



Nov-2017

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Recommended Citation

Petrosino, Carolyn (2017). In the Crosshairs of the White Nationalist Movement: Is Bridgewater State Ready?. *Bridgewater Review*, 36(2), 4-8.

Available at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol36/iss2/4

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In the Crosshairs of the White Nationalist Movement: Is Bridgewater State Ready?

Carolyn Petrosino

Social movements often emerge to bring attention to social problems and to apply sufficient pressure to affect change. The Civil Rights Movement, the Women's Movement, and the Gay and Lesbian Liberation Movement all had the primary objectives of challenging systemic oppression and neglect and attaining improvements in the quality of life for affected persons. Many among us see these as positive developments that seek a greater good: equality. But, it seems, for every action there is an opposite reaction. Social movements that are negative—that advocate the institutionalized devaluation of others—are what I refer to as *dark* social movements. The White Nationalist Movement is in that category.

For the last 18 years, I have taught a course at BSU on hate crimes. In addition to focusing on the nature of these crimes and the social harms they

bring, it provides students a historical context, and includes an examination of hate ideology, its resilience, and existential hate movements. Students

tend to view hate crime as something that occurred in the distant past and was primarily committed by the Ku Klux Klan. Coming to grips with the fact that hate crime is an ongoing and *present* problem is challenging for our students who commonly observe and embrace inclusion in a diverse social world. But recent media reports describe bold acts of racism, anti-Semitism, and other forms of bigotry occurring today on the country's college campuses. Students who were not familiar with the contemporary nature of hate crimes are having their naiveté dashed, and some of them are vulnerable to the advances of the hate movement.

Hate on Campus

Acts of intolerance, bigotry, and hate-motivated *crimes* take place on college and university campuses across the U.S. In California, the state assembly's Committee on Higher Education issued a 2010 white paper on hate incidents (behavior that does not rise to the level of a crime) and hate crimes (criminal acts) occurring across the state's public colleges and universities. The Committee's report (*Hate Violence and Bigotry on Public College and University Campuses*) mentions several disturbing



crimes: the stabbing, in April 2010, of the Chico State student body president by two men who uttered racial epithets as they did it; the slashing of a transgender graduate student at California State University, Long Beach, in April 2010; and, in the same semester, the carving of a swastika into the dormitory door of a Jewish student at UC Davis.

Similar acts have happened more recently in the eastern U.S. In May 2017, an African-American Bowie State university student, Richard Collins III, was stabbed to death while visiting friends at the University of Maryland by a white student who identified with the white nationalist movement. And in fall 2016, Black freshmen at the University of Pennsylvania were victimized by racial taunts and threats through the social media tool “GroupMe.” The text threads were titled “Mud Men” and “N---Lynching” and contained a daily lynching calendar and images of people hanging from a tree (www.washingtonpost.com, 11 November 2016). Most of these incidents were student-on-student attacks, a trend noted as early as 1993 by scholars Jack Levin and Jack McDevitt in their book *Hate Crimes*. It is paradoxical that such acts of intolerance can occur in a setting committed to nurturing enlightenment.

White Nationalist Recruitment Efforts on Campus

In April of this year, BSU faculty and students were the recipients of a disturbing email message: “Stop (or Fight) White Genocide.” The message in the emails (there were three different compositions) contended that the university’s emphasis on inclusion, multiculturalism, equality, and diversity is tantamount to embracing the extinction of the white race. The email also argued that to be “anti-racist” is to be “anti-White.” *The White Genocide Project* website describes the email campaign aimed at the BSU community:

... Large-scale mixing together of races is being forced ONLY IN WHITE COUNTRIES!

People who welcome that say they’re anti-racist. What they are is ANTI-WHITE.

Anti-racist is a codeword for anti-white.

“Diversity” is a code word for White Genocide.

“Diversity” means chasing down the last White person.

River College student Greg Withrow founded one of the first student organizations based on race—the White Student Union—in 1979. Most youth leaders in the white supremacist movement in the 1980s started their careers while either in high school or college (Hamm, *American Skinheads* [1993]).

The White Genocide Project is a grassroots effort to reintroduce ideas of racial segregation and white supremacy, and to normalize these ideas in mainstream culture. Today, this “dark movement” has energized its efforts to target

The emails were sent “to intimidate our community and to get us to respond in a way that would allow it to recruit members from around the country.”

The concerted effort to openly approach college students is an important development in the agenda of organized modern racials, though it is hardly new. Such groups have attempted to make inroads on campus settings over the last several decades. But current efforts indicate greater coordination and the effective use of social media.

