

## **Bias-Related Incidents**

The world now knows that Cho Seung-Hui, a 23-year-old Virginia Tech student and native of South Korea, has been identified as the gunman in the April 16th tragedy on campus that claimed 33 lives (CNN, 4/17/07).

Unfortunately, there is already some backlash. Hate-filled groups directed at the gunman are popping up on Facebook. Biased comments are being made, some of which focus on his ethnicity. There is the potential for bias-related incidents to stem from this and it's important to be prepared should this be the case. Plus, there are proactive things you can do as a student leader to contribute to a community of care—and character.

■ Take bias-related incidents seriously. When an incident motivated by prejudice occurs, it is never just a prank or bad behavior. This is a serious civil rights violation and needs to be treated as such. So, never joke or brush something off. Pay attention, immediately.

■ Notify the proper personnel. Your supervisor or advisor can help you understand the proper protocol to follow when you come across any bias-related incidents. Find out what role you should play if you come across hate-related graffiti—should you

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### **Proactive Measures**

Openness is the key to creating an environment where bias-related incidents will not be tolerated. There are several things you can do to create such a community, including:

**1. Being aware of the messages your surroundings send.**

Take a critical look at the posters you have in your room. Is anything derogatory to a specific group? Also, think about the physical environment you have created. Do the things you have on the walls promote an appreciation for diversity? Do you highlight cultural holidays on your floor calendar? Conduct a “message inventory” of your surroundings – it may help you determine whether or not you have created a truly welcoming environment.

**2. Not tolerating verbal examples of close-mindedness.**

Relaying or laughing at a joke where another group is degraded in the sense of “fun” sends a powerful message. Commit yourself to a higher standard by choosing not to laugh at or tolerate prejudiced comments from others. This may take some practice, yet the increasingly open environment you are creating with this action is well worth the effort.

**3. Offering programs on a variety of diverse topics.**

Choose to sponsor regular programs on cultural issues, human relations, conflict resolution, and more. By enhancing students’ understanding of one another, you are making sure that prejudice has fewer places to fester.

**4. Promoting and supporting independence!**

Make an effort to celebrate the individual accomplishments and strengths of others. When people feel good about themselves, it can do wonders. When people feel poorly about themselves, it can lead to the put-down of others—and this can lead to incidents of hate.

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## Bias-Related Incidents continued

wait for public safety or other personnel to see it and take pictures? How should you respond if someone is being physically or verbally attacked? Learn the ropes now so that you'll be prepared.

- Put yourself in others' shoes. None of us can know exactly how another person feels, yet empathizing to the best of our abilities is *very* important. When someone is the victim of a bias-related incident, he will need to have his fears and anger validated plus, he'll probably just need to feel safe. Support students as you would want to be supported in a similar situation, but don't assume to know how they want to proceed. Just being there for them is often enough; this can be an awful thing to experience alone.

### Following Up Effectively

Once the initial incident has been handled, devise an educational action plan with your staff in order to provide effective follow-up to the incident. Some possibilities include:

- An open forum where students can air their feelings to campus administrators and find out more about how the case is being handled from "the top."
- Small discussion groups held in conjunction with university counselors where students can candidly discuss their fears, anger, and other emotions.
- Educational programs related to the type of incident that occurred where awareness can be increased immediately.

Bias-related incidents are dangerous and degrading to targeted populations. After 9/11, many students of Arab and/or Muslim descent left campus because they felt unsafe. We want to make sure the same thing doesn't occur with our Korean students, just because the Virginia Tech gunman was from South Korea. Incidents of bias and hate contribute to the creation of an uncomfortable environment for all students who may wonder "Am I next?" Even the so-called "little" things you do can make a world of difference. And, with any luck, our world *will* become different, one step at a time.

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