

Panel discussion: Minorities, Law Enforcement and the Binghamton area

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By John Miller

Racial profiling and racial tensions between the police and minorities are not a major social issue in the Binghamton area, according to a panel of local experts.

On March 5 in the Decker Health Sciences Building, an open forum was hosted by Associate Professor Scott Corley and the President's Taskforce on Diversity and Inclusion. The purpose was to discuss the relationship between minorities and law enforcement following the Michael Brown, Eric Garner and Tamir Rice shootings. The panel included Professor Major Barnett, the Binghamton police chief, the Endicott police chief, Assistant Professor and Chair of the Criminal Justice Department Kerry Kalic-Weber, and the director of the Syracuse ACLU office.

Both police chiefs agreed that racial profiling is not a major problem in the area; Binghamton Chief Joseph Zikuski went on to say that, "Because of our small size, we don't share the same racism related issues with larger cities such as Syracuse, Utica and Philadelphia." According to Endicott Chief Michael Cox, all of his officers receive yearly training that deals with cultural competency and tolerance. Zikuski added that his police force does not have a stop-and-frisk policy. Stop-and-frisk policies have been the subject of much debate because many say they violate a person's Constitutional rights.

However, despite these preventative measures, some racially driven incidents have reportedly occurred in our area. Claudia Clarke, the Director of the Educational Opportunity Program at SUNY Broome, said that a well-known local doctor was stopped every night by the Binghamton police on his way to the bank while making his daily deposits. According to Clarke, he was targeted because he was a young black man. Although she has never been a victim of racial profiling herself, SUNY Broome student Katherine Shelton reported that her father has been harassed because of his race. Binghamton graduate student Matt Yudin said that he "...feared minorities were underrepresented in the Binghamton Police Force." Chief Zikuski confirmed that less than 5% of his force is African American. He explained that, unfortunately, very few blacks sign up to take the test and so far no one has been able to find a solution to this problem.

Doug Bonawitz, an almost 30-year veteran of the SUNY Broome and Binghamton University security departments, reported that in all his years, he has never seen or heard of a race-driven incident on either campus.

Despite their different backgrounds, all of the panelists agreed that racial profiling on behalf of law enforcement

is a major national issue and that police need to be more involved in the communities in which they serve in order to build a trusting relationship between the citizens and the officers. The panel also agreed that the national media only shows the negative interactions between minorities and the police. According to Professor Weber, there are many more positive interactions between law enforcement and the communities they serve; by not showing these interactions, the national media is only hurting the situation. ACLU Syracuse Director Barrie Gewanter added that the media is only “enforcing stereotypes.” Chief Cox also said that tolerance needs to be ingrained in police departments and in new recruits from the beginning.

The event had an excellent turnout, and a diverse crowd of students, faculty and members of the community packed the lecture hall.

Writer John Miller is a SUNY Broome student.

**Left to right: Endicott Police Chief Michael Cox,
Professor Major Barnett and Professor Kerry
Weber**

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