

# Penn State students sit-in against campus racism

■ Death threats and two dead bodies led student leaders to demand policy changes

By Beata Mostafavi  
Oregon Daily Emerald

After displays of racism plagued Pennsylvania State University last week, hundreds of Penn State students demanded action from their administration. And while that was taking place, University of Oregon students and faculty took the opportunity to examine the safety of their own campus environment.

Hate issues are not new to Penn State. In October, threatening letters were sent to three black students and one university official, which ignited fiery discussions on campus. But it was three recent and separate incidents that spurred fear and attention among members of the Penn State campus community within the last few weeks, leading to a week-long student sit-in at the university.

On April 20, the president of the Black Caucus student group was sent a death threat which also hinted at a bomb threat on graduation day. The threat was first received by a reporter at Penn State's campus newspaper, the Daily Collegian.

Three days after the letter was received, on April 24, the body of a black male was found in Camptown, Pa., more than 100 miles away from campus. The man died from multiple gun shot wounds.

And on April 27, the body of an unidentified 38-year-old black male was found about 20 miles away from the Penn State campus. The cause of death was a gunshot wound. As of April 30, the Pennsylvania State Police had declared no links between the hate-mail incident and the apparent homicides, according to the Penn

State administration.

Although the occurrences have elicited the most response within the Penn State community, an e-mail circulating about the recent threats has meant news of the incidents has also reached the attention of University of Oregon students and faculty.

It should not take these kind of incidents to raise awareness of diversity priorities, ASUO President Jay Breslow said. He said the University community tends to have a false sense of security that hate crimes do not happen here.

Although the University of Oregon administration has made some efforts to enforce diversity goals such as holding workshops to help faculty members better incorporate diversity in the classroom, he said, it is not enough.

"I think our campus wouldn't have a clue as to how to handle something like that," he said of the Penn State hate incidents. "We need to stop being reactive and start being more proactive."

Chicora Martin, director of the University Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Educational and Support Services, said the administration has made some proactive steps. She mentioned the Bias Response Team, a group of students and staff that work to bring proper responses to discrimination incidents, as a good step. She said the team has already handled a few situations this year where students felt they were the target of discrimination.

Martin also noted that a four-page survey was recently sent to a random sample of 5,500 students to examine how diversity is viewed on campus. Martin said results from the survey — which she said she hopes will reveal the minority voice — would give the administration a better idea of what new diversity programs should be implemented or existing ones

should be modified.

But Martin said more could be done. She said increasing efforts to recruit and retain faculty and students of color is one step. She added the administration is learning that diversity is an issue that has to be consistently revisited.

"We can't change overnight," she said. "But we have to be dedicated to educate students to go out in to a world that is not homogeneous."

Dominique Beaumonté, the director of the Black Student Union, said the administration needs to take a more active role in diversity plans and not leave all the work solely in the hands of offices like the Office of Multicultural Affairs and the Multicultural Center. He added that the average student also needs to get more involved with diversity initiatives, not just those students in leadership positions.

The recent sit-in at Penn State, which led to a few student arrests, was intended to elicit a response from the university's president, Graham Spanier. The sit-in took place April 25, and the university administration responded the next day with a proposal that aims to strengthen diversity objectives at the school.

But students demanded revisions, and a few changes were made before students and the administration finally reached an agreement Thursday.

A few key highlights of the proposal include investing \$900,000 into a new Africana Studies Research Center, a commitment to provide \$350,000 worth of scholarships to African-American African American Studies majors and changes to the curriculum over the next five years.

Kisha Wilson, secretary of the Penn State Black Caucus, said the administration's lack of support was one of the student concerns during the sit-in. Although members of the administration wrote the proposal, students

## Penn State Hate Incident Timeline

**Early Oct. :** Members of Penn State's black community, including three students and one university official, receive threatening letters.

**Oct. 19:** Penn State President Graham Spanier establishes a special fund providing reward money for information leading to the arrest and conviction of people threatening members of the university community.

**Nov. 13:** Penn State launches new initiatives to combat racism. These include a series of advertisements, posters and videos on the value of diversity, and are developed with student leaders.

**April 20:** A reporter from the Penn State campus newspaper receives a letter threatening the life of the president of the Black Caucus and alludes to a bomb threat at graduation.

**April 24:** Pennsylvania State Police

find the body of a black male in Camptown, Pa., more than 100 miles away from the Penn State campus.

**April 25:** Penn State students conduct a sit-in to elicit a response from Spanier.

**April 26:** The administration makes a proposal to meet the diversity objectives students demand.

**April 27:** The body of an unidentified 38-year-old black male is found about 20 miles away from the Penn State campus. Police could prove no links between the hate letter and the deaths.

**May 3:** The administration and students reach an agreement that includes investing \$900,000 into a new Africana Studies Research Center, a commitment to provide \$350,000 worth of scholarships to African-American African American Studies majors, and changes to the curriculum.

Source: Pennsylvania State University

raised the issues first and made suggestions throughout the year, she said.

