

*"There can be no right to be racist"*

## Statement of the Ad-hoc Committee for the Rights and Dignity of the Black Academic Community.

Last February's Black History month was marred by the publication of an extremely offensive article in *Excalibur*. The article contained racist stereotypes and broad unsupported generalizations about the Black community. This was not the first incident of racist material appearing in *Excalibur*. Last November, 16,000 copies of *Excalibur* were pulled from the stands for containing a viciously racist cartoon.

The Ad-hoc Committee for the Rights and Dignity of the Black Academic Community, as its first act, took up the issue of racism in *Excalibur*. We called on the York Community to support our demand for the resignation of the editor-in-chief and assistant-editor for the repeated publication of racist material.

- \* In the space of only two weeks we gained the support of the York community.
  - \* The Ad-hoc Committee sought that a subcommittee on grievances be struck in accordance with the constitution and by-laws of *Excalibur*.
  - \* This was blocked by a majority vote of the Board of Publications. In addition to this, the Ad-hoc Committee was denied access to this meeting to represent our case.
  - \* This represented a significant failure of accountability by a newspaper which claims to "serve the York Community."
  - \* It had become apparent that if our rights were to be respected we could not rely on *Excalibur* to act in good faith.
  - \* It took a militant demonstration by several hundred students supporting our demands in order to convince *Excalibur* there was a problem they could not fail to address.
  - \* When called to account in front of the students, the editor admitted that the material published was indeed racially offensive.
  - \* The students made it clear that the only outcome that they were prepared to accept was the dismissal of the editor.
  - \* *Excalibur*, for the first time, recognized the magnitude of the outrage and indignation of the York students.
  - \* It was only at this point that *Excalibur* granted the Ad-hoc Committee our right to be heard.
- An emergency Board of Publications meeting was called at which we presented our demands. At this point the editor was removed from his position.

We realized that the problem of institutional racism would not be solved by the removal of one person but that this act would show that York students would not tolerate such an affront to a segment of their community. We therefore put forward proposals and recommendations covering two broad areas of activity:

- (a) Accountability to the general community which they serve and which is a substantial source of their funding:
- We suggested that open forums take place twice each term. One early in the first term, after the staff has been able to establish itself as a working group, and one later in the first term. There should be two further forums in the second term with the last one just prior to the *Excalibur* elections for editor.
- (b) Safeguards to ensure that insulting and demeaning stereotypes do not recur:
- A policy should be written which outlines what constitutes racist and discriminatory language this policy should be strictly adhered to.
  - Violation of this policy will constitute grounds for the removal of the editor.
  - Editorial candidates must adequately reflect an understanding of the policy and must also display a firm commitment to educate the staff accordingly.
  - The editor should be aware of the resources available to help her/him understand issues of discriminatory content and language. In this instance the editor would have benefitted from contact with the Caribbean Student Associations, the Association of African Students and others.

In the same spirit that we recognize that the dismissal of the editor was only a small step towards addressing the issue of institutional racism and that our recommendations would, if adopted, bring about meaningful change, we are conscious that *Excalibur* does not exist in a vacuum and are convinced that this is part of the larger problem of institutional racism which goes unchecked at this university.

Institutional racism has manifested itself in a number of ways. We feel that it is noteworthy that Toronto is the home of the largest Black population in Canada. We at York constitute the largest Black academic community in Canada. The issues that Black students faced in the 1970s are the same issues which Black students face in the 1990s.

- a) Visible minorities are grossly under-represented in our administration, faculty and staff. These faculties on all levels do not reflect the diverse reality which Toronto and Canada have become. There are whole programs and departments which during their history have never had a visible minority professor and in light of the diversity of the York Community, this is unacceptable.
- b) There is a growing resentment towards the lack of visible minority student representation in programs. In the same way that Black students are streamed away from post-secondary education at the high school level, they are discouraged from graduate studies as well.

We wish to send a strong signal to the York Community at large that the case of Martin Bracey is not seen as the case of an individual but one which affects our entire community. Mr. Bracey, a student in the Geography Dept., has stood up and pointed out the systemic barriers at the Faculty of Education. In matters relating to his stand, Mr. Bracey is currently facing possible expulsion from the university. His hearing is ongoing. However, we would like to point out that an injury to one is an injury to all.

One of the most disturbing examples of institutional racism which has plagued us has been the denial of adequate space in which we can develop as a community. Space at Bethune College was taken away and from that point onwards the situation only worsened. An example is that the Caribbean Student Association (one of the largest clubs on campus) finds itself relegated to the basement of the Ross Building.

The Ad-hoc Committee for the Rights and Dignity of the Black Academic Community hopes that *Excalibur* will follow the recommendations offered. We were very concerned with the editor's attempt to use the principle of "freedom of the press" to seek protection for "the Right to be Racist."

We would like to thank all those who came forward to share our concern. We have made a few small steps in dealing with this problem. The spirit in which students responded reassures us that there is a genuine will to combat racism. The struggle against institutional racism cannot be won without dedicated and collective efforts.

If you would like more information about some of the issues outlined above, a general meeting has been called for April 11, at 4 p.m., in Curtis I. Various issues of concern to York's Black student population will be discussed.

Sincerely,  
The Ad-hoc Committee for the Rights and Dignity of the Black Academic Community.  
March 28, 1991