Student activists: First-hand accounts

By JORGE TENA ’12
Contributing Writer

The resistance regarding funding of the Tar Sands protests felt by student activists comes from a fundamentally different interpretation of school policies and political activism between the College Administration and College Council and student activists. To us, student activists, it is clear that an overwhelming majority of the Williams community is, if not outright politically apathetic, generally disengaged from important political issues. Furthermore, had we not received financial support through private donations, the participation in this event would have been limited to wealthy individuals capable of procuring and financing their own transportation. The change in the political climate of our community (evidenced by the takeover of Hardy House, the rallies in solidarity with Egypt, Palestine, and Mexico, and the participation of Williams students at Occupy Wall Street and the Tar Sands protest) is attributable to the gradual recognition by the community that the Purple Bubble – as an insurmountable utopia – is an illusion and is fraud that we must challenge through political activism. Our hope is for the rest of the community to get on board with this movement and recognize political activism as an academic and civic necessity that is in accord with the College’s mission that an “education at Williams should not be regarded as a privilege destined to create further privilege, but as a privilege that creates opportunities to serve society at large, and imposes the responsibility to do so.”

Here are some student perspectives:

Carrie Tribble ’13
Why is Occupy Wall Street meaningful to you?

Occupy Wall Street is at the forefront of political activism in our generation. It is changing the way we think about protesting and elements of the Wall Street movement have reverberated through various other movements. What lessons have you learned about social change and social justice through this experience?

Social change is hard. I knew this before I became involved with OWS, but seeing all of the organization in place made me realize recognize the depth of structure necessary to hold together diverse people pursuing similar goals.

A newspaper dedicated to social issues and critical thought

Center looks toward new model for diversity

By THE MCC STAFF

The MCC, like many cultural centers across the US, has been feeling the need to change for quite some time now. This step forward by no means implies that what came before was insufficient or without merit. On the contrary, the foundation of support and advocacy provided by cultural centers for students from underrepresented backgrounds is what helped many colleges and universities—especially Williams—reach their demographic diversity goals. Yet while colleges can claim diversity statistically, there is very little evidence that meaningful interactions across identities are actually occurring.

In 2007, a political scientist named Robert Putnam published a paper that turned the whole world of cultural relations on its head by questioning the relevance of two major theories: the contact hypothesis and the conflict theory in inter-ethnic relations. According to contact hypothesis, distrust will decline as members of different groups get to know and interact with each other. On the other hand, the conflict theory suggests that distrust between groups will increase with a more diverse setting, while solidarity within groups will increase. What Putnam found was that neither phenomenon was occurring in today’s colleges; instead, people of all races, [sexualities, socio-economic classes, religions] and ages were simply hunkering down into their “turtle shells.” Even more disturbing, the lack of meaningful engagement across our differences and similarities impacted one’s trust in their government, political efficacy, the expectation that others can collaborate to solve social dilemmas, whether one will participate in community service or philanthropy, and even one’s life satisfaction. Multicultural centers across the country have played a significant role in the diversity work that has been done in the spirit of both theories. On the one hand, they have been meant to facilitate contact between majority and minority students; on the other, they have been intended as sites for affinity group cohesion. However, while centers became safe spaces for students who would not have been welcomed on these campuses, the greater campus community did not become as inclusive as had been envisioned. Events and initiatives tended to attract the same small group of committed individuals, year after year; affinity groups and their programming thrived, but often in isolation and viewed solely as extracurricular. This perception is ancillary to the central mission of the institution.

We aspire to experiment with a new model of diversity and inclusion, drawing on the successes of the MCC, but also learning from the shortcomings associated with what Putnam shows to be flawed assumptions. The identity exploration we hope to inspire is not just for students of color, internationals or low-income students. We must demand that the weight. We must demand that the in-between and the overrepresented bear some responsibility in changing the landscape of how we interact across our differences, so that we can achieve more than statistical diversity. We need all of you to engage, to take a look in the mirror and be open to being changed by it. After all, changing isn’t easy, but it is absolutely necessary.