In the 1980s, the Federal Bureau of Investigation reported a disturbing increase in the number of neo-Nazi skinheads and, concomitantly, an increase in violent hate-motivated acts. Federal authorities and watch-dog groups have noted that many of these acts were committed by school-age racist skinheads (C. Turpin-Petrosino, *Journal of Social Issues* [2002]). Through the efforts of the White Aryan Resistance (WAR), founded by white separatist Tom Metzger, American

American colleges and universities. In April 2017, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) reported at least 147 incidents involving the distribution of racist fliers on 107 different campuses across 33 states since September 2016 (www.adl.org). In addition, the campaign involves the sending of mass emails and organization of speeches and rallies on campuses. The outreach efforts are reportedly inspired by the campaign and election of Donald J. Trump, who has become a symbol of white nationalism to adherents of white supremacist and xenophobic ideology (K. Vogel, www.politico.com, 17 April 2017; C. Riotta, www.Newsweek.com, 17 August 2017). White nationalist organizations that are actively involved in campus campaigns include Identity Evropa, American Renaissance, and American Vanguard. These organizations advocate the idea

of America as a white homeland, white superiority, and the devaluation of all persons who are not Caucasian.

Appealing to the intellectual curiosity of college students, these groups have repackaged ideas about white supremacy as a legitimate subject for scholarly investigation, much as the eugenics movement did in the early 20th century. Emerson College was recently targeted by American Vanguard. In December 2016, several posters were placed in prominent areas on the campus with messages touting white supremacy and white nationalism. More recently, in March 2017, approximately 500 emails messaging the same theme were

to get us to respond in a way that would allow it to recruit members from around the country.”

It is vital that colleges and universities become more aware of the efforts of white nationalists to target college students for recruitment and other purposes. The current leader of the white nationalist movement in the U.S. is Richard B. Spencer, who has made clear his goal of targeting colleges for recruitment. Spencer believes that the time is right to advocate for the creation of, “a white state in America” and that students are now open to this message due to “political correctness fatigue” (S. Jaschik, [who opposed Spencer’s presence with a large-scale “silent” protest designed to show their rejection of his message. Still others protested loudly.](http://www.inside-</p></div><div data-bbox=)

This response confirms the First Amendment rights of all involved—white nationalists and those who stand in full opposition. Hate speech is offensive speech that degrades others based on race, ethnicity, gender, gender-identity, sexual orientation, religion, age, disability, nationality, or any other similar rationale. The First Amendment clearly permits the Richard B. Spencers of the world the freedom to espouse repugnant ideas. Although most who cherish democracy appreciate the importance of this constitutionally protected right, others are concerned when the First Amendment potentially compromises the Fourteenth Amendment’s Equal Protection clause. When hateful speech influences public perspectives, it has the potential to shape law and create public policy that negatively impacts vulnerable groups.

Evidence of this is offered by the Southern Poverty Law Center, which reported that in 2010 there were at least 23 candidates for public office with radical right-wing views, nine of whom they described as white supremacists or white nationalists (E. Conant, www.thedailybeast.com, 4 July 2011). Steven Bannon, the former chief strategist for President Trump, has provided a media platform for the alt-right movement (Breitbart News), which supports and advocates white nationalist ideology. All of this points to the importance of responding effectively to the efforts of white nationalists to recruit college students.

Institutions of higher education must recognize that some students are vulnerable to the messages of white nationalists and be aware that this vulnerability can affect the quality of life for all students. Several years ago,

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received by members of the Emerson College community. In an NPR interview (8 April 2017), Emerson President Lee Pelton clearly recognized what was at stake: “American Vanguard is a white supremacist group. It’s an anti-Semitic organization that believes biological and genetic determinism assert the intellectual superiority of what it calls the white race.” The emails were sent “to intimidate our community and

higher/news, 28 November 2016). Spencer gave a speech in December 2016 at Texas A&M answering an invitation from a university alum. The university was obligated to permit the engagement because, as a public institution, private citizens are permitted to use the facilities. Concurrent with Spencer’s two-hour speech on white supremacy was a counter demonstration marshalled by student groups



I conducted a study to test high-school and university students' agreement level with the messages of hate groups and affiliation potential with hate groups. Even though only a small number of study participants reported contact with written material (e.g. fliers, leaflets) from hate groups, more

College administrators and campus leaders should acknowledge that hate crimes occur on college grounds. As early as 2001, the Department of Justice (DOJ) published a major report (*Hate Crimes on Campus*) that brought to light "a range of criminal conduct from threats to bombings

threatened to kill one fellow student." In addition, he delivered photographs of Holocaust victims to one student and stated, among other things, that the photographs were "a reminder of what happened to your relatives because they too made a mockery of Christianity" (3).

Because of the predicted seismic shift in demographics in the United States, the efforts of white nationalists to appeal to mainstream white America are poised to intensify over the next several years.

than 60% of the exposed group indicated supportive attitudes towards these groups (C. Turpin-Petrosino, *Journal of Social Issues* [2002]).

