policies. Fortunately for my sake however, I found their answers to the basic, dry questions about the formal reporting process to be enlightening and quite integral to my whole research process. These answers did help to lead into the bigger stuff I had wanted to inquire from them, i.e. the juicier answers, but they allowed me to formulate new questions based off their primary answers. To begin with, during my first interview, I asked Dean A from the Office of Dean of Students how she defined racism and how she defined hate crimes. She defined racism as any person or group having the mentality that they are superior to another person or group based off of their skin color. She then went on to make a distinction between hate crimes and acts of intolerance. Hate crimes, according to the University, are actual crimes which can be classified as crimes and be punishable by law. These
include, but are not limited to battery, vandalism of personal property, theft, and other such crimes. Acts of intolerance then, are any other bias or racially motivated actions or expressed ideas that do not directly harm an individual or group of individuals or their property. These include, but are not limited to racial slurs, hate speech, derogatory items written in public places, and other such incidents.

Dean B had given me similar information when I asked him the same questions. The following is a combination of what both Deans A and B told me when I asked them about reporting hate crimes. They told me that if it qualifies to be a hate crime, then it is first reported to the University of Illinois Police Department and the case goes through the legal court system. The Office of Dean of Students would then call a meeting with the victim of the hate crime, and get all possible information as to what exactly happened, who was involved, why the victim thinks the crime was committed, what reparations the victim wants, and other such items. They would then meet with the Office of the Dean of Conflict Resolution to discuss the matter further. If the perpetrator has been identified, they would then be called in separately to discuss why they did what they did. They would discuss disciplinary actions with them, and if the respondent needs to be dismissed from the University, the matter is forwarded to a subcommittee which comprises of the dean of conflict resolution, a hearing officer, and other necessary agents who would determine the appropriate action for the student and whether they should be allowed less severe disciplinary action. In addition, the deans would work together to educate the individual, and the individual may have to take some formal disciplinary classes to be educated about inappropriate behavior.
What was previously described deals strictly with hate crimes. Acts of intolerance are a separate category for the University. The Office of Dean of Students (ODOS) is the primary office to handle these. According to the University, acts of intolerance are different from hate crimes in that they cannot be prosecuted because they don’t actually classify as crimes. It is the right of individuals under the First Amendment to speak out in any manner they choose without actually threatening or harming a particular individual or group of individuals. This can include inciting hatred towards a particular group through a speech or piece of writing, or it can also include yelling a racially-motivated slur at an individual. As long as there is no direct threat made to the individual nor any crime committed, the perpetrators are free to act in such a manner according to the University without being prosecuted. For those individuals who are victims of acts of intolerance, they can report it to the ODOS in a number of ways. One is by going online and reporting anonymously through the ODOS website. This is the least helpful as there is no way for the deans to be able to meet with the students and follow up on the incident. All they can really do is record it as a statistic and possibly in certain situations deal with the perpetrators if they are known. Victims of acts of intolerances can directly report it if they choose to not remain anonymous, and would like more direct action to be taken. They can do this online or by going in person to the ODOS. When this occurs, a similar process to that of hate crimes occurs in which the victims are called in for a meeting and asked for complete information and how they want the situation to be dealt with. Many times the individuals will want the perpetrators to be prosecuted with disciplinary action and/or dismissed from the University. However the University cannot formally take disciplinary action on the perpetrators. Instead they
call in the perpetrators if they are known and the dean has a similar meeting with them. The dean works as a mediator between both sides such that both sides do not have to formally face each other unless necessary. The dean will extensively talk to the perpetrators on their actions and try to educate them on why what they did was out of line and hurtful to others. At the end however, the perpetrator is free to go and no disciplinary action can be taken.

