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Campus Police Departments Struggle with Issues of Race

by Peter Schmidt

The Chronicle of Higher Education, January 9, 2015

The head of the University of Pennsylvania's police union was not pleased to hear how Amy Gutmann had ended up lying on the floor last month at her own holiday party.

Ms. Gutmann, the university's president, had lowered herself onto her back to show solidarity with student demonstrators who staged a "die-in" at her party as part of national wave of protests over the killing of unarmed black men by police officers. The high-minded rationale for her action was exactly what inspired Eric J. Rohrback, president of the Penn Police Association, to regard it as a faux pas.

In a letter published by *The Daily Pennsylvanian*, the student newspaper, Mr. Rohrback said Ms. Gutmann had delivered "a slap in the face to every person that wears this uniform and serves this university." His letter accused the protesters of ignoring how the grand jury examining the shooting of Michael Brown of Ferguson, Missouri, had "fully exonerated the officer."

The tensions that have surfaced at Penn are similar to those found at many of the nation's colleges at a time of heightened attention to how the police treat members of minority groups. Several colleges' police forces have also been the subject of recent controversies stemming from allegations they had engaged in racial profiling.

Vassar College, in Poughkeepsie, New York, was accused last year of racial profiling after campus security officers confronted two black students for using their dormitory laundromat, and called the town police on a group of local black children and teenagers who had been noisy in the library. Catharine Hill, Vassar's president, announced in August that the college had taken several steps to deal with the problem, such as amending its anti-discrimination policies to explicitly prohibit racial profiling and hiring a consulting firm to assist in a review of campus security practices.

As reported in *The Chronicle* of Winston-Salem, North Carolina, students at Wake Forest University held a town hall in November to discuss black students' perceptions that the campus police ask them for their identification far more than they ask other students, and give disproportionate scrutiny to parties held by black fraternities and sororities. Regina Lawson, the university's police chief, told the audience that her department had established a new bias reporting system and plans to train its officers to avoid unconscious discrimination.

Police Backup

As proved by President Gutmann's participation in the Penn protest, however, college administrators who take a stand against alleged police misbehavior run the risk of alienating those they depend upon to maintain order on campus.

In his letter criticizing Ms. Gutmann's action, Mr. Rohrback said, "As a supervisor of law enforcement employees, she should at the very least remain neutral and not give in to mob mentality." Administrators scrambled to mend relations. Maureen Rush, vice president for public safety, said in a letter to the campus police department that Ms. Gutmann had responded "instinctively" to the protesters and "is 110 percent supportive of each and every member of our police department, and law enforcement in general."

Under a standard it adopted in 2012, the association requires that colleges have a written directive that prohibits officers from engaging "in bias-based enforcement activity" and profiling based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, or socioeconomic status.

At the University of Minnesota—Twin Cities, administrators have stood behind the university police department in a much more concrete and controversial sense, refusing demands from black faculty, staff, and student organizations that the campus police stop routinely publishing the race of suspects in campus crime alerts.

In a letter sent a year ago to Eric W. Kaler, the university's president, the campus's Black Faculty and Staff Association joined the department of African-American and African studies and other groups in protesting what they described as an upsurge in campus crime alerts that

described suspects as black males. Arguing that the alerts had led to a rise in racial profiling, they called for the university to remove the suspects' race from crime alerts or provide a written justification for providing such information.

In an interview last month, Steve Henneberry, a spokesman for the University of Minnesota, said that there were discussions about such concerns but that the university's policy is to use racial descriptors in crime alerts. "A well-informed community is an asset to public safety," Mr. Henneberry said, "and that involves providing as much information as we can to our community."

Fighting Bias

The International Association of Campus Law Enforcement Administrators, which counts among its members the public-safety departments of about 1,200 American colleges, has sought to push colleges to end racial profiling through voluntary accreditation standards.

Under a standard it adopted in 2012, the association requires that colleges have a written directive that prohibits officers from engaging "in bias-based enforcement activity" and profiling based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, or socioeconomic status. It says such a directive should require that all officers receive entry-level and biennial training to prevent profiling, that all complaints of biased enforcement be investigated, and that complaints be reviewed annually.

It's unclear, however, how much weight those standards have. Just 18 college agencies have earned the group's accreditation, while 23 have earned accreditation jointly through the association and the Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies. Christopher G. Blake, chief staff officer of the law-enforcement administrators' association, said agencies without accreditation may well have developed their own policies against profiling.

The effectiveness of anti-bias training programs for police also remains in question.

Maria (Maki) Haberfeld, who studies racial profiling as a professor of police science at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, says when police officers are caught engaging in biased enforcement, "the first and easiest thing to say is, 'We are going to retrain them.'" She says she is skeptical, however, that officers can be taught to operate without bias in a few training sessions, because bias against certain groups can be so entrenched in their thinking. Moreover, she says, "You can come up with the most wonderful training program, but if you are not offering it to the right people it is not going to improve anything."

David L. Perry, president of the law-enforcement administrators' association and chief of police at Florida State University, says one of the main factors keeping more campus agencies from being accused of racial bias or excessive use of force is "our foundation in community-oriented policing."

Gary J. Margolis, a former chief of police at the University of Vermont who now consults for campus police departments, says he believes such agencies "tend to be a little bit more sensitive to the dynamics of race just because of the nature of an academic learning environment," where race is often discussed.

If there is a major change that the recent police-shooting controversies is likely to bring about among campus police agencies, it may be in the popularization of the body-worn police cameras.

About 350 campus agencies have watched a webinar on such cameras that the law-enforcement administrators association offered in September, according to Tom Saccenti, who helped organize the presentation as chief of police at Furman University. He says the cameras, which his own agency began using in 2013, have helped in enforcing both laws and campus codes of conduct—not just by documenting what an officer is seeing, but by changing the behavior of those being filmed.

"It is accountability for both sides," Mr. Saccenti says. "The officer knows he is being recorded, but you can clearly see that there is a camera on the police officer. We have seen a change in behavior in a lot of people who we talk to because they know they are on a recording."

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Citation Types

Type	Format
MLA Style	Schmidt, Peter. "Campus Police Departments Struggle with Issues of Race." <i>Civil Disobedience, Social Justice, Nationalism & Populism, Violent Demonstrations and Race</i>

Relations, edited by Editors of Salem Press, Salem, 2017. Salem Online.

APA Style

Schmidt, Peter. (2017). Campus Police Departments Struggle with Issues of Race. In E. Salem Press (Ed.), *Civil Disobedience, Social Justice, Nationalism & Populism, Violent Demonstrations and Race Relations*. Hackensack: Salem. Retrieved from <https://online.salempress.com>

CHICAGO Style

Schmidt, Peter. "Campus Police Departments Struggle with Issues of Race." *Civil Disobedience, Social Justice, Nationalism & Populism, Violent Demonstrations and Race Relations*. Hackensack: Salem, 2017. Accessed January 10, 2019. <https://online.salempress.com>.