Guilt by Association

The decision by a disciplinary panel to compel Metcalf residents to attend a mandatory dormitory meeting last night in response to several cases of homophobic behavior in the dorm is unjustified and counterproductive. While there is a need to educate the Tufts community about homosexuality, the means employed here sacrificed student’s rights. The solution is long-term education, and that will not be accomplished by one meeting of Metcalf residents.

The panel has adopted a standard of guilt by association to justify its decision to coerce the residents to attend the session under penalty of a $25 fine. The arbitrary action of the panel fails to solve the underlying problems that led to the harassment and may create new difficulties in dealing with serious problem of homophobia. The result of the panel’s action would work against its intent if homophobes direct their irrational anger at the gay and lesbian community on campus, when that group is not responsible for the panel’s actions. The perception that TLGBC is to blame for the panel’s decision is entirely unwarranted.

The panel assumed an unprecedented degree of authority by ordering the residents to attend a dorm meeting after a lesbian student was harassed with homophobic graffiti over Columbus Day. The panel cited past incidents of homophobic behavior within Metcalf to justify its decision; however, the two defendants brought before the panel were absolved of any responsibility. If the panel felt that the incidents were extreme enough to warrant dorm-wide action, then why wasn’t a more thorough investigation conducted to find the guilty parties. The final decision allows the panel to skirt its responsibility. Collective guilt was attached to the dorm when the panel failed to find the culprits. It is improper for an entire dorm be subject to a penalty for a violation committed by one or a few students.

But does a disciplinary panel have the power declare this punishment? Once more at Tufts, punishment has been handed down before policy has been established. The Pachyderm states that all students have the right to several procedural guarantees, which includes the right to “a fair hearing before a dean or an impartial panel or committee.” If the residents are appearing under the sanction of the panel, then they have the right to appeal the decision. These procedural guarantees have been violated for Metcalf residents.

The panel would have been better advised to have issued a scathing condemnation of the harassment that occurred, and called for an institutionalized diversity program that would address issues of sexual orientation. Such a call might prompt the faculty or the Administration to further strengthen diversity programming. Students must be educated in a more comprehensive manner than is currently done with the Orientation diversity programming.

The institution of diversity programming in general and the creation of forum following a specific incident of harassment are separate matters. Individual incidents require prompt investigation and disciplinary action, while protecting the rights of the accused. Homophobia probably occurs in every dorm on campus. Solutions must be created on a more broad-based level, and not on the presumed authority of a disciplinary panel. The panel’s decision only serves to trample students rights. As for residents who refused to attend the meeting, they should appeal any fines to the Committee on Student Life. Hopefully, the CSL’s decision will be more judicious than that of the panel.