The process is somewhat similar at the dorms on campus. When I met with both Housing Directors A and B, they broke down the process of what happens when an act of intolerance or hate crime is reported in the dorms. Basically they both said that the incident is documented and reported to the police if necessary. Most times however, it will not be necessary to get the UIPD involved. Within 48 hours of the report, they try to get as much information as possible about the incident because they want to be as timely as possible. They form a group that comprises of the resident directors of the dorm where the incident occurred, the resident assistants, housing officials, area coordinators, a social justice specialist, the dean of students (most often Dean A), and other necessary agents. They then meet with the victim(s) and try to ascertain as much information as possible. They ask the victim(s) what happened, why it may have happened, what reparations they would like, etc. In that meeting, they also brainstorm ways to educate the perpetrators if they are known, how to educate the residential community about the incident, how to keep others inside and outside of the community from committing similar actions, and other items. Within those 48 hours they take all necessary actions possible to move onto the next phase, which is to find the perpetrator(s) and bring them in if they haven’t already brought them in. Most times however the perpetrator is
unknown. If they are able to find them, the perpetrators will have to go through a similar process of having to meet the housing director, dean of students, and other high ranking officials to discuss reparations and other consequences. If the incident is deemed to be an act of intolerance, the most disciplinary action that can be taken would be that of moving the perpetrators to another dorm, or just kicking them out of housing in totality, although this is very rare. Their main goal here is to educate the perpetrator(s). In addition, they also try to educate the residential community with consent from the victim(s) about what has happened and how to build understanding in order that similar happenings don’t occur in the future. They do this by sending letters to residents, utilizing bulletin boards, bringing in speakers, and holding interactive programs and discussions.

While I was interviewing Housing Director B, she described to me two separate, but similar incidents which occurred. In each of the incidents, a specific individual was targeted and derogatory items were written about them. In the first incident, a resident had the word “fag” written on his marker board that hung from his door. In the second incident, a staff member had derogatory items written about her on the floor she was living on. Both incidents were similar. However, both individuals took different approaches and wanted different outcomes. In the first case, the man didn’t care so much about the writing itself nor did he care about finding the perpetrator. He took pictures of the board, reported it to the appropriate people, and met with various senior housing officials. He wanted to use the incident to make it into a learning opportunity for others. After it happened, his dorm held seminars and sent out letters to the residents to inform them about why the incident was very derogatory. Their purpose was to build understanding amongst students and expose hatred for what it is. In the second incident,
the individual was targeted for her femininity, and she was genuinely concerned for her safety. She took the same steps by reporting the incident and meeting with various people. But she wanted to keep the incident as low key as possible. She just wanted to find the perpetrator and have the appropriate disciplinary action taken against them. So each individual hate crime or act of intolerance that occurs has a different outcome, whether in the dorms or on campus. The outcome is highly dependent on the victim(s), but each time it is a learning process for those involved as well as those who know about it.

All of my interviewees, however, did tell me that hate crimes are very uncommon on campus, and that acts of intolerance don’t occur too often either. This could mean however (although it is not necessary) that hate crimes and acts of intolerance are underreported. One of the reasons for this may be is that students don’t feel comfortable opening up when they have been victimized. Another is that they just don’t know the University system of reporting incidents that occur. Dean A as well as Housing Director B conveyed to me that these incidents have gone up since they began working here, and neither have been working at the University for more than five years. This may be because hate crimes and acts of intolerance are going up, or they may be because more and more students know how the process of reporting works, or they feel more comfortable reporting such things.

After I was done asking about the formal reporting process in each of my interviews, I was able to move on to inquire about their own personal thoughts and feelings on the different issues at hand. However, I had to be subtle when asking the deans. I couldn’t ask them outright how they felt, because I don’t think I would have
gotten a straight, un-biased response to my questions (reasons for my thinking will be explained later). Instead I asked them to describe particular incidents that have occurred on campus, and how the University has dealt with them. I was then able to ease in more subtle questions on how they viewed these incidents, and whether they felt that the University dealt with them appropriately or not.

Whilst interviewing Dean A, I asked her about the different issues on campus including the Palestine-Israel issue, the Chief issue, the “Tacos and Tequila” party, and other such items which dealt with racism and tensions between groups on campus. I started off by asking her about a famously controversial speaker who was brought to the University in 2003, Daniel Pipes. She hadn’t been here at the time, and she didn’t know much about the speaker, so I explained to her that Daniel Pipes is a right-wing conservative Christian in support of Israel and very critical of Islam and Muslims. I told her that he is widely known for being controversial and many Muslims feel that he incites hatred towards them through his writings and speeches. I also told her that he is widely supported by Israelis and Zionists. To this, she responded that she didn’t know the reasons that he had been brought down on campus and what the administration discussed amongst themselves and with student groups when he was brought down. She did say however that it was the right of the student group, IPAC (Israeli Public Affairs Committee), to bring him down and for him to speak. She also said that it is the right of pro-Palestinian groups to bring speakers down who would counter somebody like Daniel Pipes and give their own viewpoints. I then pointed out to her that there was a film entitled “Paradise Now”, which the Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR) at UIUC was showing in 2006 at the Illini Union. However, on the day of the screening, the
Illini Union Board decided to cancel the film in the eleventh hour, due to students who had come to complain about the film and that it incited violence against Jews. This would seem like an obvious double standard and would contradict Dean A’s earlier statement that pro-Palestinian groups could bring in speakers or have similar events to show the other side of the debate. To this she responded that she didn’t know about this event either, and that it might have been an isolated event in which the Illini Union Board did not adequately know a procedure to follow and had hastily cancelled the screening. This actually does turn out to be true since the screening was cancelled last minute, and an apology was issued to CAIR later on by the Board. In addition, the film was allowed to be shown the following semester.

