

Learn by Neglect:
A History of Cal Poly's Stance
on Campus Racial Climate

Salar Malik
History 303: Research and Writing Seminar in History
March 17th, 2016

On the eve of the 12th of November, 2015, one hundred and thirty students gathered to protest the erection of a “Free Speech wall on Cal Poly’s famed Dexter Lawn.”¹ Put together by the Cal Poly Republicans, the initially blank wall was designed to uphold the value and principle of free speech, however the wall quickly turned into a flashpoint for controversy as students took the opportunity to fill the wall with words of hate and degradation explicitly directed towards the LGBTQ, African-American, and the Muslim communities. The series of events which followed included multiple protests, several forums, and a presentation of a manifesto of demands, all over what? The construction of a crudely put together wood base with a piece of white poster paper nailed to it? No, this was an issue of bigotry, hate, and more importantly the issue of how Cal Poly’s administration was going to respond.

The issue of racism is not a new one at Cal Poly, this is evidenced by the seemingly perennial campus incidents of racism, which are always followed by student outrage, and of course a lackluster response from administration. The “Free Speech wall,” incident is predated by other incidents such as the presentation of a noose and Confederate flag on campus housing,² the creation of an inflammatory fraternity party,³ and the list goes on and on. The purpose of this paper is not to investigate the reaction of Cal Poly students and faculty to these incidents of hate, or to psycho-analyze the reasoning of the perpetrators of these incidents. Rather the purpose of this paper is to pose the question: what has Cal Poly’s administration done over the years to address this? Each one of the aforementioned incidents was followed by an almost robotic offering of condolences for the offended parties, but nothing substantial or permanent. The

¹ Nick Wilson, "Cal Poly Students Protest 'hurtful' Remarks on Republican Club's 'Free Speech Wall'." The Tribune. November 12, 2016. Accessed February 01, 2016. <http://www.sanluisobispo.com/news/local/article44582163.html>

² "Sowing Hate." New Times SLO. October 30, 2008. Accessed February 27, 2016. <http://www.newtimeslo.com/news/1267/sowing-hate/>.

³ Julia Hickey, "'Colonial Bros and Nava-Hos' Frat Party Prompts Cal Poly Investigation." The Tribune. November 20, 2013. Accessed February 01, 2016. <http://www.sanluisobispo.com/news/local/education/article39461634.html>.

nearly continual existence of racial flare-ups on campus, is like clock-work, followed by the lackluster response that leaves minorities wondering if their campus administration actually has their best interests at heart. So the question persists, do they?

The history of hate speech and bigotry falling under the protective umbrella of free speech, is by no stretch of the imagination a new issue or history, however it has become more of an issue in recent years due to the increasing demands of students to see more work done by campuses in stemming the expression of bigoted remarks. Some Universities, such as the University of California Berkeley have taken up stronger positions on the regulation of what sort of statements are permissible, and what sort of statements are impermissible, due to political incorrectness.⁴ Such measures are often times pointed to as the clear example of what not to do from a campus perspective. Cal Poly has not only demonstrated a sort of laissez faire policy when it comes to responding to campus incidents of hate, but they have allowed a sort of campus administrative apathy to exist. As evidenced by nearly every hate incident in the last few years, the campus response has been present, yet the administrative response remains non-existent.

Near the end of October, the discovery of a Confederate flag and noose outside a Cal Poly crop house, shook the foundation of campus climate. The Crop houses are housing units that are not only affiliated with the University, but are considered an extension of the dormitory housing units, essentially establishing that this crop house which presented a Confederate flag, and a noose, was considered under the jurisdiction of campus.⁵ The presentation of a noose and Confederate flag, both clear signs of hate that, were acts that were clearly reprehensible but ultimately unassailable, as best articulated by John Peterson, head of the Department of

⁴ Robby Soave, "The University of California's Insane Speech Police." The Daily Beast. June 22, 2015. Accessed February 6, 2016. <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/06/22/the-university-of-california-s-insane-speech-police.html>.

