It doesn’t meet the threshold: Asian students reported anti-Asian texts in November 2021, the search for solutions continues

By River Lisius

Content warning: This article discusses texts that emerged in February between two Occidental College students that included genocidal, racist speech toward Asian people.

The story of genocidal, anti-Asian texts between two Occidental students were released via social media Feb 1. As an increasingly outraged student body became aware of these texts, so too did senior level administrators at the college, including President Harry J. Elam Jr. and Vice President for Equity at Justice David T. Cameron Bradley.

The events that followed exposed a major gap in the college’s policies to respond to racism on campus through existing Disciplinary, Harassment, and Retaliation (DHR) Policy and student conduct processes, and also demonstrated a lack of communication between lower-level administrators and senior staff.

Several administrators had been aware of and had been responding to the texts since November 2021, when two Asian students, Shanna Yeh (senior) and an anonymous source,” first contacted Chris Argueso, director of the Intercultural Community Center (ICC) and eventually initiated the college’s DHR process.

“Throughout the whole process, I felt like there was nothing in place because I kept being shown to the next door. And each door didn’t open up to anything,” Yeh said.

In an interview with The Occidental, Elam said he became aware of the texts Feb. 2, and reviewed the screenshots of the text Feb. 3. Elam said he is immediately informed of direct and credible threats to the college, but in this case, no imminent threat was determined. Elam said that moving forward, it is his priority to reconsider when and how quickly his office learns about incidents related to racial hatred on campus.

Elam said he also works to address the gap in the college’s current processes to respond to incidents that are deeply harmful to the community, but do not reach the level of a direct and credible threat and are protected speech under the First Amendment.

“I’m working with the senior staff, as well as with faculty and students and staff to think of a system that fills that gap. To have an answer to what we’re going to do in the future, so that this is not repeated,” Elam said.

November 2021: Assessing the threat and providing support

Argueso was the first college administrator who became aware of the anti-Asian text messages when Yeh and the anonymous student met with him Nov. 17, 2021, according to Yeh and Argueso. Yeh and the anonymous student said they scheduled this meeting after becoming frustrated at Kappa Alpha Theta’s lack of action, of which Yeh, the anonymous source, Student A* and Student B* were members.

“We decided to have a meeting with the three of us to talk about what could happen,” the anonymous source said. “At this point, we weren’t like, ‘We need XYZ to happen.’ We’ve never advocated for a specific punishment. We weren’t even necessarily coming at it from a punitive standpoint. We just wanted someone to acknowledge what had happened.”

Tirzah Blanche aims to provide support and educate

By Sam Reed

Tirzah Blanche, program manager of Occidental College’s Project for a Sexual Assault-Free Environment (SAFE), has a lot on their plate. In the basement of Stewart-Cleland Hall, the office of their former role as project coordinator is conspicuously empty, with Blanche now sitting in the dimly lit office one door down. Blanche’s new position as program manager involves running most of the day-to-day operations at Project SAFE. As the Survivor Advocate, Blanche also provides confidential assistance to victims of sexual violence on campus. As announced via email, Project SAFE’s previous manager, Marianne Frapwell, left the office in April 2021. After several months serving as interim director, Blanche was officially selected Oct. 3.

“Project SAFE professional staff, historically, has [had] one person in charge of prevention — that’s a coordinator — and one person that’s in charge of advocacy,” Blanche said. “I work with people who are impacted by gender-based violence, power-based violence. As an advocate, I essentially help people to navigate the various structures, processes, things that they need to do to get their life back on track.”

Blanche said Project SAFE faced significant challenges during the early months of the pandemic, as workers were furloughed at 50 percent while training and outreach were complicated by the online format.

“When we had to go to a virtual, that sucked,” Blanche said. “We did our best. We did our best.”

However, recent changes in leadership and a push by student activists on campus have made Blanche hopeful for the future of the program, Blanche said. Despite hurdles during the pandemic, Project SAFE is finally rounding a corner.

Blanche pointed to recent protests, organized by the Oxy Sexual Assault Coalition (OSAC) in November 2021 to advocate for greater accountability from the administration, as one positive sign. And with the recent appointments of Dean Rob Flot in 2017 and President Harry Elam Jr. in 2020, Blanche said the college seems to be making strides in the right direction.

“I think with the new administration, there’s just been a new renewed interest in our approach to preventing sexual violence and doing violence on campus,” Blanche said.

The administration is making efforts to address OSAC’s demands in particular. In an announcement Nov. 16, for example, President Elam delineated a new Sexual Misconduct Training and Education Working Group — of which Blanche is a part.

Divine deep into Black history with Justin Dunnavant

By Mostyn Trudinger-Smith

Seventy years after the graduation of Occidental’s first Black students, Dr. Janet Stafford ’52, George F. Ellison ’52 and Barbara Thomas of Whittier ’52 celebrated the re-opening of Dunnavant Hall with a virtual symposium welcoming Justin Dunnavant as the Staford Ellison Wright Scholar in Residence.

Dunnavant is an assistant professor of archeology at UCLA and co-founder of the Society of Black Archaeologists. He conducts research with a wide range of questions in a wide range of locations — including the bottom of the ocean — all united by his essential project of studying Africa and the African Diaspora of the past 500 years through archeology.

Erika Ball, chair of the Black Studies department and Stafford Ellison Wright Committee Member, said that every year the committee aims to find someone who is on the cutting edge of their field and who can get students excited about the expansive nature of Black Studies.

According to Dunnavant, it is able to access the same history that the studies through literature and theory in a way most people would not consider, showcasing the diversity of disciplines that Black Studies encompasses.

“We can look for it in different places.”

Ball said. “We can look for it in print culture if you’re coming from the humanities and studying literary works, we can find it at the bottom of the ocean if you’re doing the work that Dunnavant is doing.”

Dunnavant said he first got the idea for his current project in St. Croix while visiting the island and seeing the current environmental problems.

“I got interested in understanding the colonial roots and origins of a lot of these issues,” Dunnavant said.

5 Opinions
Mia Ancaloe (phonograph) responds to the LA Times coverage of the recently emerged anti-Asian texts between two students.

6 Features
Jeff Weiss ’03 on his career in music journalism.

9 Arts & Culture
Recent film by Occidental alumnus Cooper Raff ’19 premieres at the Sundance Film Festival.

PAGE 12

TIRZAH BLANCHE

PAGE 12
Students who reported anti-Asian texts to the college detail the process, search for solutions

TEXT RESPONSE

According to Yeh, Arguedas became an important support system for her throughout the process. She said that her experience was very scary because it clouded her mind, “Like, what do we do?” Arguedas said. “I don’t want to think about it too much, because it could bias my response,” Flot said.

“Over and over again, it doesn’t meet the threshold,” Carreon Bradley said. “I got that it was the legal language, but there’s no acknowledgment of the fact that these things are words that represent sentiments that lead to actual violence. And just because this specific thing wasn’t a credible threat doesn’t mean those thoughts that are expressed by people can lead to violence in other cases.”

“Somebody else who doesn’t have the same college, but was also in the same situation was saying that she was very scared about my safety and how I would continue to be a student.” Yeh said.

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