Do we need affinity groups on campus?

Assessing the social honor code debate

Hate Crime Statement

Some may argue that we are losing sight of our main mission by serving the campus as a whole rather than continuing to focus only on underrepresented groups. We disagree. We recognize that the historical burden of equity and inclusion cannot continue to be carried by a few. We must distribute the weight. We must demand that the in-between and the overrepresented bear some responsibility in changing the landscape of how we interact across our differences, so that we can achieve more than statistical diversity. We need all of you to engage, to take a look in the mirror and be open to being changed by it. After all, changing isn’t easy, but it is absolutely necessary.
“Community” is a trendy topic these days, having replaced “diversity” on the tips of tongues of students, faculty and administration alike. We at Williams are diligent about preserving our community; we avoid any exclusive or divisive events or programs, especially those associated with the Minority Coalition (MinCo). Some feel that campus affinity groups do more harm than good — that they actually increase racial or other tension on campus.

Dr. James Sidanius, professor of psychology and African American Studies at Harvard University, explores this notion in his book The Diversity Challenge — Social Identity and Intergroup Relations on the College Campus. He surmises that affinity groups increase racial tension in that they increase perception of discrimination and ethnic victimization. At the same time, however, Sida- nius also concludes that there are some benefits to “self-segregation,” with some members of minority student groups finding it useful in adjusting to college life and achieving academically.

So affinity groups do cause racial tension.

Affinity groups can increase racial tension because members of these groups tend to perceive more racial discrimination. Affinity group members also tend to exhibit more in-group favoritism. However, it is important to note that in-group favoritism does not necessarily translate to out-group hatred. A lot of prejudices and stereotypes stem from misconceptions and lack of understanding, which is why inter-group contact is encouraged. Contact is most effective in less-structured, one-on-one situations or smaller group settings, as these tend to be the least intimidating.

Should racial affinity groups be taking all the blame for racial tensions on campus?

Of course racial affinity groups are more visible, simply because they are comprised of individuals who may not look, dress or speak like the typical college student. But aren’t sport teams and other student organizations also responsible for fostering racial tensions, as they are predominantly comprised of white middle or upper-class students? Like affinity groups, these other student organizations also add to the racial tensions on campus and perpetuate social status hierarchies.

If not to stir up racial tension and divide the campus, then what is the purpose of affinity groups such as the BSU?

Affinity groups such as the BSU serve as identity-affirming institutions. According to social identity theory, successful in-group favoritism — and consequently positive identity-affirmation — enhances self-esteem. Sida- nius concludes from his research that black participants who had mostly black friends exhibited enhanced acade- mic motivation and commitment, by the end of their college career. However, these results are not the same for all affinity groups. Latino students with predominantly Latino friends exhibited reduced feelings of belonging and poorer academic performance.

So then is there a need for these affinity groups. Getting rid of them won’t get rid of racial tensions?

Precisely. The underlying factor to racial tension on campus is the perceived social hierarchy — with white students at the top of the totem pole, followed by Asian students, then blacks and Latinos consistently in last place. If we want to reduce racial tension, we must foster hi- erarchy-attenuating institutions, which Sidanius believes is the overall function of college campuses. Williams College is a small, private, predominantly white college. That a majority of the students are white is not the issue, it’s the type of students we have – students who are either unaware of their privilege, or who are over-aware and want to maintain their privileged status. Williams oper- ates as a hierarchy-enhancing institution. Consequently, many minority students graduate with a bitter taste in their mouths, and are more cynical and prejudiced than when they entered college. We celebrate being the top lib- eral arts college in the country, but what does being number-one actually mean?

OWS made me look at Williams, and our efforts at community building, in a new way. The Occupy Wall Street protests are all about creating community and integrating diverse needs and desires. I think we have a lot to learn from this movement in that sense.

What lessons have you learned about social change and justice?

It took 10-15 people to organize these protests. When you have 5% of the student body to go to Washington DC, that is really powerful. Outside [of Wil- liams], this was one of the biggest envi- ronmental activist demonstrations ever in Washington DC.