⁵ "Sowing Hate." New Times SLO. October 30, 2008. Accessed February 27, 2016. <http://www.newtimeslo.com/news/1267/sowing-hate/>.

Horticulture and Crop Science, who said “there are limits to what can be done. There are free speech rights.”⁶ The Crops House incident became an issue of “free speech rights,” as Cal Poly administration also hunkered down on the statements John Peterson, that taking action against the students would be against the first amendment. The decision to not take action resulted in even greater backlash towards the university as hundreds of Cal Poly students and faculty gathered in the University Union plaza to one protest the act of presenting the flag and noose, but to also protest the lack of action being taken.⁷ Despite stiff opposition to the lack of response, Cal Poly administration did not budge in their decision to not prosecute the students involved in the Crop House incident, and instead allowed the situation to die down on its own, with the emphasis that this incident was an anomaly, and not the norm for Cal Poly culture.

On the 15th of November, in 2013, approximately 60 Cal Poly students took part in a Fraternity sponsored off-campus party titled “Colonial Bros and Nava-Hoes.”⁸ The response to this event was an outcry from Cal Poly’s American Indian and Indigenous Faculty and Staff Association, who called on the university to condemn the party and the racist undertones it brought with it. Not only this, but the party was also offensive as it degraded women on a whole scale with its party name. The result from the outcry was a mixed response on campus, as some students weren’t convinced that the party was even racist, based on intent. Cal Poly students reacted with statements like “Personally, I don’t think it was meant to be racist,” or “There are a lot more offensive themes out there, especially during Halloween,”⁹ These types of responses

⁶ "Sowing Hate." New Times SLO. October 30, 2008. Accessed February 27, 2016. <http://www.newtimeslo.com/news/1267/sowing-hate/>.

⁷ Jon, "Hundreds Protest, College Claims Acts Protected." Mustang News. October 31, 2008. Accessed February 01, 2016. <http://mustangnews.net/hundredsprotestcollegeclaimsactsprotected>.

⁸ Julia Hickey, "'Colonial Bros and Nava-Hos' Frat Party Prompts Cal Poly Investigation." The Tribune. November 20, 2013. Accessed February 01, 2016.

⁹ Julia Hickey, "'Colonial Bros and Nava-Hos' Frat Party Prompts Cal Poly Investigation." The Tribune. November 20, 2013. Accessed February 01, 2016.

although not indicative of the entire campus, demonstrated that there was a divide over whether there should be anguish at this sort of language, or these sorts of actions. The administration responded with a statement of condemnation of the party with President Armstrong saying “Let us be clear, events like these have no place in the Cal Poly community and are not reflective of the principles of The Mustang Way...” also adding that his administration will “focus on supporting those who feel negatively affected by this event and helping those who created the event understand and repair the damage it has caused.”¹⁰ The reaction to this incident actually was not contained within the confines of Cal Poly’s campus, and actually made national headlines, in an article by the Huffington Post, citing fraternities staging offensive parties across the country.¹¹ With the recognition of this fraternity party reaching national recognition, the Cal Poly administration doubled-down on its previous statements that they would work to help the affected parties.¹² The idea that the issue of derogatory remarks or statements being something that only the “offended,” parties should care about demonstrates a lack of admittance by both members of Cal Poly’s general campus and by Cal Poly’s administration, as simply working to console the “hurt,” parties does nothing to address a possible culture problem on campus.

Two years after the “Colonial Bros & Nava-hoes,” incident, the ugly head of discriminatory hate reared its head on Cal Poly’s campus yet again, but this time in the form of a “Free Speech wall.” The “Free Speech wall,” was an event sponsored by the Cal Poly Republicans club in an attempt to check back against what they saw as a nationwide trend

¹⁰ Julia Hickey, "Colonial Bros and Nava-Hos' Frat Party Prompts Cal Poly Investigation." The Tribune. November 20, 2013. Accessed February 01, 2016.

