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America Can't Seem to Kick its Racist Costume Habit

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“When you know better, you do better,” the old adage goes, and colleges are working hard to make sure that their students know not to wear racist or offensive costumes this year.

The University of Oklahoma sent a memo reminding students that costumes should be “designed respectfully”; the University of Wisconsin at Madison told students that they’re free to wear what they want, but “racist, crude, and culturally insensitive costumes say a lot about the person wearing that costume”; and Ohio University, too, posted a reminder to “use good judgment when choosing a costume.” It’s become a tedious, if necessary, routine for institutions hoping to avoid a scandal.

However, some people’s impulses to wear racist or offensive Halloween costumes aren’t going away. Year after year there are reports of people wearing blackface, Native American headdresses, and caricatured costumes of Mexican people. A cursory search of this Halloween season yields yet more examples of such behavior.

Last week, a student at Brigham Young University donned blackface to attend a Halloween party on campus. The response was swift. Administrators started investigating the “improper and offensive behavior.” Ed Carter, the director of BYU’s School of Communication, apologized on behalf of the school—of which the student is a major. The student, for his part, apologized as well.

A 2017 Cato Institute survey of the “State of Free Speech and Tolerance” found that 65 percent of college students say they should be able to discuss offensive costumes without administrator involvement—though there were sharp divides when that data was broken down by race. Seventy-one percent of white students said that students should be allowed to discuss and resolve on their own, while 56 percent of Latino students, and 43 percent of African-American students responded that way. But if student conversations alone could solve the issue of offensive costumes, there would not likely be a fresh crop of them in headlines every October.

Of course, the scope of racist or offensive Halloween costumes isn’t limited to college campuses. Take the first-grade teacher in Iowa, for example, who wore blackface to a Halloween party earlier this month as the character Lafawnduh from the movie *Napoleon Dynamite*. Or consider the father in Kentucky who dressed himself as a Nazi soldier and his son as Adolf Hitler last week as a historical costume for a trick-or-treating event.

“I think it was in bad taste for me to let my child to wear that, probably for me to wear that,” the father told a local news outlet. “It didn't occur to me. I thought it was a bad decision on my part.” This is a common refrain after a racist or offensive costume is donned: *It didn't occur to me that it was wrong*.

Megyn Kelly, whose unceremonious departure from NBC following her remarks about blackface held national attention last week, made a similar plea. “What is racist?” the former daytime host asked. “You truly do get in trouble if you are a white person who puts on blackface at Halloween or a black person who puts on white face.” And, in her initial estimation, that shouldn't have been the case. “That was OK when I was a kid, as long as you were dressing like a character,” she said.

A day later, Kelly apologized for her comments. “I'm sorry,” she said. “I defended the idea, saying as long as it was respectful and part of a Halloween costume, it seemed okay. Well I am wrong and I am sorry.”

There are those who argue that offensive costumes are a form of free expression, or, more innocently, done in the name of cultural exchange. However, as Mia Moody-Ramirez, a professor at Baylor University, notes, “cultural appropriation is distinct from equal cultural exchange because of the presence of power inequities that are a consequence of oppression.”

Not to mention the fact that “cultural exchange” is rarely the argument made in the aftermath of such events. The *it didn't occur to me* argument is more common—despite an annual cycle (2017, 2016, 2015, 2014, 2013, and so on) of offenses, apologies, and claims of unawareness. And on campuses, despite routine efforts by administrators and fellow students alike to nip any offensive costume ideas in the bud, the incidents are guaranteed to happen anyway. News outlets may as well just have a skeleton post titled “College Student Facing Discipline After Blackface Incident” prewritten and waiting on October 31.

The old saying that with knowledge comes a change in behavior isn't holding up. This year, there were incidents of blackface, at least one of which happened on a college campus. A father and son dressed as Nazis. And that was all before Halloween day. There will, seemingly inevitably, be more instances, because after years of warnings, America still hasn't learned.