

## Gray matter?

"Racism" is an ugly word.

Ugly words abound on this campus.

The current racial tension on campus was altogether too evident Monday night at the Executive Committee meeting, where Student Association for Black Unity (SABU) member Billy Rhinehart and members of the EC discussed the possibility of a black ad hoc member to either the EC or the Student Control Committee or both. Tempers began the slow boil of exasperation.

Putting aside for a moment the question of token black representation on any committee, we as a campus need to take a step backward and look at the situation in a large perspective. Blacks at Washington and Lee are an obvious minority. Out of a total enrollment of more than 1,700 on both the law and undergraduate campuses, fewer than 25 students are black. Until March, no black student had ever been elected to the EC. Black membership in social fraternities has always been next to nil. During Rush deliberations last fall, at least one house was divided over giving a bid to a black student simply because of the color of his skin. Racial jokes are exchanged among white students on and off the Colonnade. Black students, almost without exception, all sit together in the dining hall, as if the table were reserved or assigned. Few black students have enjoyed prominent leadership positions on campus.

It is more than coincidence that black history at Washington and Lee lacks luster and shine. We can assign some of the blame to the school's location (after all we did fight a war a hundred years ago in part because of the question of the rights of blacks). Other factors include the social structures present at the school that do not encourage multiracial participation and the expressions of white racial superiority still felt by the very minute black minority. All of these in some way encourage the continuation of the present system. For many, it is very convenient that the SABU house on Lee Avenue can house most black students who do not live in campus housing.

In this case, though, out of sight does not mean out of mind. We as a university community must address the problems and questions of this racial dilemma.

The solution is not in another committee that will study the problem and come to the same very obvious conclusions. Pressing questions do not require mundane solutions. Rather, it is time that we examine the petitions for black representatives — or minority representatives, as the cases might be — on the various committees of importance at the school.

First, the EC. While the EC's job is primarily that of enforcing the Honor System at this school, it does engage in other important activities. Dispensing student tax dollars, hearing petitions calling for a cleanup of the town and revising the White Book are not racially sensitive issues. The presence of a token (and it is tokenism) black or minority representative will not bring about any cure. Honor, in and of itself, is not color sensitive, just as it is not gender sensitive. The same arguments can be used to defend the present structure of the Student Control Committee and other subcommittees. All of this, however, only rebuts the argument of tokenism. It does nothing to change the status quo, where very real problems do exist.

Perhaps the change needed, then, is not a structural or administrative one, but instead a very personal alteration. Both sides need to do some personal examinations of attitudes and opinions. Each side needs to consider and respect the opinions of the other and see where changes can and should occur. Why are there so few minority members in social fraternities? Why is there not more white participation in SABU? What changes can we make to encourage greater participation of minorities in each of those groups? What changes can we institute for next year when the largest class ever of minority students will be entering the University?

The problems of color-sensitive social life, campus leadership and closet racism have no easy solutions. It will not even be easy to tell when they are no longer problems. Simply because a black gets elected to the EC or joins a fraternity does not mean all the problems have been solved. The victory will only come with a change in the attitude of both sides and with the recognition that merit far outweighs the color of one's skin.