

Little Paper Cuts

The Struggles and Demands of Black
Students at the University of Oregon

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“Everything was like little paper cuts and you couldn’t look down because you knew you were hemorrhaging and couldn’t do anything to stop it.”

–Carla Gary, UO student 1968-1972

The Late 1960s: The Nation, Eugene and the University of Oregon

The late 1960s and early 70s were a time of great revolution in this country. The civil rights movement was in full swing and thousands of our country’s youth were being sent over to Vietnam to fight an unknown enemy. This was supposed to be a time that brought our country together and joined us under an umbrella of common purpose, but sadly, it became a divider in many ways.

For African Americans, every issue that was being dealt with on a local and national level had a different aspect for the black community.¹ Vietnam was a war in which many students joined together in protest, many of those students being from white middle class homes. For black students, this was not just about a war. It was about the racist ways that the United States government was sending out troops. African Americans and many other minorities were put on the front line to protect a country in which they were not even treated equally. The civil rights movement was not just about wanting to create a fair environment; it was about wanting to change their personal lives and the way they were treated in society. The black student sentiment was very different than that of their white counterparts; it was more complex and the outcomes had a truly profound effect on the way they would live their daily lives.

During this time of national revolution, the little town of Eugene, Oregon went through its own radical change. The small, urban, predominantly white community of Eugene was a hotbed of civil unrest and revolution. Protests for the war and civil rights

¹ Personal Interview with Carla Gary, Assistant Vice Provost for Institutional Equity and Diversity. March 11, 2005. (contact information: Hcgary@jwj.uoregon.edu, (541) 346-2084)

were common place on the University of Oregon campus. This reputation of being active, open and liberal has continued to define this campus to the present day. Unfortunately, this is a misperception. For as open, progressive, inviting and diverse as this community feels it is, it perpetuates a racist attitude that can only be felt by those that are the brunt of its force.

The University community reflected the same lack of diversity as the town itself. It was not until the Upward Bound program was started with the help of Gerald Bogen in 1965 that a number of black students started to be admitted into the University of Oregon by means other than through athletics.² These students were pushed into the world of higher education with no one ahead of them to help them through the process. In order to cope with the discriminatory atmosphere, black students joined together to form the Black Student Union (BSU) in 1966.³

By 1968, black students were fed up with being marginalized and having to conform to a system that did not take into account their worldview.

On April 8, 1968, Johnny Holloway, president of the Black Student Union, issued a set of grievances and demands to be addressed by the university.⁴ The intent of this request is clearly laid out in a letter written by Holloway to President Arthur Flemming:

If racism, especially institutionalized racism, cannot be eradicated by institution changes, if the University community is not willing to implement changes, it then becomes the responsibility of the Black students, who are the victims of this

² Class interview with Gerry Bogen.

³ Proposal for Funding: Task force on Black Studies. Box 8, Folder "Racism, Committee on 1967-68" Office of the President 1967-68, coll. 10586. Division of Special Collections and University Archives; University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon 97403.

⁴ Grievances and Demands of Black Students of the University of Oregon. April 8, 1968; Box 2, Folder "Black Student Union" Office of the President 1967-68, coll. 10586. Division of Special Collections and University Archives; University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon 97403.

racial oppression, to purge this campus of racism, by whatever means are necessary.⁵

It is important to note both the timing and the rhetoric of this letter. This letter was sent right after the death of Martin Luther King Jr., a black leader who dedicated his life to fighting for a peaceful end to racism. With his violent death also came the death of the peaceful approach to attaining equal rights. It also ended the era of black students sitting back waiting for things to happen. The words “by whatever means are necessary” strongly evokes the image of Malcolm X, MLK’s counterpart who believed that end of racism in this country was only going to be achieved through the use of force.

The administration of the university took these demands very seriously and developed a Committee of Racism whose job it was to address the issues laid out in the proposal.

