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It's time to discuss race relations on campuses

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Regional

It's time to discuss race relations on campuses

During the first week of March a nine-second video recorded a few days earlier went viral on the Internet and then throughout all conventional media. The video showed members of the Sigma Alpha Epsilon (SAE) chapter of the University of Oklahoma singing a song that included the N-word and made reference to lynching.

The president of the university, David Boren, ordered the SAE house shuttered, expelled the two students identified as the ringleaders and made strong verbal condemnation of the behavior.

By reading the press reports we saw that there were a large number of people who, while condemning the whole incident, showed surprise by the swift and firm response by the president of the university. Why would this be?

First, most college leaders tend to be very circumspect when dealing with "hot" issues such as race, sexual assaults and the like. Yet, Boren, a lawyer, knew what he was doing.

While at Yale he was a member of the controversial undergraduate secret society Skull and Bones. He is also a seasoned politician who served as governor of the state from 1975 to 1979. In 1967, while serving in the U.S. House of Representatives, he was a member of a committee that investigated OU for inviting Paul Boutelle, a black militant, socialist and Vietnam War activist to give a speech there. He then served as a U.S. senator from 1979 to 1994. In this position he helped to orchestrate U.S. efforts to have Nelson Mandela

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released from prison in South Africa.

So, Boren knows about the culture of college close-knit student societies and also about controversial political issues that have a racial component.

The other surprise that some people expressed was about this type of behavior in what is supposed to be a post-racial America. But for those of us who have had long experience in academia, this incident was of no surprise. At the same time that the incident at OU surfaced, similar incidents (but without videos) were being investigated at fraternities at Louisiana Tech University, The University of Texas at Austin, the University of Maryland at College Park and the University of Washington.

Nolan Cabrera, an assistant professor at the University of Arizona who has studied these issues, recently gave an interview to The Chronicle of Higher Education in which he said that this type of behavior is not confined to the Deep South and that it is more common throughout the country than people think. He also said that such misconduct is not confined to Greek life either. What happens is that members of those organizations feel less accountable for their actions. They also oftentimes become important alumni donors of the

university. In fact, alumni of the SAE chapter of the OU have already hired a lawyer to work with the students expelled.

The perception that this is a problem limited to the Deep South comes from two sources. One is that the SAE itself was founded in 1856 at the University of Alabama and held its Southern heritage close. "We came up from Dixie land," says a ditty from an old SAE songbook.

The other is that a similar well-publicized incident took place in 2001 at Auburn University, also in Alabama. Then a group of 15 students, members of Beta Theta Pi, who had worn Ku Klux Klan uniforms and blackface to fraternity Halloween parties were suspended. The then interim president of Auburn, William F. Walker, also used strong language condemning the incident. Yet, within weeks of the president's public stance, an Alabama judge ordered the university to reinstate most of the students. The argument used in court? What those students did was protected speech.

And this brings us to the other bone of contention in this whole issue. Should this kind of behavior be acceptable because the First Amendment protects it?

First of all, the First Amendment is not absolute. That is why child pornography is severely persecuted not only in this country but also in any other country that protects freedom of speech. So, how can we avoid this type of behavior from repeating?

One problem in today's American society is that we do not want to talk about race outside our comfort

zone. And that is an issue more serious than most people think, particularly on college campuses.

Postsecondary educational institutions are supposed to be places for the discussion of all kind of issues, including those that can be uncomfortable or controversial. Yet, we rarely see these discussions happening outside a few classrooms where the issue of race is specific to the subject matter of the course.

Unless we take a more decisive stance on this matter, change will not happen. Many surveys in recent years have shown that after the election of Barack Obama as the first African-American president of the United States, race relations have not improved as had been expected. Incidents like the ones in Ferguson only highlight that sentiment.

I believe that discussions about race need to take place more frequently, forcefully and openly on campuses across this country. And those discussions need to be led by college presidents. Regardless of what you may think of Boren's actions in relation to its legality and due process, the fact of the matter is that he saved the name of his institution for, at least, as long as he is its president by showing courage and moral fiber.

That is what is called leadership.

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The opinions expressed in this column are those solely of the author.