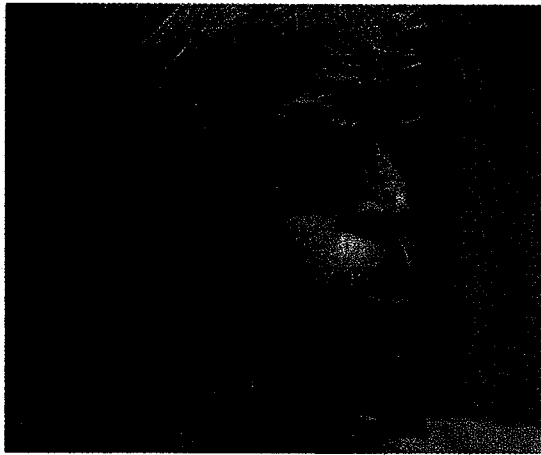


Who Can Say What?

When Don Imus used a racial slur against a college basketball team, it was clear he crossed a line. What's unclear is, Where's the line, and who can cross it?

BY JAMES PONIEWOZIK



The I-Man on ice Imus waits to go on the radio show of his critic Al Sharpton. "I'm not going to call you bigot," Sharpton said. "I'm going to say what you said was abominable ... You could be ... the nicest guy in the world, but you ought to be fired."

SAY THIS FOR DON IMUS: THE man knows how to turn an economical phrase. When the radio shock jock described the Rutgers women's basketball team, on the April 4 *Imus in the Morning*, as "nappy-headed hos," he packed so many layers of offense into the statement that it was like a perfect little diamond of insult. There was a racial element, a gender element and even a class element (the joke implied that the Scarlet Knights were thuggish and ghetto compared to the Tennessee Lady Vols).

Imus was a famous, rich, old white man picking on a bunch of young, mostly black college women. So it seemed pretty cut-and-dried that his bosses at CBS Radio would suspend his show—half frat party, half political salon for the Beltway elite—for two weeks, and that MSNBC would cancel the TV simulcast. And that Imus would plan to meet with the students he offended. Case closed, justice served, lesson—possibly—learned. Move on.

But a reasonable person could ask, What was the big deal? And I don't mean the lots-of-black-rappers-say-"hos" argument, though we'll get to that. Rather, I mean, what celebrity isn't slurring some group nowadays?

I exaggerate slightly. But our culture has experienced an almost psychotic outburst of -isms in the past year. Michael Richards and "nigger." Isaiah Washington and "faggot." Senator George Allen and "macaca." Mel Gibson and "f_ing Jews."

But we also live in a culture in which racially and sexually edgy material is often—legitimately—considered brilliant comment, even art. Last year's most critically praised comedy, *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan*, won Sacha Baron Cohen a Golden Globe for playing a Kazakh journalist who calls Alan Keyes a "genuine chocolate face" and asks a gun-shop owner to suggest a good piece for killing a Jew. Quentin Tarantino has made a career borrowing tropes from blaxploitation movies. In the critics-favorite sitcom *The Sarah Silverman Program*, the star sleeps with God, who is African American and who she assumes is "God's black friend." And the current season of *South Park* opened with an episode about a Michael Richards-esque controversy erupting when a character blurts the word niggers on *Wheel of Fortune*. (He answers a puzzle—N_GGERS—for which the clue is "People who annoy you"; the correct answer is "niggers.")

This is not to say that Borat made Imus do it or to make excuses for Imus. Even in the midst of his apology tour last week, Imus did enough of that for himself, citing his charity work, his support of black Senate candidate Harold Ford Jr., even his booking the black singing group Blind Boys

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"I love chinks. And who doesn't?"

SARAH SILVERMAN, explaining to Conan O'Brien why she didn't write "I hate chinks" on a form to avoid jury duty

AFTERMATH: NBC and O'Brien issued an apology, but Silverman did not.
OUTRAGE FACTOR: 3



"You know the worst thing about niggas? Niggas always want credit for some s_ they supposed to do. A nigga'll brag about some s_ a normal man just does."

CHRIS ROCK, in his HBO special *Bring the Pain*

AFTERMATH: None.
OUTRAGE FACTOR: 0

of Alabama on his show. (He didn't mention how, last fall, he groused about persuading the "money grubbing" "Jewish management" to okay the booking.)