What would you like to tell your fellow Williams students about the protest you attended?

The issue, the specifics of the envi- ronmental issue, is important, but the most important thing about this is that a lot of people took this seriously enough to act on it. Find a problem you think needs to be fixed, and then try to find a way to fix it.

What have you learned about yourself from this experience?

I’ve learned that I am more com- fortable with challenging things. I am more rooted in my principles than I initially thought and I didn’t care if people looked at me conde--scendingly. A hundred people did go from Williams, but 1900 also didn’t go.

I had work to do, but I value so- cial change more than schoolwork. My priority is social change rather than schoolwork. My professional trajectory is meaningless if there is nothing to fight for.
Exploring the social honor code debate

By JORGE TENA ’12
Contributing Writer

Two students discuss the relevance of a social honor code to deal with issues of discrimination on campus:

Student One: I don’t feel that the Williams community is committed to ensuring the ability of individuals to express their personal religious or political views, to feel comfortable with the color of their skin or the amount of money in their wallets, or to express their sexuality.

If the school is truly committed to ending issues of discrimination, we should have an honor code that establishes our moral and ethical stance and that allows for the processing of complaints and the issuing of punishments against those who act against our shared community values.

Student Two: I agree with your first point. One just has to look at the incident timeline documented by the MCC to know that year after year there are grave issues of discrimination on campus. Just last year, for example, the RASAN posters were vandalized.

But do you really think that embarking on an institutional “witch-hunt” against discrimination will improve the situation? I think that establishing punishments would only discourage uncomfortable but vital conversations about sensitive issues from taking place. Students would be too afraid of speaking their mind in case they come off as being insensitive.

Student One: But surely you will agree that vandalism motivated by discrimination, or usage of the n-word, for example, are hateful and not protected by our respect for freedom of speech. Having a complaint procedure that is transparent and representative would allow the campus to be aware of issues of discrimination and could prompt even more healthy discussion. Our collective values as a community would be established on a case-by-case basis. The honor code need not be specific enough so as to alienate anyone.

Student Two: We already have a case-by-case procedure. When an issue of discrimination arises on campus enough to rile emotion, students organize and demonstrate. Claiming Williams, for example, was the product of student mobilization against the case of a student writing the n-word on the wall in a common room in Willy-E. Our collective values, as you rightly indicate, are manifested and represented when an event gathers the community against a particular incident, as demonstrated by our solidarity, public discussion, and demonstration against discrimination such as the Stand With Us movement that created Claiming Williams.

Student One: I still think it is important to have an honor code that establishes our commitment against discrimination. It would not only be a symbolic achievement, but it would ensure that individuals are held accountable for their actions.

These two students are debating whether communal values and individual accountability are best achieved through a bottom-up or top-down approach. According to Student One, a judicial body should uphold the collective sentiment of the campus and would allow for an efficient processing of complaints. Student Two, on the other hand, believes that communal values are inherently expressed by individuals in response to incidents of discrimination, and that the centralization of power to a certain group of people reduces diversity of beliefs. Neither opinion is entirely wrong or right. What do you think?
have an opinion on social issues on/off campus? Write/Draw/Create Faculty/Sta Students
Submit by December 9, 2011 to insightwilliams@gmail.com to appear in the February issue

November Happenings

11/16 Social Change film series: Stand&Deliver: 7 p.m., Paresky Auditorium Coming Out...Going Home 8 p.m., Jenness Anything But Straight in Athletics 9 p.m., Jenness

11/17 "Just Sit" secural meditation noon, Hardy House Ballet Folklorico Mexicano: 7 p.m., Goodrich Hall Open Mic continuation 7 p.m., Paresky

11/18 VISTA/SoCA Heritage Party, 10 p.m., Spencer House


11/22 Latinos at Williams: panel with faculty, staff and community members, 5 p.m., Rice House

11/23 Latino Heritage Month dinner, 5 p.m., Mission
Speaker Rick Doblin speaks on Marijuana policy 7 p.m.