The Committee on Racism

The Committee on Racism was thus broken into these five categories to look specifically at each set of demands to see what could be accomplished so as to appease these black students.⁶

President Flemming put his office and its resources at the disposal of the committee to meet these demands in whatever way they saw fit. When commenting on the importance of this committee, Flemming stated:

Just as there can be no higher priority for the Nation than healing racial bias and cleaning up city slums, there can be no higher priority for the University of

⁵ Grievances and Demands of Black Students of the University of Oregon. April 8, 1968; Box 2, Folder “Black Student Union” Office of the President 1967-68, coll. 10586. Division of Special Collections and University Archives; University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon 97403.

⁶ Memo to Full Committee on Racism from Bob Agger, Chairman. May 9, 1968; Box 8, Folder “Racism, Committee on 1967-68” Office of the President 1967-68, coll. 10586. Division of Special Collections and University Archives; University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon 97403.

Oregon community than eliminating and preventing any racism which may exist on this campus.⁷

The committee was made up of 48 members who were from all aspects of the university: students, faculty and administration. Many of the students were from the BSU, but acted as concerned students, not in their BSU capacity. This gave the committees a real life element. It was ultimately the BSU who decided if the proposals set forth by the committee were satisfactory. The ratio of students to faculty was about 1:1, but the white to non-white was 31:17. It is also worth noting that all non-whites were students because at the time there were only two black staff members (a grievance listed by the BSU).⁸

Fast Action: The University Getting Things Done

President Flemming wasted no time in getting this committee rolling, which drives one to be curious of his motives. There are several reasons why this list of demands was put on the high priority list. One reason could be that the administration realized that this was a large problem that was negatively affecting students and that something needed to be done to remedy this situation. Another reason could have been the fear that if these black students did not get what they wanted, they were going to do something drastic which would put the university in danger. I will argue that it is the later reasoning that motivated the quick action taken by the administration.

This was a time when blacks were still feared by the community and the idea of students, especially black students, coming together to go against the University was unacceptable. The Black Panthers, who were not connected but commonly associated

⁷ Proposal for Funding: Task Force on Black Studies. Box 8, Folder "Racism, Committee on 1967-68" Office of the President 1967-68, coll. 10586. Division of Special Collections and University Archives; University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon 97403.

⁸ Ibid

with the BSU, still had a presence in the community that furthered the fear of a black militant group gathering to “take down the establishment.”

The following pages discuss the nature of these demands, by section, to see if they were met and what was done in the short term, and what continues to be done, to meet these demands.

The document was set forth in a very organized and professional manner which could be another possible reason as to the acceptance of this proposal. The students had done their research and not only listed a set of complaints, but then also listed the remedies to these injustices. The grievances/demands were divided into five categories: Dormitories and related areas, Finances and related areas, Athletics, Curriculum and General.⁹

Dormitories and Related areas

*The set of demands revolved around the food options in the dining halls, the racist attitudes of dormitory counselors and the segregation of black students in particular halls.*¹⁰

This is quite possibly the most important section of the demands which is perhaps why it was listed first. The dormitory is the first place you are introduced to campus life. It is the place where you spend a majority of your time. It is the place where you make your initial friends on this campus. But most of all, it is the only place that you can call home and make your own.

⁹ Note: This paper will not include an analysis of the athletic section because another student is focusing their entire paper on that one section

¹⁰ Grievances and Demands of Black Students of the University of Oregon. April 8, 1968; Box 2, Folder “Black Student Union” Office of the President 1967-68, coll. 10586. Division of Special Collections and University Archives; University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon 97403.

In 1968, as well as now, the majority of the students attending the University of Oregon were from Oregon. At that time, unless you were from Portland, you had little to no personal interactions with black people as peers. For many Eastern Oregonians, this was their first time meeting a black person in a social setting and their fear the unknown was apparent.