¹¹ Tyler Kingkade, "Randolph-Macon Frat Caught Hosting 'USA vs. Mexico' Party." The Huffington Post. November 22, 2013. Accessed February 12, 2016. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/11/22/randolph-macon-frat-mexican-party_n_4323837.html.

¹² Hannah Croft, "Cal Poly Gains National Attention for "Colonial Bros and Nava-hos" Party - Mustang News." Mustang News. November 22, 2013. Accessed February 10, 2016. <http://mustangnews.net/cal-poly-gains-national-attention-for-colonial-bros-and-nava-hos-party/>.

towards political correctness at the expense of free speech. The effort backfired as the wall became a canvas for all manners of hate speech, with derogatory remarks towards Muslim, LGBTQ, and Black communities all being presented on the wall.¹³ The result was a late night protest against the free speech wall, a condemnation of what was written on the free speech wall, along with a condemnation of the campus climate from where those remarks came from.¹⁴ The administration response to this event was a response that has almost become characteristic of the administration, with Vice President Humphrey “We have work to do. We need to be better... we knew this as a community before (the wall) went up, (and) we know it now.”¹⁵ The campus reaction to the administration response, was the formation of a reactionary student group called “SLO Solidarity,” which held a rally in the University Union plaza to protest the lack of “proper response from administration.”¹⁶ SLO Solidarity brought forward a list of demands, with a central thrust demanding administration provide a stronger engagement within the climate of Cal Poly, so that events like the “Free Speech wall,” do not resurface on Cal Poly’s campus again.

From 2008 to 2015, from the Crop house incident to the Colonial Bros & Nava-hoes,” fraternity party, to the more recent “Free Speech wall,” incident, there is a clear pattern of campus hate, being followed with a lackluster response from campus leading to a lack of long term addressing of the problem. The obvious question from these instances becomes what can Cal Poly administration do to address the issue of a negative campus climate which elicits hate

¹³ Wilson, Nick. "Cal Poly Students Protest 'hurtful' Remarks on Republican Club's 'Free Speech Wall'." The Tribune. November 12, 2016. Accessed February 01, 2016.

¹⁴ Benjy Egel, "Students Gather to Protest Hate Speech on Campus - Mustang News." Mustang News. November 12, 2015. Accessed February 6, 2016. <http://mustangnews.net/students-gather-protest-hate-speech-campus/>.

¹⁵ Benjy Egel, "Students Gather to Protest Hate Speech on Campus - Mustang News." Mustang News. November 12, 2015. Accessed February 6, 2016. <http://mustangnews.net/students-gather-protest-hate-speech-campus/>.

¹⁶ Naba Ahmed, "SLO Solidarity Movement Takes Charge - Mustang News." Mustang News. November 18, 2015. Accessed February 12, 2016. <http://mustangnews.net/slo-solidarity-movement-takes-charge/>.

every few years? What is a “response?” These questions must further be analyzed in the contextual lens of what work has been done on this issue of campus racial climate and can this actually be addressed.

In order to understand the question of what a response to campus hate, from an administration perspective looks like, there needs to be some discussion on what work has already been done on racial climates of universities, and more importantly what factors allow for the rise of a less tolerant campus climate? Most of the work on minority studies was done in the nineties when race centered admissions started to come to the national forefront, with discussion on affirmative action and making college campuses more diverse in general. One diagnosis of this campus climate problem comes from the inability of minority students to properly adjust to the climate on campus.¹⁷ In Ohio State University’s 1999 study on campus racial climate, they found that inability to adjust to be a detriment to minority students academic success, with minority students citing the existence of “perceptions and prejudices,” as the number one reason for proper adjustment to campus climate.¹⁸ Another charge comes from the problem comes with the natural selectiveness of universities. The extremely competitive climate on universities creates an atmosphere of students competing against each other for grades, employment, and graduate school, allowing for student animosity to quickly boil over into racial hatred, if provided the right conditions to exist.¹⁹ Not only this, but the creeping of racial hatred on college campuses can also be attributed to the willingness of universities to not shy away from

¹⁷ Alberto F. Cabrera, Amaury Nora, Patrick T. Terenzini, Ernest Pascarella, and Linda Serra Hagedorn. 1999. “Campus Racial Climate and the Adjustment of Students to College: A Comparison Between White Students and African-american Students”. (*The Journal of Higher Education* 70 (2). Ohio State University Press), 135.

