

The Student Voice

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Students of Color Question Their Place at Buckley

Minority Students Advocate for Change

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On March 4, Head of School Alona Scott sent an email to the Buckley community about an anonymous letter sent to a Black employee. According to the email, the letter included “specific, targeted, and racialized language, including the N- word.” Scott reported that the incident has been turned over to the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD). Scott wrote, “This is an attack not only on the individual who received the letter, but on the entire Black community and our community as a whole.”

A few weeks after Scott’s email about the racist letter, she sent out another email, this one announcing that Middle School Head Don Smith would not be returning next year (see accompanying article).

The loss of a prominent Black administrator, whom many students of color feel comfortable relying on, as well as an act of blatant racism towards a faculty member, have created a noticeable decline in students of color's sense of belonging on campus. Affinity groups have been holding meetings in order to discuss in depth how these events, and others like them, affect the school community.

Junior Zaiya Algee, a member of the Black Student Union (BSU), explained how racism and discrimination have impacted her sense of belonging on campus. “It's just a next level to the otherness,” Algee said. “We’re already a small group of people... It just emphasizes the fact we feel separate from everyone else.”

In response to the racist letter as well as the lack of information and support regarding the incident from the administration, members of multiple affinity groups, including BSU, Latinos Unidos, Asian American & Pacific Islander (AAPI) affinity group, and other supportive groups, collaborated and initiated a peaceful protest during the last Big Red Day. The protest consisted of making posters for students to hold during the assembly, with powerful phrases combating racism and emphasizing the community's "no tolerance" policy in relation to the issue.

Junior Mychal Bella Bowman, a member of BSU, shared the impact of seeing students work together to spread an important message. “A sense of community has always been here, but actually seeing it being acknowledged had a strong impact. When we did the posters, I got really emotional because we really can come together,” said Bowman.

While the Big Red Day protest represented a powerful opportunity for students to express their dissatisfaction with the recent events, some saw an inadequacy in the support students received from the administration. “[The protest] would've been a great opportunity for [the school] to show that they actually supported us. That would've been a really good opportunity for them to just show that they actually care and are not just saying they care,” said Anonymous Student A, who did not feel comfortable using their name.

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Smith's Departure Shocks Students

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The announcement that Head of Middle School Don Smith would be leaving Buckley and starting a consultancy practice shocked and saddened students, as they mourned the loss of a supportive, trusted figure on campus. It also raised questions of how Buckley can continue to promote itself as a school that values diversity when Smith’s departure looks to many like a continuation of the school consistently losing faculty and staff of color.

The sudden announcement of Smith’s departure stunned many in the community, but he described his parting as almost inevitable, considering an accumulation of tension throughout his time at Buckley. “I am a leader who doesn’t shy away from speaking my truth and perspective, especially because my lived experience, at Buckley and in the world, is not the same as many others,” Smith said. “Being honest and direct was/ is not always well-received. Tensions build from there, because there, quite frankly, tends to be more comfort with me having a negative experience than hearing about it.”

Smith clarified that there wasn’t a specific, inciting incident that led to his sudden exit. “I want to be clear that there were never any egregious, malicious, unprofessional decisions or behaviors that I participated in, nor would I ever. There also wasn’t any sort of big boom, so to speak, that ever happened. I struggle with decisions that lack consistency and integrity, and, as I named before, my honesty and directness is not always well-received,” said Smith.

Smith also explained that starting a consulting business was something he had been considering for a while. “Every time we did admissions events, the parents would respond in ways that were awesome,” Smith said. “So, starting an educational consulting business was something I was already going to do anyway.”

But, Smith emphasized that, if given the choice, he would have stayed at Buckley for several more years before pursuing a career in consulting. “There is a piece of [my departure] that’s mutual, and there is a piece of it that isn’t,” said Smith. “In the past three years, there’s been a disproportionate amount of work on my plate that I took on in order to support the sustainability of programming. When there was no acknowledgement of the additional time added to my plate, I knew that I needed to build my business sooner rather than later. Consulting is certainly what I was planning on doing anyway, but not necessarily this year...it probably would have been within another year or two that I would have made that decision.”

Head of School Alona Scott recognized the effects that Smith's absence would have on the school community. “I think there's going to be a lot of sadness. He's had a really big impact on the lives of the entire community,” said Scott.

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Photo courtesy of Nylah Mondesir'27

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Minority Students Advocate for Change

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Senior Leila Algee, a BSU board member, mentioned responses from the community have varied, being both supportive and negative. “[The letter] forced everyone to acknowledge what goes around on campus, which has been a good and a bad thing,” Algee said. “It’s just shown what the culture is like on campus, and the way that people really see and understand racism.”

