

## 15. Day of Absence

At Evergreen College, students created a tradition to emphasize the lack of inclusion of people of color: each year they took one day to be a Day of Absence, in which students and faculty of color leave campus and meet elsewhere to participate in programs and discussions.<sup>68</sup> After the Day of Absence, a “Day of Presence” follows in which campus groups are reunited.<sup>69</sup> About 200 of the College’s 4800 staff and students participated each year. The goal of the exercise was to battle racism and emphasize the importance of minority voices to the campus community.<sup>70</sup> In 2017, however, minority groups on campus upped the stakes. Instead of removing their presence from the campus community for a day, they asked white students and faculty who wished to participate to leave campus and participate in programs and discussions.

The request, according to the Director of the college’s First People’s Multicultural Advising Services program, was designed to allow white students to show solidarity with minority students. Echoing a frequently cited talking point, one former Evergreen student argued that part of dismantling white supremacy was giving up white spaces to people of color.<sup>71</sup>

The proposal was controversial. Most notably, Bret Weinstein, a history professor at Evergreen, challenged the request in a widely distributed email. He argued that asking white students to leave campus went too far in the other direction and promoted exclusion rather than inclusion. He distinguished between the previous form of the Day of Absence which he called a “call to consciousness” and the new request as a “show of force” and an “act of exclusion.”<sup>72</sup>

After the Day of Absence and the Day of Presence took place without incident, word of Professor Weinstein’s email got out. Some students called for Weinstein’s firing and accused him of racism. Weinstein refused to back down, citing demonstrations and campus police’s inability to keep him safe from student groups that were supposedly searching for him demanding his ouster.<sup>73</sup> When word of the controversy made it into the media, it caused national attention (including an interview by Weinstein on Fox News), bringing a firestorm of online threats and harassment to Weinstein as well as the student activists who set up the Day of Absence. Many saw the issue as being about more than race and inclusion. They saw the attacks on Weinstein as evidence that Evergreen students did not support the freedom of speech for those who disagreed with their tactics. Threats to bomb the campus even caused the closure of the campus.

In 2018 the Day of Absence was cancelled, according to school officials, because people mischaracterized the event. In its place, the College is considering “different and expanded”

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<sup>68</sup> WALKER ORENSTEIN, “Read the email exchange that sparked protests against an Evergreen professor” The Olympian, June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017. <https://www.theolympian.com/news/politics-government/article153826004.html>

<sup>69</sup> <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/05/30/escalating-debate-race-evergreen-state-students-demand-firing-professor>

<sup>70</sup> Scott Jaschik, “Who Defines What Is Racist?” Inside Higher Ed May 30<sup>th</sup>, 2017. <https://www.facebook.com/events/2240072412884080/>

<sup>71</sup> @NorthwestNina, Former Evergreen Student’s Public Letter. [https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B1d1t1z\\_127eZG9kZW9naGJlVDA/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B1d1t1z_127eZG9kZW9naGJlVDA/view)

<sup>72</sup> “DL on the Faculty DL: Update on the Email Chain” Cooper Point Journal, April 10<sup>th</sup> 2017. <http://www.cooperpointjournal.com/2017/04/10/dl-on-the-faculty-dl-update-on-the-email-chain/>

<sup>73</sup> Bret Weinstein, Public Comments, May 24<sup>th</sup>, 2017. <https://twitter.com/BretWeinstein/status/867584422941384705>

ways to have conversations about race and inclusion.<sup>74</sup> However, students later organized a Day of Absence independently of the school.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Lisa Pemberton, “Evergreen cancels annual ‘Day of Absence’ event that sparked backlash and protests” February 27<sup>th</sup>, 2018. <https://www.theolympian.com/news/local/article202266074.html>

<sup>75</sup> Nina Godlewski, “‘DAY OF ABSENCE’ AT EVERGREEN STATE COLLEGE CONTINUED BY STUDENTS AFTER SCHOOL CANCELED EVENT” May 16<sup>th</sup>, 2018. <http://www.newsweek.com/evergreen-state-college-protest-day-absence-2018-canceled-928693>