Subject: Halloween at Colby
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<x-flowed>Dear Colleagues:

I write you as other recipients of the students’ accounts of social events on campus this weekend. I am sure you share my dismay at the reports of SPBs weekend comedy act, which apparently involved recycling the most disgraceful and tired racial stereotypes in the service of “humor,” and the reports that some staff and students also couldn’t come up with Halloween costumes that did not involve racial insult or (at best) insensitivity. I wasn’t there and did not personally witness these things, but I know the students who described them and I trust them. They are mature and rational people, who let a lot of things go by without losing their balance, and who often take the time to educate when they see a problem.

I am so saddened for these students and so angry that, once again, they have to be distracted from their education to deal with such affronts. How about if, just this once, the institution didn’t leave it to the injured parties to demand their own redress from a largely indifferent white majority group?

I have written to Bro and Jim Terhune to say that there simply must be a strong and unequivocal and meaningful response to this from the administration. And I don’t mean sending everyone an email that states that we will not tolerate such things, because clearly we will. Indeed, apparently we will PAY people to bring such vile ideas to our campus. It is long past time for the senior administration to be visibly in solidarity with the students who have to deal with such affronts in milder forms every day. I hope that if you agree and have time, that you will communicate with them as well.

I am also, frankly, furious that this kind of thing completely negates the collective effort that we and many of our colleagues make to help make this campus more welcoming and safe for students of color. Most of us do this work in addition to full loads of teaching, scholarly, and administrative work, and while it is very meaningful to us, it is also exhausting. Many of us also teach about these topics, work for which we are frequently devalued and dismissed, in the grand invocation of the need for more "rigor" at Colby. And why should many of us come out on a Sunday night to recruiting dinners for prospective students of color, when we have real qualms about
what will happen to them if they enroll? Many of you were there, of course. How do we square what happened this weekend with what Richard Uchida said to those visitors last weekend? Will Colby "commit to them" and "invest in them" as he so eloquently claimed? How can we expect them to reach their tremendous potential in such a hostile climate?

Many of us also go to a lot of trouble to program (or to attend) extra-curricular events that will help educate everyone on campus about these issues, including, for example, a talk and a luncheon with Dr. David Pilgrim last Wednesday/Thursday, two presentations that dealt explicitly with exactly these kinds of racial insults in our popular and political culture, and on college campuses. His talks attracted large and attentive audiences, and yet the very next day, a hired performer is making "jokes" about the alleged sexual prowess of black men and personally degrading Latina students, while other members of the community are walking around in afro wigs or sombreros or carrying nooses? WHAT!?

I personally asked Kelly Wharton to invite SPB members to come to these events. Were any SPB members at Pilgrim's talks? I don't know, but somehow they have not gotten the message about respecting all members of the community, despite quite clear and heartfelt explanations of why previous events have been upsetting to students who have felt their cultures were being mocked by SPB events. Who is in charge of hiring performers and how could they have gone so egregiously wrong in this case? And after last year's Cinco de Mayo events, how could anybody think dressing as a "Mexican" for Halloween was okay?

I am ashamed of Colby right this minute. I argue that we cannot let this go by, and cannot leave it to the students of color and their allies to try to resolve it. The students will no doubt have their say, but it is essential that we become involved in generating an appropriate and unequivocal response to the entire campus, and that we put pressure on the administration to do so as well. I know none of us has time for this. But this makes me absolutely sick. I am looking for help and ideas about what we can do that will have some meaning and effect. Maybe it is time to cancel classes and have a teach-in?

Please circulate this to anybody else you think will share our concern.
Margaret
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