As the interview kept going, we moved on to discuss the “Tacos and Tequila” party which was a social exchange between a fraternity and sorority on campus in which members of both organizations came dressed up in farmers’ and gardeners’ outfits stereotypical of Latinos in the country. Some also came dressed up as pregnant women and with the Mexican flag draped over themselves. In response, Latino organizations on campus, as well as STOP (Students Transforming Oppression and Privilege) and other minority organizations responded to this event by holding protests and meeting with Chancellor Romano and other administration members to discuss why the event was derogatory and racist. When I was discussing the incident with Dean A, she mentioned that she did indeed believe that the party was racist and stereotypical, but she posed the following rhetorical questions: “When students hold events such as these, are they fully aware and do they truly recognize the underlying notions of these types of events? Are they fully aware of the repercussions of their actions? Are they even aware whether their
actions might be racist and derogatory?” Indeed it does seem that many students are just ignorant and do things seemingly out of fun to go along with the majority. This party was one of those instances for many. Although this party, when looked at from a proper context, looks obviously derogatory to many, it may not have seemed so for many members of both organizations at the time. It may have been uncomfortable for some, and some even recognized that it was derogatory, but because of the atmosphere and majority mindset, nobody spoke out right away to protest it. And indeed nobody recognized the major consequences that would ensue. This shows the need to educate students about sensitivity issues such as these. Many students and many people are just ignorant when it comes to these issues. They do not overtly try to be racist, but it just comes off that way and as a result it creates tension and animosity. This is not to say that there aren’t overtly racist individuals out there. Plenty of these kinds of people do exist unfortunately, and they close themselves off to wanting to understand other cultures and other groups of people. The leaders of both organizations came out and apologized for their actions, although one side still did not see what they had done wrong. Both organizations however did express the interest in being educated, although one can question whether they truly wanted to be educated or whether they just felt pressured to succumb because of all the negative attention. I had asked Dean A about whether she felt the University handled this particular situation appropriately or not. I will touch upon her response later on in my paper.

When talking to Dean B, I was not able to have as long of an interview with him because of his time schedule. Because of this, I was not able to delve into specific examples with him. We briefly talked about the “Tacos and Tequila” party, and he
actually gave pretty much the same response as Dean A by stating that many of the
students probably did not understand the implications of the party, and that there was a
need for education. He also mentioned the Office of Civil Rights in the Department of
Education which works with the Office of Dean of Students and the Office of Conflict
Resolution to ensure that the University’s policies are fair and in line with the court
system. They have had influence in the past to help educate administration members and
level out the playing field for minorities. Other than this, I did not get much of a chance
to speak to him more, nor do I think he wanted to discuss the issues any further.

Housing Directors A and B were more open with their answers, especially
Housing Director B. When I asked them what facilitates racism on campus and why acts
of intolerance and incidents such as the “Tacos and Tequila” party occur, they both
answered that there are multiple factors, one of the main ones being the lack of education.
Housing Director A said, “This is a small college town. Most students feel safe here.
They don’t have to worry about their safety so much as they would in other cities. The
problem though with it being a small college town is that people come in from all over,
but not too many people are educated culturally and this is why ignorant events like
Tacos and Tequila occur.” He went on to say that there are different programs at the
dorms to combat this such as bringing in outside speakers and having flyers passed out to
educate the students, but at the end, it is up to the student and how willing he or she is to
learn. He said that they work very hard in the housing community to promote an
environment of understanding and awareness. When asked about his feelings on the
different issues that surround campus, he was very open in giving his personal opinion.
He said that issues like the “Tacos and Tequila” party were very difficult issues for the
University to deal with. He said that he felt that the incident was investigated thoroughly and that everybody did what they could. It was a learning process in which opinions were voiced and people were educated. About the Chief issue, he said that he was against having the Chief around, and that he was finally happy that the University had taken steps to get rid of it. He also stated that he could understand both sides of the issue, and that it was something that a lot of students were passionately fighting for on both sides, but in the end, it was the socially right thing to do.

