

Worcester State University Bias Incident Response Team

Academic Year 2020-2021 Final Report

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Committee Membership

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Introduction

BIRT efforts during the 2020-2021 academic year began with a focus on programming addressing bias incidents reported to our campus community. As the academic year progressed, the focus of the work concentrated on mitigating and addressing bias incidents and its response.

BIRT members continue to sound the alarm in response to both anti-Black and anti-Asian bias incidents nation-wide. BIRT coordinated messaging and programming around national events of bias in collaboration with faculty, staff, and students.

As the Spring semester progressed, the global pandemic made the role of institutional efforts shift. However, BIRT continued to meet virtually as scheduled. BIRT continues to explore further programming opportunities for early Fall and work to be completed by Staff over the Summer 2021.

Achievements/ New Initiatives and Activities

- ❖ The Bias Incident Response Team (BIRT) collaborated with other campus organizations promoting DEI, while also working to alert faculty, staff and students of the severity of anti-Asian and anti-Asian Americans violence taking place in the United States. Further, BIRT issued a statement of solidarity with faculty and offices. The BIRT response was amplified by the Office of Multicultural Affairs, and Third World Alliance, the largest multicultural student organization on campus.
- ❖ BIRT outreach and awareness around its mission. BIRT undertook a review of the ways the purpose and the responsibilities of the committee were communicated to the university community (see next bullet point).

- ❖ As reviewed and suggested by BIRT last academic year, further communication around reporting mechanisms was necessary, specifically for our student population. Over the summer and during the fall and winter (2020-2021), the Office of Diversity and Inclusion met this need by developing sessions tailored in length and scope, both live and recorded, to explain the work of the Office of Diversity & Inclusion, the different DEI committees and options for reporting bias incidents as well as discrimination complaints. Sessions were offered to incoming students, RAs, student orientation leaders, SGA, among other campus groups requesting such information.
- ❖ BIRT brochure and poster branding updates will take place over the summer. This poster, which was designed by students last year, will be fully implemented and distributed in high-traffic areas on campus by fall 2021. As a result of this project, BIRT recognized the need for further updates to the brochure to bring the design of the brochure and the information provided in line with the poster itself. The distribution of the posters to high traffic areas, including residence halls, is planned to proceed ahead of the Fall 2021 semester. The brochure will be in student-centric areas and expected completion is summer 2021 so it can be used during orientation and training of key student populations.
- ❖ BIRT receives a log of complaints, BIRT incidents, and other discrimination concerns and findings handled by the Office of Diversity & Inclusion. This report includes dates, complainant and respondent affiliation, as well as the subject of the alleged discrimination and the general finding, without detailing any identifiable or other case related information. In order to continue reinforcing institutional transparency and accountability; we are recommending that such a report be shared on the WSU website going forward. The Office of Diversity and Inclusion can be the host of this information, as they update and revamp DEI institutional information under their scope. This report can be made accessible to WSU users, with the necessary firewall/security protections in place.
- ❖ The student-founded Chabad chapter was organized in the Spring of 2020. The organization serves and supports Jewish students on campus through social, cultural, religious, and educational programming; in partnership with local Jewish leadership from Central Mass Chabad and a WSU faculty advisor. During the AY 2020-2021, members of Chabad recruited eight active student members. Events included: Shabbat dinners; to-go packages; holiday to-go packages; and holiday celebrations; which are available to those at WSU who self-identify as Jewish: faculty, students, and staff, and members of the WSU community who do not self-identify as Jewish. Chabad has also been actively involved in voicing student concerns regarding rising rates of anti-Semitism and other issues of concern to Jewish students. The next academic year will include ongoing events supported by BIRT to address the concerns of Jewish students, staff, and faculty. Event opportunities include: experts from trusted organizations describing the causes and manifestations of anti-Semitism and what the university can do to eliminate it. This includes introducing the preferred definition of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's definition of anti-Semitism; Holocaust education; and diaspora education. BIRT should also be open to extra event opportunities as Jewish students respond to being back on campus.

- ❖ In the AY 2020-2021, 770 students completed the Diversity, Equity & Inclusion training module. This included incoming freshmen, Resident Assistants and students participating through course work assigned by their Faculty, both a required work and as complementary/ optional work. The Diversity, Equity & Inclusion training module incorporates topics related to identities, power, privilege, oppression, and how to create a culture of respect. Additional resources and information will be added to the EVERFI customization for the 2021-2022 academic school year, including specific information related to BIRT and how to file a bias incident report. EVERFI is an online learning platform that is assigned to targeted student populations and managed by Student Affairs personnel that are part of the BIRT.

- ❖ BIRT organized a student mentoring program for student members of the committee. It is designed to help students not only understand BIRT's role, but also help them understand their responsibilities as committee members of the team. Mentoring BIRT student representatives helped the specific students very much. Student members were encouraged to be ambassadors for BIRT. They explained BIRT's purpose to their fellow students. They also encouraged students to report events to the BIRT committee so their concerns could be effectively documented and addressed through proper institutional channels. Current students serving in BIRT have been contacted about continued support from Faculty and Staff on BIRT who have volunteered to serve in a mentor capacity. As of now, the students serving in BIRT have expressed interest for an informal type of mentoring relationship going forward, which will be explored further in summer and fall 2021.

Closing

Although a good portion of the programming taking place in the Fall and Spring semesters of AY 2020-2021 was focused on/ in response to the bias incidents that took place on campus and the national climate of hostility toward marginalized populations, the outcomes and main events such as the campus-wide Asian-American Solidarity rally and sessions around how to report incidents of bias and hate on campus, can be seen as setting the stage for future opportunities for training and messaging from this group to the campus community in any Fall 2021 scenario.

BIRT recognizes and underlines the current and ongoing challenges presented to our campus community as a result of this global pandemic, which has exacerbated bias incidents against subgroups of our population. Further, BIRT recognizes the increasing national climate of hostility towards marginalized populations, specifically the Asian-American community. As such, BIRT's work is of particular importance as we delve into more concrete plans to define the Fall semester while continuing to utilize different modalities and inclusive opportunities for accessing future programming and education opportunities. As a group, we will need to develop further efforts and define the strategy regarding communication, structuring and delivery of such opportunities in the upcoming months.