

# Tensions rise at St. Thomas community discussion after sit-in

**OCTOBER 30, 2018 BY SAMANTHA HOANGLONG**

Tensions rose when more than 100 students, faculty, staff and community members joined administration members in a three-hour discussion following the sit-in demonstration against racism on campus.

The Oct. 25 meeting in the Anderson Student Center's Dorsey Way focused on President Julie Sullivan's "Action Plan to Combat Racism," but included outbursts of anger from students and community members directed at university leadership.

The Black Empowerment Student Alliance organized the call to action meeting and sit-in protest after a first-year student found a racial slur written on his door in Brady Hall. Earlier in the day, before the discussion, over 500 protesters sat in the Anderson Student Center atrium to denounce racism.

Members of the administration in attendance included University President Julie Sullivan, Executive Vice President and Provost Richard Plumb and representatives from Student Affairs, the School of Education, Residence Life, and Development and Alumni Relations.

On the morning of the sit-in protest, Sullivan released an "Action Plan to Combat Racism," which includes short-term actions and long-term strategies.

Sullivan and Plumb canceled all afternoon classes Wednesday, Oct. 31 for a campus-wide meeting that will

have “educational and healing components and a commitment to action,” according to the action plan.

When students at the call to action meeting raised concerns about how student attendance would be enforced for Wednesday’s meeting, administration said that this is not a one-time event. They also discussed requiring an online anti-bias training program for students.

Other short-term goals included conversations in classrooms led by faculty, an anti-hate campaign, trauma resources, bias incident and hate crime reporting, campus climate and safety in residence halls, campus external assessment and diversity, equity and inclusion resources.

“One of the issues we’re facing is trust,” Plumb said during the discussion. “We will be more transparent. We need to hear from you when we fall short. We also need to hear from you what we’re doing right.”

Long-term strategies include supporting anti-racist pedagogy and curriculum development, committing to academic excellence in diversity, equity and inclusion, recruiting and retaining students of color, strengthening the university’s financial aid model, accessing the university’s integrity and diversity in its marketing and admissions messages and communicating the action plan to the community.

“I think it’s important to honor our truths in order to make a stronger community,” said Kathlene Holmes Campbell, dean of the School of Education. “I see this as a process and this is the first step, but we obviously have a lot of work to do.”

Shanene Herbert, St. Paul community member and healing justice program director of the American Friends Service Committee, criticized the administration and said they need to listen to the students.

“This problem is rooted in white supremacy, and you haven’t admitted to that,” Herbert said. “I just want the students to know that organizations, community members, individuals are here to support you outside of

this campus so that your voices are heard and that we'll amplify your voices.”

One parent expressed concerns for her daughter, who is a student of color on campus.

“She has already decided that she is leaving because of this, and it just makes me sick. Did I give my money to put her into a place like this? It's just sad. It's really sad,” she said. “I love the idea if this thing could turn around and this college could be known for being diverse. It would be really cool to have that stand out in a college visit because those kids who don't like it won't come.”

## **Next Steps**

Students suggested hiring counselors of color, increasing accountability by sending transparent updates, making a welcome program available to all students of color similar to the Entrepreneurship or Reaching Excellence in Academics and Leadership program, changing the core curriculum, and training the faculty and staff to better understand the experiences of students of color.

“I would just recommend that a lot of you start attending the events, the meetings of the multicultural groups on campus if you really claim to care about these students,” one of the students said.

One student said he would like to know what the resolutions of these incidents are.

“Do I have to wonder if, when I walk into a class where I'm the only person who looks like me, am I sitting next to somebody who has committed a hate crime and the university has let them get away with it?” he said.

Sullivan said she is committed to telling students the outcome of the student judicial process, without releasing the name of the student.

Students discussed the need for a multicultural center on campus.

“We have been asking for a multicultural space,” one student said. “I was told a multicultural space would exclude our white students. I just want to know what is wrong with having a multicultural space and why can’t we specifically call it a multicultural space.”

An international student from Central America raised concerns about gaining and retaining diverse students.

“We’re not included in a lot of programs, especially during orientation week. If it wasn’t for OISS, we would not be included in anything that includes local students,” she said. “They always look at me and expect me to educate everyone else. They look at me and expect me to teach my peers about diversity, about my experiences, about how I feel in St. Thomas, how I feel in the U.S. ... sometimes it’s really intimidating.”

Some students expressed concerns for the new core curriculum and its impact on the university’s action plan.

“I want you to not only shift the gaze on race, but I want you to shift it on disabled community. I want you to shift it onto different religious communities. I want you to shift it onto the LGBTQ+ community. When you are looking into this core curriculum I need you to open your eyes as wide as you can and to really really think,” a student said.

The faculty senate passed a version of a new core curriculum this past week. It now has to go out to the full faculty for approval. If approved, it will take a year and a half to implement, Plumb said.

At the end of the discussion, students said they want this conversation to continue, potentially quarterly.

Student Body President Bisrat Bayou said it’s important to continue this conversation.

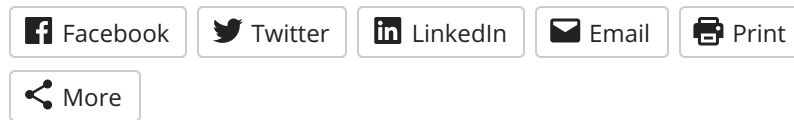
“It’s important to continue this conversation by all means,” Bayou said. “If people are walking out of here uncomfortable, I’m sorry, but at the same time, that’s the point of this space.”

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One Reply to “Tensions rise at St. Thomas community discussion after sit-in”

**Eric Falkenstein**

NOVEMBER 1, 2018 AT 9:26 PM

My senior son was considering this school, but I'm wiping it off consideration. There's no real evidence the event really happened, and if it did, an individual's actions do not imply a grand strategy that not coincidentally coincides with identity politics. The reaction highlights St Thomas represents the worst of the progressive agenda, subserviating everything to their political ends.

*Comments are closed.*

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