Change is inevitable
It doesn’t mean the past has to be forgettable
Change can mean conducting an internal investigation
Digging for clues of premeditated thinking
Comparing presumed facts, with new findings
Leading to a foreign talk, something you felt was exclusive
Illusive to your train of thought,
Consciously you will resist this new outfit
Slowly understanding thoughtful,
forward-moving change is a prophet
A piece of capital used to rebuild
culture, people, institutions, goals and opportunities
All are subjected to this living probability
as nothing stays the same
Only to get better or worse with age
Change is constant, will you accept this person?

The Center’s Response to Hate

The hate crime that occurred this past weekend is certainly a deplorable act that will not be tolerated by the majority of our community—that was made clear on Monday when approximately 1000 members gathered together in solidarity. The crime is also a symptom of a much larger problem within our campus and society at large, namely a Culture of Silence and a general lack of awareness regarding issues of discrimination, prejudice, and sexual violence. The stories we heard from brave members of our community highlighted the fact that the hate graffiti was merely a culmination of daily experiences of micro and macro aggressions, among and between, students, staff and faculty.

We, the Center Staff, ask that the community focus not only on the blatant issues of intolerance and violence that arose a couple of times a year, but on the more subtle and systemic ones that serve as catalysts.

Are activism and the academy mutually exclusive or interrelated?

I definitely think there is a relationship between activism and the academy. For me, as an American Studies scholar, there is a historical relationship between activism and research in the fact that the early American Studies practitioners (like me) were able to reformulate their research methods as new and revolutionary. In this sense they were activists ‘within’ the academy, but also outside of it because the topics they studied had been either marginalized or understudied by other scholars.

For instance, Henry Nash Smith’s "Virgin Land" looked at sources from the 19th century to recast how we might understand both those cultural texts and the history of their production, circulation, and reception during the 19th century. In many ways his approaches, and those of other scholars in the so-called “Myth & Symbol school” of American Studies were activists because they were calling into question how American history, society, and culture had and could be studied--and by extension American Studies became a very self-reflexive field that continues to be in dialogue with how culture and politics work “outside” the Academy.

Native American Studies, as a field of knowledge, has a more explicit political activist origin related to the Red Power movement during the late 1960s and early 1970s, where there was a demand for more research, resources, and courses within the academy concerning Native American history. In both examples, we can see how activism and the academy can be interrelated and also mutually constitutive.

I am very committed to maintaining and promoting Native American Studies as its own interdisciplinary field of knowledge, which I think is not only essential to the future of the Academy but also the wider world in the U.S. and beyond.

Faculty Spotlight

American Culture

by: Kiara Vigil, PhD - Bolin Fellow

Briefly describe your work and the reasons you choose to pursue it?

My research, broadly, focuses on the intersection of methodologies from American Studies and Native American Studies. I have been interested in recuperating an early cohort of Native public intellectuals. Many of these figures were integral to late 19th and early 20th century policy debates and cultural production. They have left us key texts that help us to re-imagine American cultural history in regards to Native American people as individuals, as citizens, and of course also as Indians. Unfortunately, these figures have remained on the margins of U.S. history and also mis-characterized as either assimilationists or accommodators by many, if not all, scholars within Native American Studies.

My passion for this type of work grew out of a personal and less academic journey I took while driving cross-country over ten years ago. On this trip I visited the Sisseton-Wahpeton Reservation in South Dakota where my grandmother was born and raised. She left S. Dakota in the 1920s to move to Los Angeles with many members of her family in order to find new economic opportunities. Along with her father and brother many of my ancestors ended up working in the Hollywood film industry and for Walt Disney world as “Indian performers.”

This personal journey of witnessing first-hand the structural inequalities of the past and present regarding the relationship between the U.S. Federal government and Indian people, along with the particular histories of my own family, greatly influenced the type of academic interests that I have.

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The Center for Social Change

The Center for Social Change is why, in the Fall of 2012, our name will evolve from the Multicultural Center to...

advocacy and activism should be the foundation of our work. We hope that from...