For Carla Gary, being feared and viewed as different was an everyday occurrence. In fall 1968, Gary entered the University of Oregon as a freshman after graduating from Cleveland High School in Portland. She was used to being one of the only black people in a group being that her high school had 12 black students out of 2,600.¹¹

The first tangible “success” of this committee was the changing of the menu at the dining halls. Although it was not made clear what constituted a “black meal” in a note from President Flemming to Holloway, it assured him that the menu changes would be going into effect.¹²

However, despite this effort to make improvements, according to Gary, the demands were not met. She remembers the dining hall having a themed “Soul Food” night in which they served crunchy, undercooked black-eyed peas, hard yams, and some sort of international dish that was unfamiliar to her and her black counterparts.¹³ There were obviously black people cooking in the kitchen because many of the service jobs on campus were held by minorities; however, no attempt was made to engage them, or the black students they were trying to appease by serving this meal. If anything

¹¹ Personal Interview with Carla Gary, Assistant Vice Provost for Institutional Equity and Diversity. March 11, 2005. (contact information: Hcgary@jwj.uoregon.edu, (541) 346-2084)

¹² Letter to Holloway from Flemming/Barnhart about menu change. May 9, 1968; Box 8, Folder “Racism, Committee on 1967-68” Office of the President 1967-68, coll. 10586. Division of Special Collections and University Archives; University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon 97403.

¹³ Personal Interview with Carla Gary, Assistant Vice Provost for Institutional Equity and Diversity. March 11, 2005. (contact information: Hcgary@jwj.uoregon.edu, (541) 346-2084)

this “Soul Food” night made a mockery of the demands by putting in a half assed effort rather than committing to make a lasting, positive improvement on campus.

This issue has not been resolved and the UO dining halls still lack soul food; however, this does not seem to be a particular problem for black students today. LaTina Lewis, co-chair of the BSU, said that she may be black, but she’s American and eats the same foods as everyone else.¹⁴

The role of the Resident Assistant, or dormitory counselor as it is referred to in the demands, was another issue laid out in the demands. These RAs in the 60s were very racist toward black students. Gary distinctly remembers moving into the dorms her freshman year. Her RA said that students could pick whatever room they wanted to, but when Carla and four other black females wanted to live on the same floor, the RA refused it. She had an overwhelming fear that if black students were united, they would be a source of trouble.

This fear was widespread throughout the campus. Both Gary and current students of the BSU commented on the spectacle which they seemed to be in the dorms. People constantly ask black students how they do their hair or if they can touch it.¹⁵ That invasion of private space was, and is, a common happening for black students on this campus.

While improvements have been made in the areas of these demands, the problems have still not been solved. While black students are no longer institutionally segregated, there is still a very high concentration of black students in particular dorms.

Presently, when you fill out a housing request contract, you list your interest ranging from music, to health and fitness to multicultural. When talking with members of the 2005 Black Student Union, it was apparent that most of them had chosen to live in

¹⁴ Personal Interview with LaTina Lewis, co-chair of the Black Student Union. March 7, 2005.

¹⁵ Black Student Union Meeting. March 9, 2005.

the multicultural dorms because they felt that is where they would be most at home and be around people who were like them. If they were in another dorm, they tended to be the only black person.

Sadly, this university is still not at a point where it can meet the “three black students per dorm” request. With only 330 black students attending the University, and only a fraction of those students being freshman, there is simply not enough “diversity” to go around.¹⁶ In addition, with the disproportionate amount of black students being athletes, who are required to live in Barnhart which is off campus, it makes this lack of black students even more apparent in the physical campus dorms. While this does not make for institutionalized racism, I believe there is still a very clear segregation that occurs on this campus.

However, there are certain demands that could not be met simply due to the lack of diversity on campus. For example, there are not many black dormitory counselors, but that can be attributed to the lack of black students present on campus and/or applying for the position. While more blacks have not been hired, the demand for all white dormitory counselors to have training in human behavior and interpersonal relationships has been achieved.

According to Katie Wallace, a resident assistant at the UO, all housing staff is required to attending trainings in addition to taking classes and doing in-service days. There is also a program called “quality circles” in which staff from across the campus joins in themed groups to provide services to their residents. There is a Diversity circle that has put on events to bring cultural awareness to the dorms through means such as a movie series.¹⁷

¹⁶ Fall Terms 1993-2002, Fourth Week Comparative Enrollment by Ethnic Background*Admitted Students. H<http://diversity.uoregon.edu/stats.htm>. 3/13/05.

¹⁷ Personal Interview with Katie Wallace. March 2, 2005.

