UVM Board of Trustees

Board of Trustees Office

85 South Prospect Street

Burlington, VT 05405

Sept. XX, 2022

Dear UVM Board of Trustees,

The Vermont Commission on Native American Affairs (VCNAA) would like to offer some brief remarks centered upon the University event held at the Davis Center on April 29, 2022 and entitled “Beyond Borders: Unheard Abenaki Voices from the Odanak First Nation.” Several VCNAA members attended, apprehending what was about to unfold.  
  
The event was presented as an educational opportunity for “…Vermonters to listen to and take account of Native voices that have so far gone unheard in our public discourse.” To say the least, this was blatantly and intentionally misleading. While the first half of the program was largely historically evidence-based, the second half consisted entirely of opinion, aspersion, and politically-motivated and deeply polarized vitriol including personal attacks and completely denouncing the four Vermont State-recognized Abenaki tribes. This was a deliberate platforming of a campaign of political invective, sponsored by select faculty using the assets and reputation of the State’s leading educational institution to defame local indigenous communities who are just beginning to find a public way forward after centuries of official denial and public ignorance, which is as prevalent here in Vermont as it is nationally.  
  
Projected into this lack of understanding, represented by a full auditorium composed primarily of uninformed students drawn from all over the country, was an constant tirade of invective, slander, and misinformation. There was no balance, no context, and no inclusion. Questions submitted after the speaker panels were hand-screened by the moderator. The only audience question introducing the suggestion of a mediation process was dismissed as irrelevant. Any semblance of dialogue or civil exchange – in the vacuum of the audience’s lack of comprehension to what they were witnessing – was lost in the circus-like atmosphere. Sadly, the Vermont Public article that followed spread the showcased unilateral slander to thousands more listeners.

The Abenaki communities in-state, along with many allies and friends, are left deeply dismayed and grasping for explanation at how this appalling level of hate could be planned and hosted by University faculty and staff, just when UVM and the State itself are beginning to rebuild deeply damaged relationships. Disclaimers by administrators attempting to distance themselves from department sponsorships of the event - now that the true intentions have been shown - ring very hollow; these circumstances are not separable. This is not how we move forward with intention, compassion, and inclusion, “doing no harm.” We have been informed that, in the light of this display of disavowal and deeply prejudicial showcasing of innuendo, the few Indigenous students at the University are now fearful for their own safety on campus and are reconsidering their welcome. This is a complete breakdown of responsibility.

What can be done by the University to exemplify “…its values, which include a commitment to rigorous intellectual inquiry and critical thinking, and a willingness to address difficult societal issues with honesty, civility, and practicality. [The] University community values respect, integrity, innovation, openness, justice, and responsibility and promotes the intellectual capacity to engage in ethical decision making.” This is not what was demonstrated on April 29th at the Davis Center, and the Commission, with our fellow community members, are left wondering if the future of our children is left any brighter than the past has been for those who survived the assault of colonization in their homelands, now called Vermont?

We appreciate your thoughtful consideration of the effects of this deeply divisive situation and of how it was allowed to proceed under official auspices. We trust that a way forward can be found toward balance and understanding, and a complete examination can be made of policies that allow harm to continue. We, with our fellow communities, welcome your engagement.

Sincerely,

The members of the Vermont Commission on Native American Affairs

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