Housing Director B was definitely a lot more open about her answers. She said that she felt she was working at the University to create a socially just environment. For her, this past year had been a very exciting time with all of the different incidents occurring with the demand of the return of the Chief regalia by the Oglala Sioux tribe, the actual riddance of the Chief, the “Tacos and Tequila” party, and other such incidents. She felt that the Chief issue had polarized the student body. The gates to educating both sides had been open, but neither side was really taking advantage in doing so. Those gates were closed after the Chief was taken away. She said that the majority of students only wanted to see their views and not truly open themselves up and learn about the other side. In addition, she commented about the “Tacos and Tequila” party. “The timing of the party was an amazing coincidence because of how much it charged up the student body. With all these different happenings occurring, it’s been a very static year in which the student body mobilized and demanded action from the University. Things are getting better for those who feel marginalized on this campus, but at the same time it’s creating a tenser atmosphere.” She also said that she felt that this is the right time for students to keep going and stay proactive. “Now is the most opportune time for new policies to be
put into place and students to be educated. How awesome would it be if we could educate next year’s freshmen and just hit them with awareness.”

As can be noted, my interviews with the deans were quite different from the ones with the housing directors. In both of my interviews with Deans A and B, I felt that they really cared about upholding the University system and strongly defending the University, even if it seemed wrong or may not have been in line with their own personal views. Their answers seemed to be unbiased, but at the same time mechanical, and very defensive of the system. The problem that I felt was that both deans showed too much comfort with the current system and the fact that acts of intolerance are tolerated, for lack of a better word. I understand and agree with the need to be unbiased towards all groups, and to show the same fairness toward everybody, although this topic can be debated as to the exact neutrality when it comes to the administration and the University. However, I feel disconcerted about the fact that acts of intolerance can be protected under the First Amendment and allowed to persist. An individual should not have to fear for his or her safety when a racially-motivated slur is yelled at them and nothing can be done to the perpetrator except that they are called in, asked to apologize at their own will, and let go. This is something that is tolerated within the University, but not in the real world. An example of this is when Don Imus was fired from his radio show for making racial remarks about the women’s basketball team at Rutgers University. Granted that NBC and CBS were pressured into taking his radio show off the air and wanted to protect their own vested interests of not losing their audience, it still shows that these types of acts of intolerance will not be tolerated. Unfortunately, there is a lot of gray area about the current system that is in place at the University, and not any single item can be
pinpointed to account for the flaws. Dean A herself said that there is a need for the system to be reviewed and changed. Although she didn’t point anything out specifically besides the technique for marketing the system and letting students know that there is a system in place for them to report hate crimes and acts of intolerance, she did subtly point out that there are flaws in the system. This goes back to the point that I made at the very beginning that America doesn’t have a perfect system, nor does the University. It is impossible to appease all sides, but more things can be done to show fairness to the students and to level the playing field. When I asked Dean A about the “Tacos and Tequila” incident and what she felt the administration could do better to alleviate tensions on campus, I was surprised to hear her respond, “It needs to start from the top down. Diversity needs to be incorporated into the institution and the administration needs to actually listen to what its students are saying. If the administration takes on the opinion that it needs to appease only a few students who are complaining just to silence them, then we are wrong. The administration needs to wholeheartedly take on these issues and show genuine interest and care when listening to students. Too often these students feel marginalized and frustrated with the administration because it just doesn’t care. That is something that needs to change.” When I asked each of my interviewees about what the students can do on campus to break down the barriers and build the bridges, surprisingly they all had very similar answers. They said that the students need to get out there and take charge. They need to work in order to see results. Being passive doesn’t help anyone. They need to get out and educate each other, and the surrounding community. But it seems that this is exactly what the student body did this year. By taking the issues that were important to them, they were able to confront the University administration and
show everyone that change is possible. Actions like these do show that the system needs that change. It won’t always be perfect, but it moves society towards equality in which the marginalized feel like they are finally being heard.