Finances and Related Area

The finance section dealt predominantly with financial aid and scholarship discrimination and the lack of knowledge and access about job opportunities¹⁸.

Many strides are being made in this area to recruit and retain black students to this campus who cannot afford the rising cost of tuition.

Currently, students are fighting, along with members of the state legislature, to increase the Oregon Opportunity Grant, a state grant that would cover 11 percent of the cost of tuition to the neediest of the needy. While this grant does not specifically address black students' needs, it is another program that could help them receive the financial assistance that will make their educational dreams a reality.

A set of scholarships has also been developed to award partial or full tuition payments to students who enhance the cultural diversity of this campus. The University of Oregon Diversity-Building Scholarship, being among the most popular, recognizes undergraduate and graduate students who enhance the educational experience of all students by sharing diverse cultural experiences. These scholarships are an integral part of the university's effort to meet the educational-diversity needs of its students, and they complement other programs in the UO campus diversity plan.¹⁹

Other diversity/multicultural awards include: Accenture Consulting Diversity Scholarship, Jewel Hairston Bell Award, OMA Excellence Award and OMA Outstanding Faculty Award.²⁰

¹⁸ Grievances and Demands of Black Students of the University of Oregon. April 8, 1968; Box 2, Folder "Black Student Union" Office of the President 1967-68, coll. 10586. Division of Special Collections and University Archives; University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon 97403.

¹⁹ Definition of Diversity Scholarship. Student Financial Aid and Scholarship Website. [Hhttp://financialaid.uoregon.edu/SCG-dbsinfo.htm](http://financialaid.uoregon.edu/SCG-dbsinfo.htm)H. March 13, 2005.

²⁰ Diversity/Multicultural Awards and Descriptions. University of Oregon's Diversity Homepage. [Hhttp://diversity.uoregon.edu/scholarships.htm](http://diversity.uoregon.edu/scholarships.htm)H. March 13, 2005

Job opportunities were a complaint listed among the demands. Students who had work study could rarely find work other than with the Project 75 department.²¹ The racist attitudes of Johnson Hall employees also tied to this. Even today, when the administration is preaching the need for diversity, there are still no black people working at Johnson Hall from student interns to secretarial staff. How are people going to take the message of the University seriously, when it is not leading by example?

Curriculum

*Complaints were made about the lack of African languages within the language department, a lack of black instructors and students and the lack of an African studies department within the university.*²²

The lack of African American history and other black culture classes offered at the university is a problem of the past. While there is always room for improvement, as of spring 2005, there were several classes offered. Classes include: African American Writers, African American History, The South, and African Environmental History.²³

As a result of the Committee on Racism, a proposal was set forth for a Black Studies program. This program eventually became the ethnic studies program which includes African American studies classes. In addition, Swahili is offered as a language although it must be done through an independent study program. While this may not go as far as the demand writers had wished, I believe that is an area that has had vast improvement.

²¹ Personal Interview with Carla Gary, Assistant Vice Provost for Institutional Equity and Diversity. March 11, 2005. (contact information: Hcgary@jwj.uoregon.edu, (541) 346-2084)

²² Grievances and Demands of Black Students of the University of Oregon. April 8, 1968; Box 2, Folder "Black Student Union" Office of the President 1967-68, coll. 10586. Division of Special Collections and University Archives; University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon 97403.

²³ University of Oregon Schedule of Classes Spring Term 2005. University of Oregon Homepage [Hwww.uoregon.edu](http://www.uoregon.edu). March 13, 2005.

The gross lack of Black professors is a problem we are still dealing with today. African Americans accounted for 2 percent of the overall employment at the University of Oregon in 2002 according to the university's diversity statistics.²⁴ In regards to admissions, the black student population has seen an increase of 79 students from 1995 to 2004, an increase of approximately 30 percent. However, this only made up 1.6 percent of the total student population in 2004 (total minorities represented 13.3 percent of the total population).²⁵

Currently, a lot of work is being done in the areas of recruitment and retention of black faculty, as well as black students. Specifically, there is a minority hiring fund that is trying to hire black professors in clusters.²⁶ The idea behind cluster hiring is that black professors will feel as though they have a community behind them from the start, rather than trying to build that community one person at a time. The hope is that with a larger set of people experiencing the same transition and able to support each other, there will be a great chance of keeping those professors at the University of Oregon.

