University Council Report – May 13th

For the final GSA report to the University Council for the year we wish to focus on a topic emerged last year as we prepared to host the National Association of Graduate-Professional Students’ annual Leadership Summit. Hosting student leaders from across the country at Liberty Terrace and giving them a tour of the heritage garden led to a critical dialogue about why our University still maintained the name “Indian” for one of our quads when the use of this term in reference to indigenous people of New York State is generally seen as offensive. This incident was not the first time that this issue has come up at this University. It has come up on social media and been a point of question and contention for some students who worked on the Heritage Garden project through the Office of Environmental Sustainability. The Student Association has also taken up related concerns when considering a resolution to change the name or to change Columbus Day to Indigenous People’s Day. This resolution has moved all the way up to the SUNY Student Assembly demonstrating that respect for indigenous populations is a value student leaders from across the SUNY system hold.

The use of this term by the University certainly does not fall to the level of some universities which still have mascots and team names derived from overtly racist stereotypes. In fact, our use of the term “Indian” seems to be just short of controversial concern because it is less overtly racist. Students tend to identify as a problem, but not a big enough problem to hold protests over. The naming of the quad and its halls (the halls named after various indigenous nations in New York; Mahican, Cayuga, Seneca, etc.) is undoubtedly an attempt to pay respect to New York State heritage, but the evolution of the term “Indian” since the quad was named suggests that we need to revisit how we respect the indigenous populations of New York State.

During the process of developing our Heritage Garden, one of our graduate students engaged in a fruitful dialogue with local Mohawk leader, Kay Olan, about potential renaming. One name which was suggested was the Mohawk word "Onkwen:we" which means "The Real People" referring to the Mohican and Mohawk. Members of our undergraduate population have contended with this issue and suggested that we rename it Indigenous Quad. While all of these are great potential options, it seems that in order to capture the original intention of the name, the best option may be First Nations Quad. In the coming weeks before the University Council meeting we will formally consider these options within the Graduate Student Association and offer input to the University Council. But ultimately, we understand it is within the Council’s power to determine a new name, if any. Regardless of the recommendations of names to come, the basic request from students to this Council is to at least thoughtfully consider a name change. We believe we should take advantage of the opportunity to show respect for indigenous nations of New York, rather than letting a questionable term continue to be used.

Sincerely,

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