¹⁸ Alberto F. Cabrera, Amaury Nora, Patrick T. Terenzini, Ernest Pascarella, and Linda Serra Hagedorn. 1999. “Campus Racial Climate and the Adjustment of Students to College: A Comparison Between White Students and African-american Students”. (*The Journal of Higher Education* 70 (2). Ohio State University Press), 152.

¹⁹ “Racism on Campus: Are the Strongest Institutions the Most Vulnerable?” 1995. “Racism on Campus: Are the Strongest Institutions the Most Vulnerable?” (*The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, no. 7. JBHE Foundation, Inc), 38.

controversial statements or inflammatory remarks in staunch defense of freedom of speech, also allows for racially motivated hate speech to ferment on campus.²⁰ The final area in which there is evidence of being a contributing factor towards campus racism is affirmative action. Although now defunct in California schools, affirmative action is still blamed by students for creating a campus climate in which certain students are passed up for less qualified minority students, linking back to the previous factor of believing that certain jobs and postgraduate programs will be unavailable due to minority students taking those positions.²¹ Although the focus of this paper has been to analyze the past decade of campus racial climate, in order to better encapsulate what is a continuous trend of campus racial climate, the question should be asked: was there a time in which Cal Poly's administration responded differently to campus racial climate?

In 1969 the civil rights movement was in full national swing, and Cal Poly's Black Student Union (BSU) wanted Cal Poly's administration to address their concerns, which they felt were synonymous with the national outcry for better treatment of African-Americans. The Cal Poly BSU demanded changes from Cal Poly's administration over what they saw as a racially intolerant campus for black students. The administration responded to the BSU demands by scheduling a series of meetings between, then university president, Robert E. Kennedy and the BSU.²² This February meeting between Kennedy and the BSU was to be the first in a series of meetings between him and the students. The February meeting was kicked off with a discussion on issues such as curriculum, athletic relationships, and the employment of more black faculty

²⁰ "Racism on Campus: Are the Strongest Institutions the Most Vulnerable?". 1995. "Racism on Campus: Are the Strongest Institutions the Most Vulnerable?". (*The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, no. 7. JBHE Foundation, Inc), 38.

²¹ Rebecca B. Rubin, Marie A. Whaley, Nancy E. Mitchell, and Karen Sharp. 1984. ("Affirmative Action on Campus". *Academe* 70 (5). American Association of University Professors), 26.

²² Mel Thompson, "Administration Meets BSU." *Mustang Daily* (San Luis Obispo), February 10, 1969. <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/studentnewspaper/1349/>.

members.²³ After months of continued discussion on a wide spectrum of issues, the BSU and Kennedy began to narrow their discussion to two primary areas of focus, the establishment of a Black studies program, and the recruitment of Black faculty.²⁴ Kennedy seemed receptive to both of these ideas, however he did provide pushback, in that he wanted a more overarching ethnic studies class program, and not solely a Black studies program, and he said he would hire any Black faculty he found qualified for the position.²⁵ Later on that year in the spring, Cal Poly's administration stated that there were no Black instructors to fill vacancies on Cal Poly's campus.²⁶ Now a statement like this from administration may incite a backlash from the BSU, however there was no backlash to this statement because the BSU was a part of that statement. The administration had actually allowed the BSU to help in efforts to recruit Black faculty to the campus. The negotiations the BSU had with Kennedy ultimately did not achieve all the results they had hoped to achieve, instead many of their demands were left unachieved. However what Kennedy's administration did was provide a level of transparency as an administration in an effort to fight what the BSU saw as a negative campus climate. The willingness of Kennedy to work with a minority club, and even allow them to assist in trying to solve for the harms they wanted to end, allowed Cal Poly's administration to both engage with their students in an empathetic way, but it also showed through this transparency, that they were in fact making efforts to try and change campus in the mold of students.