But in the middle of his stunning medley of sneer, apology and rationalization, Imus asked a pretty good question: "This phrase that I use, it originated in the black community. That didn't give me a right to use it, but that's where it originated. Who calls who that and why? We need to know that. I need to know that."

So let's ask.

Imus crossed a line, boorishly, creepily, paleolithically. But where is that line nowadays? In a way, the question is an outgrowth of something healthy in our society: the assumption that there is a diverse audience that is willing to talk about previously taboo social distinctions more openly, frankly and daringly than before. It used to be assumed that people were free to joke about their own kind (with some license for black comedians to talk about how white people dance). Crossing those lines was the province of the occasional "socially conscious artist," like Dick Gregory or Lenny Bruce, who was explicit about his goals: in Bruce's words, to repeat "'nig-gerniggernigger' until the word [didn't] mean anything anymore."

Now, however, we live in a mash-up world, where people—especially young people—feel free to borrow one another's cultural signifiers. In a now classic episode of *Chappelle's Show*, comic Dave Chappelle plays a blind, black white supremacist who inadvertently calls a carload of rap-listening white boys "niggers." The kids' reaction: "Did he just call us niggers? Awesome!" The country is, at least, more culturally integrated—one nation under Jessica Alba, J. Lo and Harold & Kumar—and with that comes greater comfort in talking about differences.

But that's a harder attitude for older people—who grew up with more cultural and actual segregation—to accept or to mimic. Part of the problem with Imus' joke was that it was so tone-deaf. "That's some rough girls from Rutgers," he said. "Man, they got tattoos ... That's some nappy-headed hos there." The joke played badly in every community, raising memories of beauty bias (against darker skin and kinkier hair) that dates back to slavery. Tracy Riley, 37, of Des Moines, Iowa, who is of mixed race, said the incident was among her four kids' first exposures to overt racism. "Our kids don't see color the way we do," she said. "They don't see it as much. 'You're my friend or not, but it's not about race.'"

The line was as damning as anything for what it suggested about Imus' thought process: a 66-year-old white male country-

music fan rummaging in his subconscious for something to suggest that some young black women looked scary, and coming up with a reference to African-American hair and a random piece of rap slang. (Maybe because older, male media honchos are more conscious of—and thus fixated on—race than gender, much of the coverage of Imus ignored the sexual part of the slur on a show with a locker-room vibe and a mostly male guest list. If Imus had said "niggas" rather than "hos," would his bosses have waited as long to act?)

So who gets to say "ho," in an age when *Pimp My Ride* is an innocent car show and *It's Hard Out Here for a Pimp* is an Oscar-winning song? As even Essence Carlson, one of the Rutgers students Imus insulted, acknowledged at a press conference, black rap artists labeled young black women as "hos" long before Imus did. And while straight people may not be able to say "faggot," *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and *Will & Grace* helped mainstream the nonhostile gay joke for straight people. But all this reappropriation and blurring—distinguishing a good-natured "That's so gay!" from a homophobic one—has created a situation in which, when Richards went off on his Laugh Factory rant, it was possible to wonder if he was playing a character.

The license to borrow terms other people have taken back can worry even edgy comics. A few months ago, I interviewed Silverman, who argued that her material was not racist but about racism (and I agree). But she added something that surprised me, coming from her: "I'm not saying 'I can say nigger because I'm liberal.' There is a certain aspect of that that I'm starting to get grossed out by. 'Oh, we're not racist. We can say it.'"

Comedians work through these danger zones in the presence of other comics. In a comedians' get-together or a TV writers' room, nothing is off-limits: without airing the joke that goes too far, you can never get to the joke that flies in front of an audience. Trouble might come if material meant for that smaller audience went public, as in 1993, when Ted Danson got in trouble after word got out of a Friars Club routine he did in blackface, though his jokes were defended—and reportedly written by—his then girlfriend Whoopi Goldberg.