She added that although the proposal addressed many student concerns, not everyone was completely content.

"I think student groups are somewhat satisfied," she said. "But not 100 percent of students. There are still some things that haven't been met."

Wilson added that if nothing else, the response and reaction to the incidents has shown the campus that racism will not be tolerated while also raising awareness on other campuses.

"These aren't isolated issues," she said. "This happens everywhere."

Penn State University spokesman Tysen Kendig said Penn State's priority in the last couple of weeks has been security for the students. But he said there's a limit to being ready for

such events.

"We'll do everything in our power to provide for the safety and protection of our students," he said. "We're taking these threats very seriously. ... It's no secret that racism is still a problem that plagues society as a whole."

The Penn State administration has worked to provide around-the-clock security for students who feel threatened, and it also plans to enhance security measures at the Penn State graduation ceremonies May 12 and 13.

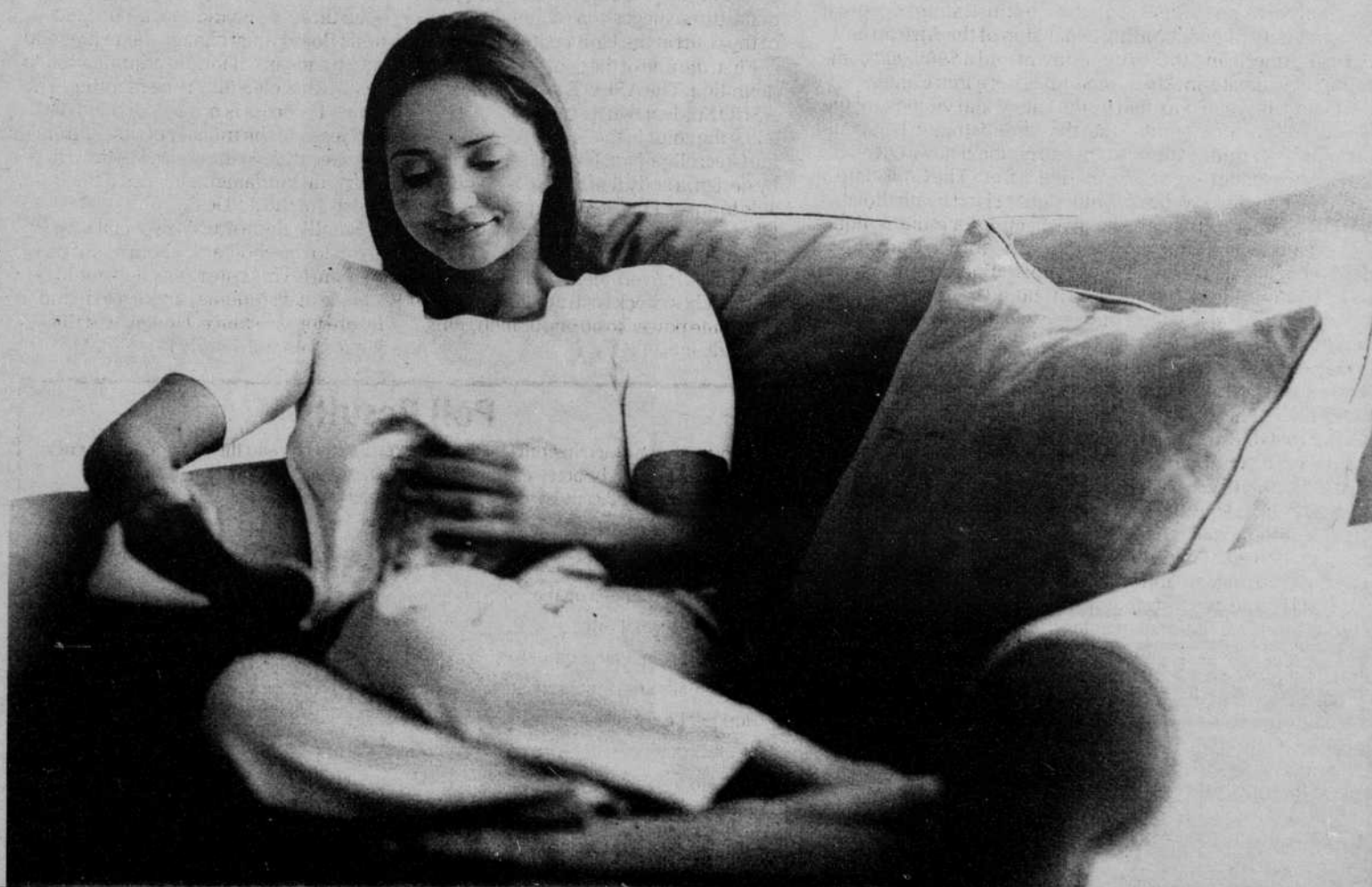
Dr. Tom Poole, associate vice provost for educational equity at Penn State, said university campuses need to consistently work toward diversity goals.

"I don't think you can even let your guard down on these things," he said. "We're on the right track, but this is a never-ending process."

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