

February 2017

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Recommended Citation

Rubio, Julie Hanlon and Janak, Noelle (2017) "Student Activism Matters: The Parable of Occupy SLU and Its Impact on Racial Justice Dialogue," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 51 , Article 7.

Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol51/iss1/7>



The Parable of Occupy SLU and Its Impact on Racial Justice Dialogue

By Julie Hanlon Rubio and Noelle Janak



In the early morning hours of October 13, 2014, conversations about the #BlackLivesMatter movement on Saint Louis University's campus shifted dramatically. Students on SLU's campus could no longer ignore the reality of police violence and racialized oppression because a crowd composed of students, community activists, and public intellectuals marched to campus and staged an occupation that would change the course of SLU's history. Two years later, the university has made

progress but continues to struggle to bring about the changes the protesters hoped to see.

While the killing of Michael Brown, Jr., by a police officer on August 9, 2014, sparked national resistance in Ferguson, Occupy SLU was designed, according to student activist Jonathan Pulphus, to bring attention to SLU's historical silence about an active participation in systematic racism. Pulphus, a senior at SLU, co-leads the youth activist organization TribeX, which organized the occupation of the university. When asked why the organization targeted SLU, Pulphus said, "Since its founding, SLU has treated black folk as bodies, not human beings."

SLU began to admit black students in 1944 following a prophetic sermon of Fr. Claude Heithaus, S.J., but efforts were slow and resistance was strong. Though the university is strongly committed to increasing diversity, the percentage of black students at SLU is less than half of the average rate for universities in the U.S., and SLU's admission and retention rates for black students have fallen in recent years. In addition, African-American Studies professor Stefan Bradley noted, "Black students and students of color have witnessed or experienced individual acts of racism," including threats and racial slurs written on white boards and social media. Though apathy is far more common on campus than hate, in the fall of 2014 black students at SLU were becoming disillusioned. Occupy SLU was their way of forcing the university to reckon with the racism within its gates and the tragedy of a city burning 12 miles away.

With the weeklong occupation, according to Bradley, "the issue of racism

began to press the university in a way it had not been challenged since the sixties." SLU's new president, Dr. Fred Pestello, made a controversial and principled decision to allow the protesters to stay on campus. He installed web cameras pointed at the encampment near the Clock Tower at the center of campus to allay the concerns of worried parents.

Student reactions to the occupation varied. Most had never experienced protest up close. Some were vocal and hostile. Some were annoyed at the disturbance in campus life, especially during midterms week. Some were fearful. Others were curious and went to observe and listen. A few were enthusiastic supporters who joined in the protests. Students, faculty, and community members brought food, water, coffee, and blankets for the student activists.

Faculty and staff tried to balance the concerns of protestors, students, and parents. Staff fielded calls from angry parents, patiently explaining that there was nothing to fear. SLU's Department of Public Safety ordered residence halls and Campus Ministry closed to protesters, forcing black students to open their apartments to those needing to use the bathroom. While many professors continued classes and exams as usual, others brought their students to the Clock Tower, invited activists to speak in their classrooms, and changed their syllabi to incorporate analysis of the historic protests.

Although the goal of Occupy SLU was a nonviolent encampment, conversations during the occupation were often tense. On the first night of the encampment, over 500 students, activists, professors, and Dr. Pestello



Student protesters at the campus teach-in. Photo courtesy of Saint Louis University.

attended a teach-in at the Clock Tower. Attendees were given the space to make statements and ask questions. A small group of angry white male students argued with some of the protesters about Michael Brown, but student activists worked to maintain the Clock Tower as a nonviolent space in which frank conversation between people who strongly disagreed with each other was possible.

As the occupation went on, black faculty members, including Bradley, pushed for the administration to interact with the protestors. "The formal meetings were especially intense early on because, I believe, many of the SLU officials wanted to know what exactly the protesters 'wanted,' so that the occupation could end," Bradley said.

Black faculty members "raised the prospect that this was the perfect moment for SLU to deal with the issue of race and class directly." After many difficult conversations, protestors and administrators signed the pivotal document that came to be known as the "Clock Tower Accords," committing the university to a set of 13 initiatives, including improved enrollment and retention of black students and faculty, investment in local communities with large populations of poor people of color, and increased resources for African-American Studies. The week ended with handshakes and celebration.

Two years later, views of the impact and significance of the protests vary. As the newly appointed Special Assistant to the President for Di-

versity and Community Engagement, Dr. Jonathan C. Smith's job is to systematically enact each point of the Accords, and he believes SLU is making progress. Bradley allows that since Occupy SLU, "We have done well to talk about aspects of race, class, oppression, and privilege. People are certainly being more intentional about initiating those conversations, and that is good." But there is "less of a sense of urgency...because there is currently no one threatening to occupy the campus." American Studies professor Emily Lutenski noted that faculty are more eager to integrate discussion of racism into their classrooms but not always prepared for the suspicion they face from students of color or the pushback they receive from white students. Ac-

ording to American Studies professor Ben Looker, “Now more than before, some students jump to make connections; they read the past differently because of the occupation’s visibility, its immediacy, and the sense of moral urgency it projected.” Yet, he notes, “these conversations – whether inside or outside the classroom – can tend to be an ‘opt-in’ affair, and the reach and span of such campus discussions has still been far too limited.”

Just as important, the slow implementation of key promises in the Clock Tower Accords is frustrating to activists. When asked how she feels about the progress on the Accords, Alisha Sonnier, a junior at SLU and co-leader of TribeX, said, “On a scale of 1-10, I’d say a 2.” Jonathan Pulphus agrees. Since the signing of the Clock Tower Accords two years ago, the difficult path to the Accords is often forgotten. Student activists claim that, rather than facing difficult

questions about race and white privilege, students, faculty, and staff sometimes opt to have watered-down conversations about diversity and inclusion.

In Bradley’s assessment, “There is one thing for sure: black and poor people pressed the university to live up to the rhetoric it espouses. Just as it took poor and black people offering their bodies for the nation’s soul to get the civil rights legislation and policies passed in an earlier period, black students, community members, and others used their bodies to invade the consciousness of SLU in 2014.”

Some on campus worry that, with the students who led and experienced Occupy SLU graduating this year, the memory of this historical event will be lost. It will be important for SLU community to tell the story of the encampment at the Clock Tower and to remember the conversations that happened that week. Honoring the activists and the Ac-

cords will take many more conversations like these as well as a costly commitment to becoming a university that fully values black lives.

Julie Hanlon Rubio is professor of Christian Ethics at St. Louis University. Her most recent book is Hope for Common Ground: Mediating the Personal and the Political in a Divided Church. Noelle Janek is a junior majoring in African American Studies and Women’s and Gender Studies.

Links:

1. The Clock Tower Accords
<http://www.slu.edu/about/catholic-jesuit-identity/diversity/clock-towers-accords.php>
2. Heithaus Sermon by Fr. Claude H. Heithaus
<http://www.slu.edu/updates/an-update-from-slus-president-1124/heithaus-sermon>



Faculty, staff and students discuss Saint Louis University's Oath of Inclusion in the Center for Global Citizenship in October 2014. Photo by Michelle Peltier