

OP-ED

I know what racism looks like at liberal colleges

Institutions don the mask of “anti-racism” without giving support to the students who need it.

By Rasaaq Shittu



Haverford College. Rasaaq Shittu, a Black student at Haverford, says the promises of social justice from primarily white, seemingly liberal institutions don't always translate to action. Haverford College

“You belong here.”

Those are three words I've heard repeatedly during my short time studying at Haverford College, where I enrolled in August 2019. Whether in discussion with mentors

or in collaboration with administrators, I kept receiving affirmation for my presence on a predominantly white, upper-class campus.

As a Black student, I had every reason to doubt those words — though the doubt itself is draining. There's no reward in constantly questioning your place in a community and what role you play; it creates mental turmoil. However, this struggle was unavoidable. That's because primarily white, outwardly liberal institutions like Haverford have such a long history of talking the talk without living up to it.

In the wake of the murder of George Floyd and Black Lives Matter protests across the country, Haverford's president Wendy Raymond and Haverford Athletics' Instagram account put out the kind of generic statements students have come to expect from elite schools. Neither contained the simple words many of us wanted to hear: Black Lives Matter. Director of Athletics Wendy Smith's statement included: "Haverford College athletics stands with and actively supports all of our student-athletes in creating an inclusive environment, free of discrimination, for everyone." This corporate "compassion" reads like it was pulled from a manual. Raymond's statement, on the other hand, unironically challenges the community to become anti-racist: "For if not at Haverford, where?" This language suggests that Haverford is somehow above the fray of other institutions, unique due to the "Quaker value of equality" at its core.

But in reality, Haverford is just as bad as other schools. Data USA reports that Haverford's Black students comprise approximately 6.87% of the school's population, less than the 8% average of the Ivy League. The school has a history of discouraging Black students from pursuing careers in STEM, according to stories on @blackathaverford and alumni testimonials.

According to Haverford students' Clearness Committee report, Black students were more likely than white ones to witness insensitivity regarding their identity, considered academics inaccessible at significantly higher levels, and only 30%-40% felt their academics were "well supported." The same report found that the Office of Multicultural Affairs was only seen as helpful by 19% of respondents, and 75% of the report's respondents did not interact with the office through any means. Numerous anecdotal reports from Black alumni have commented on the unacceptable treatment of Black staff members, particularly those in dining services.

For many self-proclaimed progressive institutions, it seems as if the presence of Black students serves their own so-called “multicultural” edification, and their attempts to morally posture to the public. A major stumbling block for many primarily white institutions is not just that they are deeply racist, but that they consistently pretend to be the opposite.

Institutions don the mask of “anti-racism” by vaguely gesturing at unity, without displaying empathy and giving concrete support to the students who need it. Vague liberalism and passive progressivism are used as shields by students and staff to avoid difficult self-reflection and discussion as to how they themselves contribute to racism. Administrators employ these generic defenses when others, like the recent protesters, demand immediate action. Their fear of public scrutiny, along with a combination of falsely professed values, pushes the community to hide behind general proclamations of social justice.

The cycle reminds me of the now infamous and ill-advised Pepsi commercial where Kendall Jenner hands a Pepsi to a grinning police officer mid-protest, suggesting the issues people have protested against for years can be so easily solved — as if years of institutional injustice can be dismantled with one sip.

We’re seeing this “pepsifying” of Black Lives Matter currently, and it troubles me. There are benefits to simply starting the conversation: following public cries for change, I’ve recently been forced to reckon with my own social shortcomings that I have to unlearn and critique. At the same time, I’m worried about the costs of superficial discussion on real progress. The watering down of Black Lives Matter protesters’ specific proposals to vague “change” allows people to pretend they’re being progressive when they’re not saying or doing anything impactful. The movement we’re witnessing now birthed from the pain of the Black community; it should directly address their needs and demands.

Institutions like Haverford can start by creating and maintaining archives of the painful experiences of Black people on their campuses, and their own history of racism. (One example: Brown University investigated and reported on its own ties to slavery in 2006, prompting other schools to do so.) Institutions should not place the burden on, but can cooperate with and support, Black students and faculty in leading these conversations. I see a way forward, but it

requires a period of honest and painful discussion, where the voices of those most marginalized are elevated — and put into action.

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