Today, because of cable and YouTube, because of a media culture that rewards the fastest, least censoring mouth, we are all in the writers' room. (Friars Club roasts are now televised on Comedy Central.) Punditry and gonzo comedy have become less and less distinguishable. (And I'm not talking here about *The Daily Show*, whose host Jon Stewart is, ironically, one of the most conservative defenders of the idea of sober, evenhanded news—see his 2004 tirade



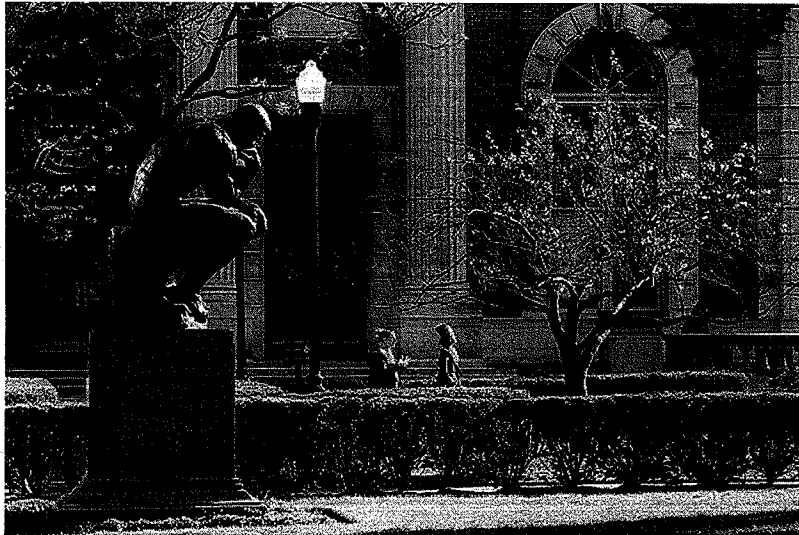
EDUCATION

Is free speech on campus under threat in age of 'empathetic correctness'?

From Title IX investigations of feminist professors, trigger warnings on classic works of literature, and 'bias-free language' guides that include the term American, some more concerned cultural sensitivities may have gone too far on campus.

by **Truong**, Staff writer | JULY 30, 2015

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Melanie Stetson Freeman/The Christian Science Monitor/File | View Caption

Northwestern University professor Laura Kipnis acknowledged she was being a little irreverent when she wrote an article about student-professor relationships.

"Forgive my slightly mocking tone," she wrote in the article, "Sexual Paranoia Strikes Academe." "When I was in college, hooking up with professors was more or less part of the curriculum."

She was surprised, and a little amused, when she heard that students were lugging mattresses up to the college president's office in protest of the article.

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It became less funny when the professor, who writes about gender identity and sexual politics, was notified that a sexual discrimination complaint under Title IX had been filed against her, leading to a two-month investigation before she was cleared of all charges.

While Professor Kipnis says she does not want to be held up as a test case, many academic observers wrote about her story. Some called it a lesson on the cultural sensitivities that, some critics say, are increasingly turning college campuses into a free-speech minefield.

Take the "bias-free language guide" developed by students and staff at the University of New Hampshire in 2013. It found the use of the word "American" problematic because it didn't recognize South America.

The guide was never campus policy, President Mark Huddleston told USA Today Wednesday after the guide went viral.

"I am troubled by many things in the language guide, especially the suggestion that the use of the term 'American' is misplaced or offensive," he said. "The only UNH policy on speech is that it is free and unfettered on our campuses."

But "free and unfettered" speech is increasingly coming up against a new generation of students, some of whom have an expectation that they have a right not to read or hear ideas that differ from their worldview or make them uncomfortable.

What began in the 1990s as political correctness – a desire not to offend others – has now morphed into what one academic observer calls "empathetic correctness" – a desire never to be offended. Even celebrities have weighed in on the debate, with comedians Jerry Seinfeld and Bill Maher [saying the environment at college](#) makes it almost impossible to do their routines without someone becoming upset.



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While many have pointed to helicopter parenting or the mainstream media as root sources of a politically correct culture on campus, much of the criticism is oversimplified, academics say.

According to professors and higher-education experts, the trend is driven by financial realities in the American higher education system, and exacerbated by a contemporary world in which opinions are catalyzed and publicized by the intellectual echo chamber that can exist online. With a drop in the number of college-age students, as well as decreased funding from states, increased competition among colleges and universities has resulted in an atmosphere where students are treated like consumers and more emphasis may be placed on their satisfaction rather than how much they are learning, critics charge.

Professors can feel disincentivized to bring up controversial issues in class for fear of getting in trouble either with administration or with students that they may offend, critics say.

