

Undoing Racism Workshop to Arrive at New School

News

Apr 25, 2012

213

After a long and contentious series of negotiations, The New School is set to host an “Undoing Racism” workshop next fall. Despite support from the offices of the president and the provost, the workshop has provoked heated debate among the students who proposed it and the University Student Senate, with many arguing that the university’s money could be better spent elsewhere. Sponsored by the People’s Institute For Survival And Beyond, a social justice and anti-racism organization, the event will be two and a half days long and will cost \$15,000 to



UNDOING RACISM
The People's Institute
For Survival and Beyond

facilitate.

A group of New School for Public Engagement students first proposed “Undoing Racism” to the USS last November, with hopes that the workshop would be held this spring. NSPE student Joe Pressley participated in an “Undoing Racism” workshop several years ago and felt that its philosophy — that even a liberal and progressive community can struggle with issues of racism — would be an appropriate fit for The New School.

USS senators Melissa Holmes and Mimi Clitus were early supporters of the program, with Clitus among the NSPE students who initially championed its arrival at The New School. Both believed that “Undoing Racism” would expand the university discourse about diversity and social justice. Pressley hoped such discussions would become “imbedded in the community by making it part of the curriculum.”

But according to the USS' meeting minutes, some students raised concerns about accountability for a program that held such a significant cost. Senators asked the students who made the first proposal to return in the spring with a more thorough explanation of how the workshop works and the programs it would offer.

The same group of students brought a second proposal to the senate on March 1, which, according to Holmes, was short notice for an event that students wished to hold in April. Those at the meeting discussed where the workshop would be held and how the USS could find enough money to pay for the program within a month. Questions also remained about what exactly "Undoing Racism" would entail. Still, USS treasurer Hajir Sailors motioned to allocate \$5,000 to the group, but earmarked the funds for Fall 2012. This, he said, would give the group time "to develop a program that could be well-integrated into The New School curriculum."

"It's a start, but we were hoping to get more," Pressley said.

The People's Institute, which is based in New Orleans, operates the "Undoing Racism" workshop regionally. Sandy Bernabei, a professional psychotherapist and New York state regional coordinator for "Undoing Racism," helps run the program in her spare time. Bernabei, who got involved with the People's Institute 15 years ago, is one of 70 regional coordinators in the North East, and helps organize the 20-plus meetings that happen in the tri-state area every month.

The 40-person workshop, Bernabei said, attempts to confront systemic racial inequality by focusing on the history of the issue. "It's not about personal sharing," she said. "It's about, 'Can you absorb this history, can you absorb the structural analysis surrounding this history, that we are all a part of?'"

According to its rules, the USS cannot grant more than \$5,000 to a proposal in one semester. Still, Holmes said that the senate has found a way to fund two-

thirds of the workshop: the current senate has given the proposal \$5,000 this semester, with another \$5,000 that can be applied by next year's senate.

“[The USS] is doing as much as we can within our own confines to really make sure that this does happen,” Holmes said. The rest will be paid by either the provost's office, the president's office, or the Social Justice Initiative, which also have a limited amount of funding to offer.

Along with President David Van Zandt, Provost Tim Marshall has vocally supported incorporating a program like “Undoing Racism” into The New School's curriculum.

Marshall said he is aware that there is debate over the program's cost, but supported its implementation after reading testimonials from other universities that have hosted the workshop, such as NYU. According to Marshall, the “Undoing Racism” workshop is now guaranteed to happen at The New School early next semester. “I just said, ‘Let's do it,’” said Marshall.