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EDITOR'S PICK

Community leaders call for 'zero tolerance' policy following noose costume outrage

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PHOTO BY SAIYNA BASHIR

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Dane County Boys and Girls Club CEO Michael Johnson addressed reporters at Camp Randall Stadium Wednesday, flanked by other community leaders.

Madison community leaders are calling for a review of the University of Wisconsin-Madison's stadium policies and for a zero tolerance policy when it comes to racist behavior on the university's campus.

Their call for change at a press conference outside of Camp Randall Stadium Wednesday followed a Saturday incident where a man wearing a prison jumpsuit with masks of Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton was led around by another man wearing a Donald Trump mask and holding a noose.

“We need to call these things out for what they are: hate speech, not free speech,” UW-Madison student Devon Hamilton said.

The individual was not ejected on grounds that the costume was considered free speech, although stadium staff reportedly asked him to remove the noose.

Camp Randall's carry-in policy stipulates that Halloween costumes worn at the stadium must be of an "appropriate nature."

While the community leaders did not provide details of what a zero tolerance policy would look like, Dane County Boys Club CEO Michael Johnson said he is talking with athletic director Barry Alvarez and has talked with the UW Police Department in an effort to analyze stadium policies.

“Any time someone feels comfortable bringing a noose in a public space should not be tolerated,” Johnson said.

After Saturday's incident, Chancellor Rebecca Blank released a statement that was criticized by the community as being too soft.

“As offensive as this costume was, I believe our university must resist the desire to outlaw forms of speech and political dissent with which we disagree,” Blank said in the Oct. 30 statement.

Alvarez and Blank released a joint statement Tuesday recognizing the noose costume as “one of the vilest forms of racial hatred and intimidation in our country's history.” The Athletic Department and the university's Office of Legal Affairs are reviewing stadium policies to prevent this type of behavior, they said in the statement.

“A noose displayed in this fashion has no place on campus,” the statement said. The statement did not explicitly ban nooses from the stadium.

University Communications spokesman John Lucas Tuesday's statement is of "a different nature," pledging action and released after the university heard public reaction.

The community leaders in attendance Wednesday said they wanted to present a united front to students who feel unsafe on campus because of this and other racially-motivated incidents.

“The national slur of a lynch around someone’s neck is something we will not accept,” Tutankhamun “Coach” Assad, founder of the Mellowhood Foundation, said. “This is not just about a noose, this is about this culture of complicity that allows the best of us to walk around terrorized.”

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Caliph Muab’El, head of Breaking Barriers mentoring, characterized the university’s second statement as a “defense mechanism” that reflected community outcry after the incident and first response.

“In my mind the first response is what you feel the most,” Muab’El said. “The second response is a collateral response based on what happened.”

Kaleem Caire, a UW-Madison alum, questioned how this would affect recruiting students to the university. Many of the leaders also work with youth in the Madison community, some of whom are looking ahead to attending universities like UW-Madison, and say incidents like Saturdays jeopardize connections.

“We need to expect more out of the university,” Caire said.

Though Muab’El and others typically deal with the broader Madison community, they felt it necessary to speak out on the university incident to express support for students of color on UW-Madison’s campus.

“Although we’re not on campus ... we understand human decency,” Muab’El said. “We understand torment, we understand what it is to be unsafe, and so we don’t have to be there to understand how those people feel.”