The final area to analyze when considering how an administration ought to respond to issues of a negative campus racial climate, is the example of Cal State University Fullerton.

²³ Mel Thompson, "Administration Meets BSU." *Mustang Daily* (San Luis Obispo), February 10, 1969. <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/studentnewspaper/1349/>.

²⁴ C.E. Jackson, "BSU, Administration Discuss Black Issues." *Mustang Daily* (San Luis Obispo), April 2, 1969. <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/studentnewspaper/1361/>.

²⁵ C.E. Jackson, "BSU, Administration Discuss Black Issues." *Mustang Daily* (San Luis Obispo), April 2, 1969. <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/studentnewspaper/1361/>.

²⁶ Mike Daniels, "BSU Aids Administration in Recruitment." *Mustang Daily* (San Luis Obispo), April 9, 1969. <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/studentnewspaper/1362/>.

Following incidents of prejudice on their own campus, CSU Fullerton engaged in a discussion with on campus faculty and students on how best to respond to incidents of racially driven hatred without, curbing free speech rights.²⁷ The decision that was best reached was a move to change the knowledge base of campus holistically without actually censoring or blocking out certain statements. The mechanism by which CSU Fullerton chose to do this by, was by adding another education requirement to their general education retinue, an area “Z,” GE.²⁸ The area “Z,” general education requirement is a graduation requirement in “cultural diversity.” Students have to take at least one course, in a wide array of areas such as Asian American studies, Chicano studies, Middle - Eastern studies, African American studies, etc.²⁹ The effect of this program was that CSU Fullerton has not had a major racial incident, since, especially to the level seen by Cal Poly in recent years.

The issue of Cal Poly’s racial incidents draws many questions on how best to deal with the issue, from the standpoint of an administration. What is the duty of an administration in dealing with the issue on their campus? Some would paint the straw man argument that campus demands for administration to better respond to campus incidents of race or hate, is nothing but an attempt at curbing free speech. It is clear that the current Cal Poly administration has dealt with the issue by using protection of free speech rights, as a shield against criticisms that they are not doing enough, while at the same time providing short term consolation to “offended,” parties. These responses are oftentimes myopic, as they simply push the issue of campus climate further

²⁷ Kristina Lindgren, "Non-Discrimination Policy Divides CSUF: Free Speech: After Hearing Arguments for and against Proposed Ban on Abusive Language on Campus, Faculty Senate Adjourns without Reaching a Decision." Los Angeles Times. December 06, 1991. Accessed March 2, 2016. http://articles.latimes.com/1991-12-06/local/me-677_1_faculty-senate.

²⁸ "Cultural Diversity Standard." Undergraduate Studies & General Education. Accessed March 2, 2016. http://www.fullerton.edu/undergraduate/generaledu/ge_approvedcourses.asp.

²⁹ "Cultural Diversity Standard." Undergraduate Studies & General Education. Accessed March 2, 2016. http://www.fullerton.edu/undergraduate/generaledu/ge_approvedcourses.asp.

down the road. Rather the current administration could do well looking to the example of CSU Fullerton in establishing an education program which focused on changing the mindsets of students by exposing them more to minority cultures and practices, as a way of reducing otherization which oftentimes leads to the incidents of campus hate. Or current day administration could even look to the example of non-other than Cal Poly administration in the past, and analyze how former President Kennedy's dealings with the BSU, actually demonstrated how an administration can properly address student needs by engagement rather than empty statements. If administration wants to create an environment that is inclusive and welcoming, perhaps they should start their homework.

Bibliography:

Primary Sources:

1. Wilson, Nick. "Cal Poly Students Protest 'hurtful' Remarks on Republican Club's 'Free Speech Wall'." *The Tribune*. November 12, 2016. Accessed February 01, 2016. <http://www.sanluisobispo.com/news/local/article44582163.html>
2. "Sowing Hate." *New Times SLO*. October 30, 2008. Accessed February 27, 2016. <http://www.newtimeslo.com/news/1267/sowing-hate/>.