Liberty University Professor Karen Swallow Prior says she does not personally feel afraid to speak freely, but over the past few years she has observed a shift among students from the desire to not offend other people, into an effort to protect one's self from being offended.

Professor Prior coined the term "empathetic correctness" to describe this phenomenon and used the classroom example of students refusing to read texts that challenge their own personal comfort.

"The problem is when this kind of culture bleeds into an environment where open-mindedness and being challenged are inherent to the process of learning," Prior says.

The shift toward a consumer-catered higher education system means resort amenities like rock walls and lazy rivers on campuses, says Richard Arum, a professor of sociology and education at New York University, but also in the rise of academic environment where student comfort is held up over open debate.

"Now, because you're interested in catering to the 17-year-old, you've set up a system where the administration chooses to disinvest from academics and invest in students' whims," says Professor Arum. He traces the roots of the trend back to the 1960s, when the federal government started shifting



funding from institutional grants to student grants – meaning that if colleges wanted those dollars, it needed to attract and keep the most students.

The ubiquitous nature of social media also can cause some faculty members to feel that they are under constant public scrutiny, with off-the-cuff comments online having serious ramifications on academic careers.

- Saida Grundy was a recently hired Boston University professor who was forced to apologize after tweets emerged in which she criticized white male college students.

- Steven Salaita had a tenured job offer from the University of Illinois rescinded over tweets about his thoughts on the Israel-Palestine conflict.

- In the case at Northwestern, one of the pieces used as evidence in the Title IX investigation came from Kipnis's Twitter account.

"I think the Internet and social media does have something to do with it. It's almost like it was communicable or catching," says Kipnis, who works as a cultural theorist and wrote about the details of the Title IX investigation in another article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. "I mean that's how culture works: Students learn to be more sensitive and more vulnerable because there's this conversation about sensitivity and vulnerability."

Recent media attention surrounding trigger warnings also may be an example. At first trigger warnings, which began on feminist blogs as a way to facilitate open discussion about sexual assault, were used with regard to material that had graphic descriptions of sexual violence. Recently, students and universities have suggested the notices on increasingly mundane curriculum, including literary classics like *"The Great Gatsby."*

Administration policies may not explicitly block controversial speech on campus by either faculty or students. Instead, it's more likely to be threatened implicitly, says Eugene Volokh, a law professor at UCLA and founder of the Volokh Conspiracy blog.

"Many faculty members will get the message that if they want to move forward in their careers then they won't express those views," Professor Volokh said.

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He gave an example of one case at the University of California (UC) where the system encouraged faculty to stay away from so-called "microaggressions."

Microaggressions are defined as 'brief, subtle verbal or nonverbal exchanges that send denigrating messages to the recipient because of his or her group membership.'

But Volokh said the UC policy basically equates microaggressions – which includes criticism of affirmative action – to a form of racism.

For its part, the University of California refutes the characterization that censorship has been institutionalized on its campuses.

"To suggest that the University of California is censoring classroom discussions on our campuses is wrong and irresponsible. No such censorship exists," it said in a statement. "UC is committed to upholding, encouraging, and preserving academic freedom and the free flow of ideas throughout the University."

The evidence is not just anecdotal: A 2013 survey of 165,743 college freshman done by the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA found that they "scored themselves lowest on their openness to having their own views challenged."

This mindset also can affect other students.

Take the case of Omar Mahmood, a student at the University of Michigan, who wrote a satirical piece last year in the university's conservative newspaper on the overbearing PC culture that he believed was rampant on his college campus.

The article set off a firestorm that culminated in his termination from the main student newspaper. His apartment was vandalized, with people throwing food at his door and writing vulgar messages.

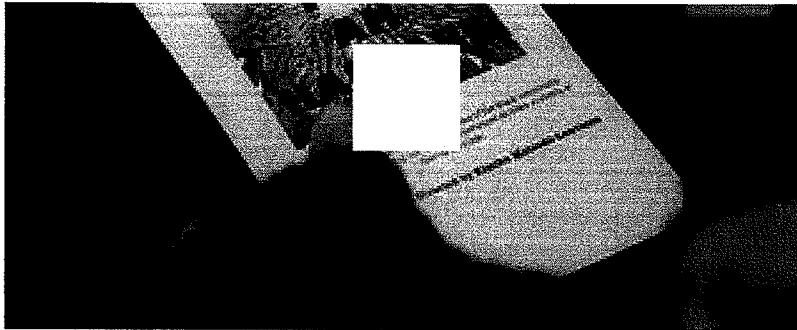
While he says he doesn't harbor any ill will toward the newspaper or his critics, Mr. Mahmood said in an interview that he is concerned about the effect what he characterized as a fear-based environment has on free speech on his campus.