General

*These demands touched on a wide array of topics ranging from the absence of black art and culture on campus to a non-representative student government.*²⁷

It is to be expected that there have been many changes in the way the university functions since the publishing of this document. In 1968, and prior, the student

²⁴ Fall Terms 1993-2002, Fourth Week Comparative Enrollment by Ethnic Background*Admitted Students. [Hhttp://diversity.uoregon.edu/stats.htm](http://diversity.uoregon.edu/stats.htm). 3/13/05.

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ Personal Interview with Carla Gary, Assistant Vice Provost for Institutional Equity and Diversity. March 11, 2005. (contact information: Hcgary@jwj.uoregon.edu, (541) 346-2084)

²⁷ Grievances and Demands of Black Students of the University of Oregon. April 8, 1968; Box 2, Folder "Black Student Union" Office of the President 1967-68, coll. 10586. Division of Special Collections and University Archives; University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon 97403.

government was almost entirely ran by the fraternities and sororities; they were the leaders of the community and university.²⁸ The Greek system, as a whole, was an elitist, racist organization that had very “traditional” thoughts about diversity and the benefits of it. Luckily, this form of leadership has been abolished.

With the changing times, students found that it was through student government that they could make a change. This moved student government away from the traditional and submissive, to the rebellious and active.

While there is not particularly a substantial amount of black students currently involved in student government, there is an emphasis on creating a multicultural aspect to the organizations. The Associated Students of the University of Oregon (ASUO) Executive branch, for example, has two multicultural advocate positions as well as an international advocate. Despite this attempt to be a diverse student government, it does not always meet that goal. ASUO President Adam Petkun admitted that he thought that black students were underrepresented at this University, not only in their numbers, but also in their representation in different branches of student government.²⁹

In addition, efforts have been made to unite all of the ASUO programs so that there is a sense of community. The Black Student Union, along with all other black student groups such as the Black Women of Achievement and Black Law Student Association, have the ability to be funded through student incidental fees and also have the access to all information regarding national and international conferences as laid out in the demands.

The Oregon Daily Emerald, the University of Oregon’s independently-run student newspaper, was demanded to provide a staff writer who would cover black events. This

²⁸ Grievances and Demands of Black Students of the University of Oregon. April 8, 1968; Box 2, Folder “Black Student Union” Office of the President 1967-68, coll. 10586. Division of Special Collections and University Archives; University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon 97403.

²⁹ Personal Interview with ASUO President Adam Petkun. March 3, 2005.

goal has been achieved in part. Lewis said that if there was an event that the BSU wanted to be covered, she felt comfortable going to the Emerald and asking them to cover it. However, it is only during February, which is Black History Month, that anyone takes initiative to see what the BSU is doing. This lack of constant interest is very telling about the attitudes of this university toward black students.

Where are we now in 2005?

Currently, we are still dealing with many of the issues set forth by black students almost 40 years ago. Some people may argue that these demands were met in 1968 and are no longer an issue on this campus. However, there are others who believe that there has been little done in these areas to make the University of Oregon a more inclusive, diverse community.

In 2002, the UO created a new position of Vice Provost of Cultural Diversity, held by Gregory Vincent. The idea of recruitment of black, and other minority students, is of particular interest to the University, whose job it is to provide a diverse, open, learning environment where all people are welcome.

According to the University's Educational-Diversity Needs Statement:

The University of Oregon is a public comprehensive research university that serves its students through the creation and transfer of knowledge in the liberal arts, the natural and social sciences, and the professions. A cornerstone of the university's mission is the belief that the education of Oregon's future citizens must incorporate a global perspective, recognizing the need to interact sensitively and effectively with people of diverse cultures. An educational experience that prepares undergraduate and graduate students for effective participation in society offers opportunities for learning, living, socializing, and studying with people from a wide variety of cultural and ethnic backgrounds,

levels of educational preparation, financial resources, and individual perspectives. The university's curriculum is enhanced by discourse made possible when its students and faculty share heterogeneous backgrounds. To meet this curricular goal, the university relies on academic programs, educational services, and scholarships to recruit and retain a diverse student body.³⁰

