

1993

Hackney, Sheldon: Humanities Chairman Nomination Hearing (1993): News Article 69

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Recommended Citation

Russakoff, Dale and Jordan, Mary, "Hackney, Sheldon: Humanities Chairman Nomination Hearing (1993): News Article 69" (1993).
Hackney, Sheldon: Humanities Chairman Nomination Hearing (1993). Paper 75.
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At Penn, the Word Divides as Easily as the Sword

By Dale Russakoff and Mary Jordan
Washington Post Staff Writers

The University of Pennsylvania has become a symbol of increasing racial tension on the nation's campuses after black students threw away nearly every copy of the student newspaper one day and a white freshman was charged with racial harassment for calling five black women "water buffalo."

While Penn is hardly alone, its troubles have national significance because its respected president, Sheldon Hackney, is President Clinton's nominee to chair the National Endowment for the Humanities. His compromising response to the incidents has provoked rancorous national debate.

Also, Hillary Rodham Clinton is to be the key-

note speaker at Penn's commencement Monday, sharing the podium with Hackney.

The unrest at Penn has counterparts on many predominantly white campuses where minority students have become increasingly militant about alleged insensitivity and outright racism and white students complain loudly that university administrators pander to minority unease at the expense of other university values, including free speech.

Earlier this week, Mexican-American students staged a violent protest at the University of California at Los Angeles about a decision not to establish a Chicano studies department.

Meanwhile, in separate federal court actions this week, racial incidents that caused deep divisions on two campuses—an "ugly woman" skit featuring a white, male George Mason Univer-

sity student dressed as a fat, black woman, and racially charged speeches by former City College of New York professor Leonard Jeffries—were deemed protected by the First Amendment.

At the University of North Carolina and Ohio State University, black students have staged protests and rallies involving black cultural centers.

"There is a sense of people generally on tenterhooks and extraordinarily sensitive to anything that could be seen as an affront," said Herbert Morris, a UCLA provost. "On issues of race, ethnicity and gender . . . all that has to happen is a gnat lands on the shoulder, and they shoot from the hip."

In the late 1980s, scores of universities established anti-harassment or speech codes to foster

environments for minorities. Penn, like
ols, has since narrowed its speech code. Even
ars to be exacerbating tensions.

ay, Eden Jacobowitz, a white freshman, faced
on charges that he committed racial harass-
elling, "Shut up, you water buffalo," at five
rity sisters making loud noises outside his
ow on a January night. Penn Afro-American
aid "water buffalo" has no racial connotations,
se has gone forward because the five women
the remark as racist and a campus judicial
nd "reasonable cause" to believe that it was.
y, who sources said believes that the charge
it, had declined to intervene, saying the case
n its course. This triggered protests led by
ive commentators from Rush Limbaugh to
et Journal editorial writers, all charging "po-
rectness" run amok.

ewish alumni have threatened to stop contrib-
he school. Jacobowitz, an Orthodox Jew, said
"water buffalo" as the approximate translation
ish epithet, "behema," slang for "thoughtless
Seventy white students protested last week by
eir mouths closed.

acobowitz yelled "water buffalo," other whites
ing "nigger" and "bitch," according to numer-
nts. When university police investigated, only
z admitted to yelling.

esterday, Penn released a statement saying no
was reached in the hearing, but Jacobowitz said
impression that the panel would rule that he
nd trial next fall.

olcanic reaction to the case reflected strong
over handling of race relations and other is-
iversity on campuses.

ey first became a lightning rod for the debate
h when black students, identifying themselves
"The Black Community," confiscated 14,000
the Daily Pennsylvanian as a protest against
y alleged was racism. Earlier, they had alleged
columnist, who harshly criticized affirmative
d the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., violated the
ode on racial harassment. Their protest, they
protected under Penn policies on open expres-

important university values, diversity and open
on, appear to be in conflict," Hackney said in
, a remark since pilloried by many conserva-

ism also came from 15 Penn law professors in
letter to Hackney saying he had not spoken
enough in favor of open expression. The pro-
y wrote, "struck at the heart of the most fun-
damental diversity which the university should foster—
y of thought, views and expression."

ney said in an interview that he views free
as paramount but also wanted to encourage an
of black students' grievances. "The grievances
t be based on something real, but they ought to
be talked about," he said.