"It's become like this private club," Mahmood says. "If you agree with us and speak out, then you're praised; if you don't and speak out, then you're a bigot."

Microaggressions: Comments That Sting

The New York Times

The New York Times



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A

'Disgraceful' University of Oklahoma fraternity shuttered after racist chant

By Elliott C. McLaughlin, CNN

🕒 Updated 2:57 PM ET, Tue March 10, 2015 | Video Source:

CNN

Story highlights

NEW: "Sooners are not racists. They're not bigots," university president tells CNN

Rapper Waka Flocka Flame "disgusted," cancels upcoming show for SAEs

National chapter quickly closed fraternity as school president said ties "severed"

(CNN)—Even with the national chapter shutting the Sigma Alpha Epsilon house at the University of Oklahoma, the school president said the university's affiliation with the fraternity is permanently done as a campus group called for the expulsion of fraternity members.

The members have until midnight Tuesday to get their things out of the house, university President David Boren said in a Monday afternoon news conference.

"The house will be closed, and as far as I'm concerned, they won't be back," he said, adding that the university is exploring what actions it can take against individual fraternity members.

A Saturday video showing party-bound fraternity members on a bus chanting a racial epithet found its way anonymously to the school newspaper and a campus organization, which both promptly publicized the nine-second clip.

David Boren: Not just another college president

The students on the bus clap and pump their fists as they boisterously chant, "There will never be a ni**** SAE. You can hang him from a tree, but he can never sign with me."

By Sunday night, SAE's national chapter had suspended the University of Oklahoma members and threatened lifelong suspensions for anyone responsible for the chant, but Boren took it a step further.

He appeared at a campus rally and told students over a bullhorn, "I have a message for those who have misused their freedom of speech in this way. My message to them is: You're disgraceful. You have violated every principle that this university stands for."



Andrew Clark
@Clarky_Tweets

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David Boren on those involved in the incident: You're a disgrace.

@OUDaily

7:33 AM - 9 Mar 2015

292 157

He said that he was angered, outraged and saddened by what he saw in the video. Boren stressed that the fraternity members' behavior is not indicative of what University of Oklahoma students, nicknamed Sooners, represent.

"It was unbelievable that this could have possibly occurred with UO students," he said. "Sooners are not racists. They're not bigots. They are people who respect each other and care about each other."

He called for zero tolerance.

"The only way you put a stop to it is have zero tolerance when it is found out. Clearly, I think some of our students wanted this exposed. They wanted this video out there, and I've asked them to please let me know when they're other things like this that happen," Boren told CNN.

How it surfaced

The student newspaper, The Oklahoma Daily, received the video in a Sunday email, said print Editor Katelyn Griffith. The fraternity celebrated its Founder's Day on Saturday, and the video showed members traveling to a formal event that evening, she said.

"We decided that this was definitely a story they needed to cover without question," she told CNN. "This was something that we knew wouldn't be tolerated by the students at OU and the university at large."



Bijan Hosseini
@BijanHosseini

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Dr. George Henderson, Norman's first African American homeowner in attendance at @OU_Unheard this morning.

9:17 AM - 9 Mar 2015

256 189

Unheard, a campus organization launched in response to the police shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, received the video Sunday via anonymous text and immediately moved to "let our community and our university know that this behavior is not tolerated, that's it's unacceptable and it's extremely, extremely offensive," said the group's co-director, Chelsea Davis.

This mentality is not new to campus, and it's not confined to one fraternity, Davis told CNN, but it's the first time people have been caught on video.

"Unfortunately, it took them getting caught on video camera for this to happen, but this is definitely not something that is brand-new. It's not something that's only seen within this one organization," she said.

Davis said the only acceptable response is to expel -- not suspend, as that would send the wrong message --

all the students involved.

"I was hurt that my fellow peers that I walk to class with every day, people that I see every day, could say such hateful things about me and my culture, about my friends, about my brothers and my sisters," she said.

