Anti-Islam message written in chalk on University of Michigan's Diag

Niraj Warikoo , Detroit Free Press Published 9:37 a.m. ET March 31, 2016 | **Updated 4:58 p.m. ET March 31, 2016**



(Photo: Rami Ebrahim)

"Stop Islam," "Build the Wall," "Stop the Rape of Europe," and "Trump 2016" were written in chalk Wednesday on a central plaza on campus at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, causing concern at the university and a debate over free speech.

Some Muslim students felt the university should have cleaned up the hateful messages on the Diag, but a university spokesman said Thursday that it allows messages to be written in chalk on campus plazas. When the university didn't respond to their requests to remove the chalk on the Diag, a group of students washed away the bigoted remarks, but left the Trump messages because it didn't want to infringe on political speech.

"We specifically made it a point to not remove the chalk that was simply pro-Trump (even though we do not agree with his hateful ideas)," said university student Rami Ebrahim. "We wanted to ensure that we weren't infringing on anybody's political free speech."

Rick Fitzgerald, a spokesman for the University of Michigan, said in a statement on Wednesday: "Someone used chalk to write a #stopislam message on the main square in the heart of our campus known as the Diag. Attacks directed toward any member or group within the University of Michigan community, based on a belief or characteristic, are inconsistent with our values of respect, civility and equality."

"We all understand that where speech is free it will sometimes wound," Fitzgerald said. "But our message is this: We are fully committed to fostering an environment that is welcoming and inclusive of everyone. Tonight we are reminded there is much work yet to be done."

> Our wonderful university! And us Muslim Students were the ones who had to clean it up in the end #stopislamphobia (https://twitter.com/hashtag/stopislamphobia?src=hash)pic.twitter.com/mKmc0jJGWp (https://t.co/mKmc0jJGWp)
>
> — Rami (@ERebrah) March 31, 2016 (https://twitter.com/ERebrah/status/715331794271387649)

U-M sophomore Anna Silver, 20, told the Free Press she saw about five young adults — a mixture of males and females — Tuesday night chalking in the Diag area when she was walking to the library around 10 p.m. with a friend.

Silver said she's previously seen people chalking Donald Trump's name on the Diag around the large block "M," and she thought they were doing something similar this time. She was shocked when she saw news stories about the hateful messages.

"...It's pretty shocking that amount of ignorance and hate still exists on a university campus," Silver said.

Trump has made negative remarks about Muslims and Islam in recent months, as have some other Republican presidential candidates, concerning civil rights advocates.

"We are concerned that these recent anti-Islam and anti-immigrant messages are creating an environment in which some students, teachers and other university faculty members feel unsafe on campus," said Dawud Walid, the executive director of the Michigan branch of the Council on American-Islamic Relations. "We encourage anyone who has information about these messages to immediately contact the university's Department of Public Safety."

Fitzgerald said: "We do not typically remove chalk on sidewalks or walkways. It is a regular occurrence across campus and on the Diag."

He said that the university's policy on chalking reads: “Chalking with water soluble chalk is allowed on University sidewalks and plazas. Chalking is prohibited on other University property including, but not limited to, buildings, columns, seating walls, steps, and other surfaces, structures and fixtures. The University has no responsibility for maintaining or removing chalk placed on sidewalks or plazas.”

Ebrahim said students were told by university authorities the anti-Islam message couldn't be removed because it was late in the day.

"We were just upset that the university didn't adequately address the situation, to the point where they wouldn't send anybody to clean it up because it was after hours," Ebrahim said. "It's a systemic problem that the University hasn't paid much attention to ... addressing this type of climate created on campus."

Banen Al-Sheemary, a student, said: "This is reflective of the deep racism embedded in our university. This doesn't only impact Muslims but all students of color. ... the administration isn't proactive in combating these hostile attitudes. When silent, it perpetuates and allows this type of behavior to continue because it sets a precedent that it is all right to target students because the administration will not take any concrete steps."

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Workplace bias complaints pour in from Mich. Muslims (http://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/2015/12/21/workplace-bias-complaints-pour-mich-muslims/77721248/)

We stand together. We are better than bigotry. (http://www.freep.com/story/opinion/editorials/2015/12/08/free-press-editorial-muslims-trump-bigotry-we-stand-together/76974510/)

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