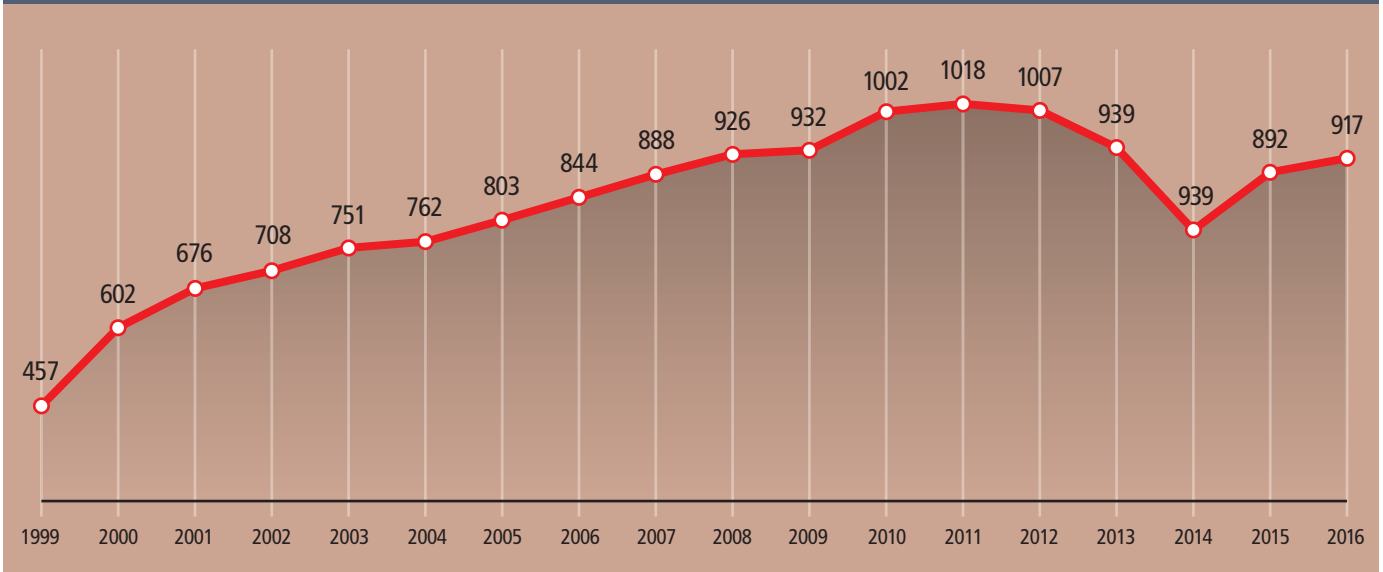
to violent physical assaults." One of these hate crimes involved a student at a small Massachusetts college, James Samar, who "used anti-Semitic slurs, threatened two fellow students, and

The Samar case is atypical compared to the more frequent types of hate crimes or hateful incidents that occur on college campuses. The DOJ report reminds us that acts of bigotry, although not hate crimes, occur far more frequently. But if bigotry (in the form of verbal harassments, racial slurs and related insults) is not challenged, the conditions for more overt hate crimes are established. Left unchecked, an atmosphere of fear and intimidation can invade a college campus and affect students significantly.

Is BSU Prepared?

When BSU received the *Stop White Genocide* emails, both students and faculty voiced disapproval and dismay. This reaction is encouraging and underscores the university's stated values, which were adopted by the Board of Trustees in December 2015:

HATE GROUPS 1999-2016



(Source: Southern Poverty Law Center, www.splcenter.org/hate-map)

In response to growing and widespread incivility, bigotry, and hostility, we, the undersigned members of Bridgewater State University, reaffirm the values of our community as a welcoming, compassionate, and intellectually rigorous learning, working, and living environment. We reject all forms of bias, discrimination, xenophobia, and violence. We re-commit ourselves to actions that put into practice our individual and institutional values of diversity, inclusion, and equality for all (<http://www.bridgew.edu/bsuvalues/>).

However, questions remain. How many students (and perhaps faculty) were intrigued by the arguments presented in the emails? How many members of the BSU community sought further information from *Stop White Genocide* or have the potential to be influenced? Should the BSU community adopt a proactive stance in anticipation of further incursions by white nationalist propaganda campaigns? Can

we better prepare BSU students from what may be just the beginning of periodic targeting by racialsists?

When the *Stop White Genocide* incident occurred on campus, it provided an opportunity for discussion in the classroom. I asked students in my hate crime class what they would want to see happen at BSU. Almost to a person they acknowledged that the reality of hate groups and their respective agendas should be brought to the attention of the student population. While some thought that the topic should be part of the orientation reserved for new students, others believed that that would be insufficient. Most students recommended that my hate crimes course (or courses like it) should be part of the core curriculum. And I agree. Too many of our students lack awareness of the extent of this problem today. Because of the predicted seismic shift in demographics in the United States, the efforts of white nationalists to appeal to mainstream white America are poised to intensify over the next several years. The United States is becoming a more diverse society, not less. These developments

antagonize white nationalists who see these changes as a form of “white genocide.” We are charged with the responsibility of equipping BSU students to effectively engage the world as they encounter it. This includes making them aware of the world view of white nationalists as they seek to shape our present and future democratic institutions and way of life.



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