At a news conference, Boren said the school was looking into punishing the individuals involved, especially against those "who have taken a lead" in the chanting. While expulsion is an option, any punishment must be "carefully directed" if it's to pass constitutional muster. One key will be whether the offending students created a hostile environment on campus, he said.

Boren emphasized that "there is no room for racists and bigots" at Oklahoma.

"I think some of the students themselves may take themselves off the campus, and I hope they do because this is not a place that wants racists," he told CNN later.

That sentiment echoed throughout campus, as a large crowd of students attended a protest at the university's North Oval, some of them arriving with tape over their mouths with the word, "Unheard," written across it.

NOT ON OUR CAMPUS



H
@Musselmandh

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I urge everyone to make this your profile pic somewhere on social media

11:45 PM - 8 Mar 2015 · Norman, OK, United States

64 30

Other students took to social media to express their disappointment, with one person urging students to change their profile picture to an image that says in Sooner crimson, "Not on our campus," the "ou" in "our" offset in gray. OU is shorthand for the University of Oklahoma.

'Racism is alive'

Unheard posted the video online Sunday with the comment, "Racism is alive at The University of Oklahoma." It was addressed to @President_Boren, the university president's Twitter handle. Boren quickly threatened to throw the fraternity off-campus if the allegations were true.



David Boren

@President_Boren

Follow

If the video is indeed of OU students, this behavior will not be tolerated and is contrary to all of our values. We are investigating. - DBo

7:24 PM - 8 Mar 2015

2,083

1,689

The SAE's national chapter also moved promptly, saying in a statement it had closed the chapter "following the discovery of an inappropriate video." The group further apologized for the "unacceptable and racist behavior of the individuals in the video."

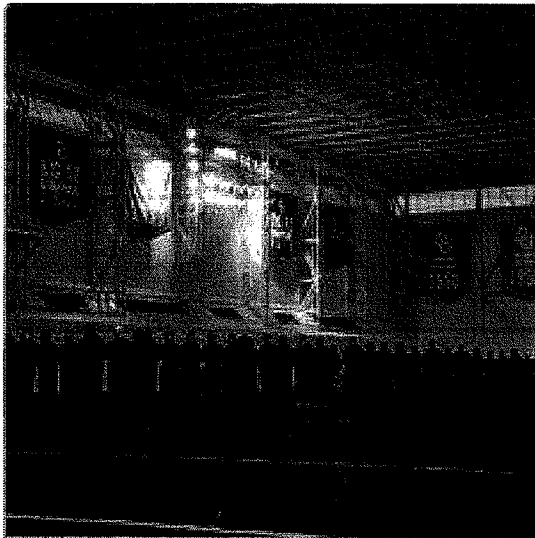
"I was not only shocked and disappointed, but disgusted by the outright display of racism displayed in the video," SAE national President Bradley Cohen said in a statement.

A group of students gathered to pray over the racist insults. One of them told CNN affiliate KFOR-TV he was "nauseated, frustrated," but he was happy with the SAE headquarters' decision.

"We should be past this. This is disgusting," he said.

Spray paint marked a wall of SAE's fraternity house at the university. "Tear it down," the graffiti appeared to say. Police posted squad cars in front of the house.

Members of the Oklahoma football team protested, marching in lieu of meeting and practice.



Oklahoma Football

@OU_Football

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#notonOURcampus

3:02 PM - 9 Mar 2015

1,671

1,841

Backlash extended beyond campus as well, with hip-hop star Waka Flocka Flame saying on Instagram that he was canceling an upcoming show for the SAEs.



wakaflocka

• 8 month

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SMFH.. I know for a fact the whole school and SAE don't agree with those kids actions so know that I'm not madd at the whole #SAE just those disgusting kids!!!!!! #WFF We can't change history but we damn sure can create our own future #DeathToRacism

21.8k likes

1,993 comn

"All races partying have a good time and enjoying themselves together peacefully. That's what Waka Flocka is all about. For that reason, I must say I'm disgusted and disappointed in the actions of the SAE fraternity at University of Oklahoma and I will be canceling my scheduled performance for them next month. Racism is something I will not tolerate," the Atlanta rapper wrote.

CNN's Ben Brumfield, Chuck Johnston, Nick Valencia, Tristan Milder, Lindsey Knight, Justin Lear and Emanuella Grinberg contributed to this report.