The climate on campus has caused parents to consider unenrolling from Buckley. One anonymous BSU member shared how this has affected their feelings and those of their parents about Buckley. “Recent events have kind of caused a lot of tension between my parents and me. They don’t really want to keep me at the school given the situations,” said the student.

At the same time, in terms of supporting affected students, Buckley’s administration claims to be offering it to those directly impacted by recent events, though the effectiveness continues to be questioned. In the email addressing the anonymous letter, Scott wrote, “Our DEI office will connect with our Black students and employ-ees and with the chairs of the Black Heritage Family Network...”

DEI Director Crystal Catalan echoed that email by sharing how the DEI office has been offering support to the community since then, “by checking in with students, checking in with our Black Heritage family network ... Checking with them and making sure that we have that open line of communication ... and making sure that students at least know who is available and where they can go.” |

Students have reported a lack of outreach, however. “The administration really hasn’t talked to [Black students] in general about recent events,” said senior Corey Hardemion, a BSU board member. “They should at least talk to us, or help us process things, but they don’t talk to us at all.”

Some students are also critical of the administration’s approach to creating an inclusive environment. “I appreciate the fact that Buckley has these [affinity spaces], but I don’t think they utilize them well,” said anonymous student B, who did not feel comfortable using their name. “They’re not necessarily serving those who need it. It’s more of a service to not only the administration but also to their advertisements. They want to be able to say to prospective families that they have these services that are in support, and that you can reach out. There are parents’ associations, so the families feel a part of the campus, but in practice, I don’t believe that’s how these spaces are used.”

Many students also feel that the administration should be more open about their course of action in light of the community’s concerns. In an interview with The Student Voice on April 14, Scott gave as much of an update on the letter incident as possible, emphasizing the severity of the situation. “We’re waiting to hear from [LAPD], but I don’t expect that there’s going to be much of an update,” Scott said. “We’re hoping that they might have some forensic opportunity that is beyond the scope of what a school could have, but I have no idea where that letter came from. It’s obviously of deep concern. I really hope that we are able to find that the sender is somebody outside the community.”

Still, students want to be kept more in the loop about updates like Scott’s. In an interview with the entire BSU, students were asked whether Buckley has been transparent about issues affecting students of color. The room unanimously agreed that the school had not been.

“They definitely like to beat around the bush in general and just protect students when it comes to things that they do that are just not okay,” Leila Algee said. “There’s a lot of protection, and the consequence, even if it does fall on the student, is very private, and the other students don’t really see that consequence. It makes sense, but it makes it feel like it’s okay to do those things, because nothing will happen anyways.”

More specifically, concerning racism and discrimination, students raised concerns that there have been reports of students being “asked to leave” and, in some cases, referred to other schools, as opposed to being expelled.

According to Scott, that has not been the case. “I’m stopping to think about whether that resonates with my experience of it, and it doesn’t right now,” said Scott. She

followed up by pointing out that those students’ stories may not be accurate. “When you all are hearing things, you’re hearing from the experience of the student who’s been asked to leave or their friends who get that person’s story, versus what we might as a school wish to say. When it’s somebody’s own story, they can kind of say what they want.”

Other students feel, aside from expulsion, the consequences for students who commit discriminatory acts are not carried out in the way Buckley claims to. “They don’t really enforce consequences, unless a parent gets involved or when adults get involved, is when they actually take action and do something,” said Bowman.

Catalan spoke about the process of consequence for students. “Every situation is different, but with every incident, I will say as it comes up, either to myself or say something’s reported to (Dean of Students) Mr. Russo or (Upper School Head) Dr. Singer. We are really operating through a restorative justice framework where consequence is given,” said Catalan who explained that, “essentially, restorative justice is where accountability is held by the person or party who commits an offense or creates harm. And that person also has to be held accountable and take responsibility for what they have done. Part of that, too, is the commitment to make things better.”

Catalan also said students can receive support from multiple places on campus. “Ms. Wiltshire and I are both in the DEI office. We also have teachers, coaches, trusted adults, and program directors on campus as well. I very much recognize that students are sometimes more comfortable with some teachers than others. Of course, we have advisors; many students find a place of belonging with them. I would say there are plenty of trusted adults and resources on campus, in addition to the division heads,” said Catalan.

While Catalan listed several places for support on campus, students of color have reported otherwise. “It just feels to me that everything put on to make us feel like we belong is so fake,” Anonymous Student A said. “And the only thing that truly makes me feel like I have a sense of community here is [affinity members] and the people who are actually leaders within the space, because it just feels like we are the only ones going through the same thing and experiencing the same emotions, and that’s really the only thing that’s making me feel like I have a sense of community.”

