‘End Racism Protest’ is held on the UMaine Mall
Students, faculty and community members from across the Orono area gathered on Monday to protest online comments made three weeks earlier about Columbus Day and Indigenous American peoples by members of the University of Maine College Republicans (UMCR). The comments in question were initially uploaded to the UMCR’s Facebook page on Oct. 5 and were addressed in an email on Oct. 7 by both UM President Joan Ferrini-Mundy and Vice President for Student Life and Dean of Students Robert Dana. The email from Ferrini-Mundy and Dana denied that the posts were representative of UMaine’s values, but chose to maintain their administrative policy regarding freedom of expression.

Of the nearly 100 people who participated Monday in front of Fogler Library, three spoke directly on the discrimination that has been faced by Native Americans, both historically and in contemporary society. Each of the three speakers expressed their support for Indigenous People’s Day and rejected calls that its name should be returned to Columbus Day by detailing the beginning of European colonization and the decimation of Indigenous peoples that thereafter occurred.

Desiree Vargas, a fourth-year anthropology student and one of the event organizers and speakers, directly criticized both members from the UMCR club who were in attendance and UMaine administrators. Vargas directly addressed the UMCR group for their “racism” and “bigotry,” and the UMaine administration for failing to adequately discipline the club after their online comments had surfaced.

“I created many social media posts, emails and phone calls in complaint of the College Republicans which went viral, in addition to other…complaints to the point the administration responded publicly to the College Republicans” Vargas said. “The rally today was in response to the lack of action at first from the university and because of the College Republican’s discriminatory behavior over the course of time and their post on Indigenous Peoples Day was the straw that broke the camel’s back.”

One of the professors in attendance, John Bear Mitchell, a lecturer in Wabanaki Studies, shared with the Maine Campus his thoughts on the event.

“The message communicated by the students was clear,” Mitchell said. “The altering of history to make people of privilege feel comfortable is in the past. It was clear to me that our future is in good hands and that was evident when I heard the students speak. It’s important for folks to hear that the majority of the UMaine community is not impressed with posts of hate being spun into free speech because when it comes right down to it, free speech becomes a distraction from the actual post. Conversations about this issue are really not productive if we are trying to convince one side or the other that they are right. Instead, it’s important for indigenous students and their allies to have their time together to support each other in their common stance.”

After the protest had ended, members of the College Republican’s spoke to the Maine Campus, explaining that the speakers’ reactions to their posts were overblown and unnecessary, since vigorous debate is always welcome on their Facebook page. The club’s vice president, Jeremiah Childs, a fourth-year financial economics student, further stated that the comments had been entirely misinterpreted and that the responsive email sent by Dana and Ferrini-Mundy had only increased the political hostility already existing on campus.

“Our biggest problem with the event was the slanderous misrepresentation of our group,” Childs said. “They did not actually quote or correctly portray any of our posts that were published on our official Facebook page. Also, the criticism was for the most part unwarranted, as our content is not outside the political mainstream of right-wing politics. The vice-chairman of our party, Mayor Nick Isgro and Paul LePage both supported our group’s effort in promoting Columbus Day.”

When asked for his thoughts on the university’s electronic communications policy, Childs said that because his group was not in violation thereof, he did not expect any punitive administrative action to be taken, but opined that “the only thing stopping the school from ending free speech on campus is federal funding.”

On Wednesday of the same week, the UMCR hosted Republican State Senate candidate Larry Lockman who spoke on the subject of Maine’s immigration system. In his comments, Lockman criticized the “racism” exhibited in what he referred to as the state’s “unbridled” immigration policy, which he argued has favored immigrants from “poverty-stricken third-world nations.”

“I don’t believe politicians in Augusta, or in Portland, have any business enacting legislation or policies aimed at achieving some progressive notion of what the proper racial balance in Maine ought to be,” Lockman said. “Speaking as a legislator, it’s none of our business.”

In addition to representatives from the UMCR and other interested guests, nearly 15 student-protestors assembled during Lockman’s address, some of whom held signs rebuking him for his comments regarding immigration. The protestors also denounced a statement he had previously made equating the severity of rape with that of abortion.

“Our community came together to resist and decry the darkness and horrors of racism and exclusion,” Dana said concerning Monday’s “End Racism” protest. “History is full of examples from which we must learn. Monday’s coming together was an opportunity to reflect on the brutal treatment of Native Americans throughout history and across the land, including here in the Penobscot homeland. I am thankful our community came together to support Indigenous Peoples and all marginalized people.”
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