Similarly, in the Jacobowitz case, Hackney acknowl-
edged problems with the working of the speech code
but defended it in principle. The policy "says that this is
an inclusive community and we want everyone to be
treated with respect and civility even as we have ob-
ligations to disagree and discuss things vigorously."

The code bans remarks that "insult or demean" in-
dividuals on the basis of race, color, ethnicity or national
origin.

Of Penn's 11,000 undergraduates, 5.6 percent are
black, the largest percentage of black students in the
Ivy League. In addition to its speech code, other efforts
to make the campus hospitable for African Americans
include ongoing "diversity awareness" programs, in-
tended to sensitize students to racism, sexism and other
prejudices, and a dormitory for students of African-
American culture. The dorm is virtually all black. There
also are a black newspaper and a black yearbook.

In random interviews, black and white students
voiced almost diametrically opposite views about how
the university treats them.

Black students said the speech policies do not begin
to address their concerns. Penn is in a predominantly
black neighborhood of Philadelphia, with a high crime
rate. Marissa Fox, a senior, said she and other black

students frequently are stopped by university police and
told that they meet the description of a crime suspect.
"We walk into buildings, we have to show our i.d.," she
said. "Whites don't."

Walter Benjamin, a senior, said white students liter-
ally run from black students who cross their path at
night, "assuming they're somebody from the neighbor-
hood." He and Fox said neighborhood youths steal bikes
on campus and have assaulted white women, which Fox
said "adds fuel to the fire, big time, because [whites]
see black kids doing this."

Michael Chang, a black student leader, said he at-
tended a predominantly white prep school in New York
and "was cool with white kids then, but now I really
don't want to be around" them. He said society, not just
Penn, changed him, starting when his parents gave him
a car and New York police repeatedly demanded to see
his license and registration.

Now, he said, white students at Penn often accuse
blacks of self-segregating but "people gravitate toward
people who share similar experiences. No one says any-
thing when white students congregate in dining halls."
He said white students have thrown eggs and poured
water onto blacks walking by their dorms and made
anonymous calls saying, "The only reason you're here is
that you're black."

Chang said blacks are "going to be a lot more polit-
ically active about getting things done at this univer-
sity," indicating that the newspaper protest and charges
against Jacobowitz are only the beginning of a concer-
ted campaign.

White students were more reluctant to give their
names. One junior said he was upset about confiscation
of the paper, considers himself a liberal and "never ex-
pected to find myself on the opposite side of black stu-
dents, having my views championed by Rush Limbaugh.
But more and more, I'm beginning to think I'm a liber-
tarian, I just feel the administration bends over back-
wards to let black students get away with what whites
can't."

Stephen Glass, a white junior and executive editor of
the Daily Pennsylvanian, said he believes that the paper
was insensitive under his predecessors. He plans an
aggressive campaign next fall to recruit "students from
all ideologies and races." But he said he cannot find
common ground with black students who complain that
simply publishing the work of a columnist who criticizes
affirmative action and the Rev. King abuses free
speech.

Glass said he was enraged when Hackney did not
strongly condemn seizure of the papers. "He's quick to
defend free expression when the attack comes from the
right," referring to Penn's display of explicit photo-
graphs by Robert Mapplethorpe, "but when it comes
from the left, he doesn't defend it," Glass said.

Hackney disputed the charge but said he believes
that "precisely because we are trying so hard to be in-
clusive and to make everyone feel a real part of this
place, we are more likely to have both [blacks] super-
sensitive to slights on the one hand and [whites] a little
leery of giving offense by saying something wrong."

Many critics of speech codes, including the American
Association of University Professors and the ACLU,
said they stifle communication and create just such po-
larization.

"These are very complex problems, and you're not
going to be able to solve them by telling people to stop
shouting at each other," said Deborah Leavy, executive
director of the ACLU of Pennsylvania. "Telling people
to stop saying it when they're still thinking it is not the
solution."

Chang said he opposes the speech code as a "fig leaf"
that leaves most racism unaddressed. However, he also
said he believes that Penn should bar columnists whose
writing blacks perceive as derogatory. "All you're going
to do is create tension and hurt people."

Roger Wilkins, a history professor at George Mason
and longtime civil rights leader, sees the polarization as
inevitable and believes that many universities are
struggling commendably with it.

"If you are going to seek diversity, you are going to
have problems," he said. "... There are tensions be-
cause many people are more comfortable when they are
segregated. But that's not the way we want the country
to be in the future."

Russakoff reported from Philadelphia.