Senior Christopher Ng, AAPI president, agreed with Anonymous Student A’s sentiment. “I don’t think Buckley has a system. The students have a system. I think certain faculty have systems like the advisors of affinity groups and the student leaders who are there for students when they need it. But I don’t think the school has that foundation, and it’s really up to the students to try and bridge these issues and communicate them with other students,” Ng said.

Scott spoke about the struggles the administration faces in supporting students due to communication issues. “I think one of the challenges is that if things aren’t reported, we can’t explore them. And if we can’t explore them, we don’t really understand the current landscape as fully as possible. And we certainly can’t issue either learning opportunities for the student or consequences for the adult who made mistakes,” Scott said.

Students, on the other hand, feel discouraged from speaking up. “[Buckley] is saying ‘Reach out for support, reach out for support,’ but we don’t feel like we can. They’re saying, you can reach out, but it doesn’t feel like it because in previous times, when we have reached out, we weren’t supported,” said Anonymous Student A.

Sophomore Nahla Bailey agreed. “[Buckley] tries to act like they [are supportive] and come off as though they are, but really, people aren’t going to these [support systems] to talk about it,” Bailey said.

Members of affinity groups have also perceived an imbalance in the treatment of the affinity groups. Bailey, who is a BSU member, shared examples that she has observed. “Buckley is better than other schools in terms of giving platforms to different speakers, but there is a bit of a disparity of who is getting assemblies. You see a lot of certain affinity groups getting multiple assemblies, family events, food fests, and a lot of platforms and I don’t see that as much with BSU or even other affinities,”

said Bailey.

Anonymous Student A agrees. “It just feels very unfair how certain groups are getting treated differently on campus and getting certain perks and not perks.”

Zaiya Algee emphasized that all affinity groups should be treated equally and given the same space. “They should really make sure that we’re supporting all the affinity groups. I feel like that would definitely make affinity spaces feel more seen on campus,” said Algee.

Catalan shared a passionate response to the question of the possible undermining of marginalized communities. “I am involved in the support for our students 100% as much as I can be in all the spaces and in all the meetings that help cultivate the student experience. So to my knowledge, there’s no undermining, especially for our student affinity groups. If anything, I want to know more about the student affinity group experience, and especially for our minority groups,” Catalan said. “I know that the Senior Leadership Team is in full support of our affinity groups. I know there have been some challenges, especially with some of the recent changes we’ve had to make, and at the same time, there’s no undermining.”

Despite the current climate on campus, students of color still have hope for Buckley and offered up changes that they feel would not only support them but also impact the campus. “I would feel supported if some admin, or just the school community in general, spoke out about the minorities and the differences, without being prompted to,” Bowman said. “After the email (on March 4), a lot of people felt obligated to speak out about it, but I think that shouldn’t be something that’s acknowledged only when something outrageous happens in our community. It should be a continuous conversation with not just BSU, but all minorities on campus.”

One major focus for students is changing the assembly process.

“The assemblies in general should be more targeted towards prioritizing change in education because of the ignorance that we see on campus sometimes with a lot of students, not just in February (during Black History Month), but all the time,” said Leila Algee

“There’s so much emphasis on having assemblies that don’t specifically talk about minorities,” Ng said. “I don’t think it’s intentional, but I think that when they schedule an assembly that’s unrelated to something that’s happening at Buckley, then it kind of takes away from the need to emphasize that issue. And sometimes when those assembly slots fill up, they don’t want to change assembly times to accommodate minority concerns. I don’t think they’re really doing a good job, because it’s the school’s responsibility to uphold student life and try to maintain what students want to see at school.”

Bailey agrees. “I feel like they don’t talk about real-world issues either. All the discussions we’ve had recently with ICE and everything going on were facilitated by a club or a student. Buckley hasn’t talked about anything going on in Iran right now, or even some of the conflicts from last year, they just didn’t bring it up at all,” Bailey said. “It just disappointed me a little bit, especially because there’s a lot of crazy stuff happening. It’s a little isolating to see them not talking about or bringing up these issues at all.”

Students also feel that Buckley needs to improve its communication about what the school is doing. “There’s little communication with students about what’s going on. [Buckley] can say, things are happening, but they have to tell us what exactly they’re doing to fix it. And if they don’t tell us what they’re doing to fix it, then [students] won’t know what is happening. And if [Buckley] is doing something, then that’s good. At least communicate with us and tell us that,” Ng said. “But if you’re not doing that and we don’t know that [Buckley] is doing anything and we notice these issues happening over and over, it just leads other students and me to conclude that the school isn’t doing anything about it.”

Students believe that if the school is serious about fostering diversity, it must prioritize taking responsibility to become more inclusive. “In order for the culture to change, there needs to be more accountability in general,” said Leila Algee.