3. Hickey, Julia. "Colonial Bros and Nava-Hos' Frat Party Prompts Cal Poly Investigation." *The Tribune*. November 20, 2013. Accessed February 01, 2016.
4. Soave, Robby. "The University of California's Insane Speech Police." *The Daily Beast*. June 22, 2015. Accessed February 6, 2016. <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/06/22/the-university-of-california-s-insane-speech-police.html>.
5. Jon. "Hundreds Protest, College Claims Acts Protected." *Mustang News*. October 31, 2008. Accessed February 01, 2016. <http://mustangnews.net/hundredsprotestcollegeclaimsactsprotected>.
6. Croft, Hannah. "Cal Poly Gains National Attention for "Colonial Bros and Nava-hos" Party - Mustang News." *Mustang News*. November 22, 2013. Accessed February 10, 2016. <http://mustangnews.net/cal-poly-gains-national-attention-for-colonial-bros-and-nava-hos-party/>.
7. Egel, Benjy. "Students Gather to Protest Hate Speech on Campus - Mustang News." *Mustang News*. November 12, 2015. Accessed February 6, 2016. <http://mustangnews.net/students-gather-protest-hate-speech-campus/>.
8. Ahmed, Naba. "SLO Solidarity Movement Takes Charge - Mustang News." *Mustang News*. November 18, 2015. Accessed February 12, 2016. <http://mustangnews.net/slo-solidarity-movement-takes-charge/>.
9. Thompson, Mel. "Administration Meets BSU." *Mustang Daily* (San Luis Obispo), February 10, 1969. <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/studentnewspaper/1349/>.
10. Daniels, Mike. "BSU Aids Administration in Recruitment." *Mustang Daily* (San Luis Obsipo), April 9, 1969. <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/studentnewspaper/1362/>.
11. Jackson, C.E. "BSU, Administration Discuss Black Issues." *Mustang Daily* (San Luis Obispo), April 2, 1969. <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/studentnewspaper/1361/>.
12. Lindgren, Kristina. "Non-Discrimination Policy Divides CSUF : Free Speech: After Hearing Arguments for and against Proposed Ban on Abusive Language on Campus, Faculty Senate Adjourns without Reaching a Decision." *Los Angeles Times*. December 06, 1991. Accessed March 2, 2016. http://articles.latimes.com/1991-12-06/local/me-677_1_faculty-senate.

Secondary Sources:

1. Kingkade, Tyler. "Randolph-Macon Frat Caught Hosting 'USA vs. Mexico' Party." *The Huffington Post*. November 22, 2013. Accessed February 12, 2016. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/11/22/randolph-macon-frat-mexican-party_n_4323837.html.
2. "Racism on Campus: Are the Strongest Institutions the Most Vulnerable?". 1995. "Racism on Campus: Are the Strongest Institutions the Most Vulnerable?". *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, no. 7. JBHE Foundation, Inc: 38–39. doi:10.2307/2963423.
3. Rubin, Rebecca B., Marie A. Whaley, Nancy E. Mitchell, and Karen Sharp. 1984. "Affirmative Action on Campus". *Academe* 70 (5). American Association of University Professors: 24–30. doi:10.2307/40249318.
4. Cabrera, Alberto F., Amaury Nora, Patrick T. Terenzini, Ernest Pascarella, and Linda Serra Hagedorn. 1999. "Campus Racial Climate and the Adjustment of Students to College: A Comparison Between White Students and African-american Students". *The Journal of Higher Education* 70 (2). Ohio State University Press: 134–60. doi:10.2307/2649125.
5. "Cultural Diversity Standard." *Undergraduate Studies & General Education*. Accessed March 2, 2016. http://www.fullerton.edu/undergraduate/generaledu/ge_approvedcourses.asp.