In addition, there have been many different organizations, groups and committees set up since 1968 around this issue of race and diversity and improve the University's climate. There is CoDaC-Center on Diversity and Community which started in 1999; UO Office of Institutional Equity and Diversity (OIED) which began in 2002, Office of Multicultural Affairs and the Ethnic Origins Peer Mentoring Program.³¹

In OIED's mission statement it says:

The University of Oregon is committed to a campus environment that is enriched and informed by the personal, cultural and intellectual differences of its students, faculty, staff and visitors. The UO Office of Institutional Equity and Diversity (OIED) plays a central role in fulfilling that ongoing commitment through leadership on issues that enhance institutional fairness and equality, eradicate discrimination and celebrate the strengths of a multicultural community.³²

Currently they are working on a five year diversity plan with the goal of attaining a critical mass students and faculty of color on this campus. The idea of attaining critical mass on this campus is at the very center of this debate. Black students, as well as all students of minorities, have to see themselves reflected in every aspect of the

³⁰ Educational and Diversity Needs Statement from the Student Financial Aid Website. [Hhttp://financialaid.uoregon.edu/SCG-dbsinfo.htm](http://financialaid.uoregon.edu/SCG-dbsinfo.htm)H. March 13, 2005.

³¹ Programs: Retention. University of Oregon's Diversity website. [Hhttp://diversity.uoregon.edu/retention.htm](http://diversity.uoregon.edu/retention.htm)H. March 13, 2005.

³²UO Office of Institutional Equity and Diversity Homepage. [Hhttp://vpdiversity.uoregon.edu/H](http://vpdiversity.uoregon.edu/H). March 13, 2005.

University, to not only give them an environment in which they feel welcome, but also to show them the potential that they can have.

To my dismay, many of the improvements that have happened across this campus have done little to increase the presence of representation of black students. Administration has given up little aspects that were so watered down that it made it seem like they were giving the University something positive to work off of, but rather it was just a show piece. The multicultural requirements that students are not expected to fulfill before graduation is a wonderful example of this watered down gift. The idea behind the requirement was to let all students learn about something that was different to them and help them grow as individuals and become aware, if not accepting, of others differences. The administration eventually passed a set of classes that would met this requirement, but also let classes such as “European History” count as a diversity class. It became so watered down that it lost its importance. These classes don’t engage the topic.

It is difficult to live in a community that you believe to be open to all races, and then find out that it is not. Our University community has made little progress in the area of diversity and specifically racial diversity as it relates to black students, on this campus. The institutional racism that plagued the education system in the 50s and 60s is still as fervent as ever, only now it is a hidden racism that can be even more dangerous because it is now harder to detect and get rid of.

Final Thoughts:

While this campus has not yet reached all of the demands set out by the Black Student Union, it has defiantly made leaps and bounds. There is an awareness of the diversity problem, which is the first step in solving it. The barriers and

overt racist attitude that existed in 1968, do not seem to permeate the university at the present time.

Still, despite the advances, we have not come as far as we should have in the past 40 years of dealing with diversity. There are still students entering this university that have no frame of reference and have not learned how to deal with differences and we have yet to put into place and institutionalized method to help them learn those skills. While the black students of 1968 may not have achieved what they wanted to, there have still been improvements for the black students of 2005. With a renewed knowledge of this document, the BSU is planning on updating this list of demands and sending them to the university administration so that they are aware of the issue that our black students are facing today.

It is the university's responsibility to create an environment that is welcome to everyone and to extend the knowledge of diversity and its benefits to the university community.

According to Carla Gary, the once UO student who has now become the Assistant Vice Provost of Institutional Equity and Diversity:

If you graduate from the University of Oregon and are technically competent, but culturally unconscious, we will have failed you, and inevitably, you will fail us.³³

³³ Personal Interview with Carla Gary, Assistant Vice Provost for Institutional Equity and Diversity. March 11, 2005. (contact information: Hcgary@jwj.uoregon.edu, (541) 346-2084)