

Banner vandals need a slap on the wrist

The right to protest is constitutionally guaranteed, but that right doesn't exempt a protester from the consequences of his/her actions.

Pamphlets, sit-ins, petitions and rallies all fall under the vague guidelines of "protest." So does breaking a window, or for that matter, tearing down a banner.

When certain politically minded students on April 28 took it upon themselves to rip down a University banner, a message was sent. Yes, the University's record for helping minorities can be called into question. And yes, vandalizing the banner did point that out.

However, there was a slightly more rancid message sent: that some people who possess worthy goals will use alienating tactics when the whim strikes.

The people upset with the banner had a right to protest. But instead of channeling their efforts into a more positive action, such as lodging a complaint with the administration or demonstrating, the banner vandals chose to rip it down and talk about it afterward.

In a few strokes of a scissor blade, the group managed to turn off a segment of the population who ordinarily would have been attentive to their goal. But the action — simple vandalism — spoke louder than the message.

In the end, their actions were unproductive. The banner folks have certainly drawn attention — most of it negative. The frustration minority students feel is understandable, but that doesn't excuse destructive behavior. If you want to play, you've gotta pay.

And most likely, the banner vandals will pay. The incident is being investigated under student conduct code statutes. The offenders could face anything from a reprimand to an expulsion.

Assuming the banner-rippers are guilty, the punishment should fit the crime. Expulsion or even suspension would be an overreaction. A reprimand — perhaps probation — and paying for the banner seems an appropriate sentence.

Hopefully, something can be learned from this. Perhaps the group can meet with the banner-makers, and together they can come up with a sign that would reflect the mixed cultural background a University education should present. Work toward a positive goal, not a mindless mob tendency to destroy something because you don't agree with it.

Destructive action is never the answer.

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OPINION

Group eases life for its members



THE FINE PRINT

BY MANDY BAUCUM

"How was your day?" Zeenab asks Black Women of Achievement member Shavetta Davis.

Shyly, President Zeenab Johnson asks all of the women in the room about their days. Some of the answers are funny and everyone laughs. Just about everyone knows each other, so the members don't hesitate to joke about little eccentricities.

Silly comments bounce around like Nerf toys. Simple encouragement plays a key part as a reassuring "That's OK, honey," is passed around the room.

There is a fine line you know they will never cross. Their respect for each other is something I have never found anywhere else.

The meeting centers on current events and social issues that could be important for a group such as the BWA to support. New ideas about being part of a type of big sister program are tossed around and people express interest. The upcoming dance is a big topic.

Being a freshman at the University, I am fair game to just about every organization dying to increase its enrollment.

When Zeenab and another member of the BWA asked me to join their group, I thought it would be a great way for me to learn more about black women and how they feel about today's racial issues and life in general.

My dad is black and my mom is white. I went to school in Elmira, an almost all-white community, and never came into contact with or learned much about black culture. Never really having had a black female role model, or known any black female for that matter, I thought that this group could be a good thing for me.

Turns out, it was. The group accepted me as a true sister, despite the fact that I could probably pass for Hispanic.

Don't get me wrong, I accept my white culture. It's just that I already know a lot about that. European history was the only thing they taught at my high school.

You could say I wished my exposure to both cultures was

as balanced as the even, brown tone of my skin.

My wish for the presence of a black female role model was granted through the BWA mentors: Diane Wong, the University's former affirmative action director; Edwina Welsh, adviser and admissions counselor; and Mentha Hynes, assistant director of admissions.

The mentors serve as a source of information about current events that hinder racial equality. All of them are familiar with the campus and direct us toward issues we can either defend or support as black women.

They know much about the history of black people and the kinds of injustice they have endured. The strength and wisdom I see in them are things I want to someday have for myself.

Age and experience have allowed the mentors to form strong views about what needs to be done to support the continuation of racial equality. This sets an example for how we, as black women, can continue to do this when our turn comes.

Although the University does not have a tenured black woman professor, which the BWA would most definitely like to see, these women have served the group well in providing a positive influence.

Zeenab said the BWA has received criticism because it is separate from the Women's Center and the Black Student Union. I feel this position is justified because students are really sick of seeing their money used to start up new groups that are always whining for office space, a phone and other such privileges.

However, the BWA is not after office space or its own phone. A desk in the BSU suits them just fine and serves its purpose.

When broad groups of people are forced to work together, often the goals of each are hampered by differing interests, and the specialized needs of the members are not met.

Like Zeenab says, "We have a different agenda."

I do not condone separatism, but I think that diversity would only hinder, not help, the BWA. I know I wouldn't have gotten what I wanted out of the BSU if white women or black men were part of the BWA.

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A prime example of the great need for black sisterhood was the story of how BWA was founded. Winter term of last year, about 15 black women were interested in becoming part of a group that would support them. They thought a predominantly black sorority would be the answer to their problem and tried to raise money so they could become part of the sorority. In the process they founded the BWA.

Since its founding, the group has done many things. The African American Caucus in October brought black students together to discuss racial issues.

To help support itself financially, the BWA jointly sponsored a dance with the Alpha Kappa Alphas, a predominantly black sorority, and are now planning a semi-formal dance on May 16 at the EWEB building at 8 p.m.

However, the group is limited by its lack of funding and would accept financial backing so members can attend a conference for "Women Leaders on Campus" in Washington, D.C.

The BWA also planned a retreat so the members could spend more time planning the dance and better organizing their records for next year's group.

Tonya Menefee, a BWA founding member, explained why she helped start the group.

"When the group started, we wanted to focus on making black freshmen feel comfortable because some of us had had bad experiences, and we didn't want them to have the same," Menefee said.

I think they did a good job. My freshman year has been pretty good, and I know it had a lot to do with the acceptance and culture the BWA has given me.

Mandy Baucum is a student activities reporter for the Emerald.

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