

CAMPUS TIMES Wednesday, February 16, 1983

Students Analyze Racism on UR Campus

To the Editor:

The discontent of black students at the U of R, expressed recently by the BSU over the budget allotted to it by the SAAC, over low black student enrollment, few black faculty members, etc., offers a timely opportunity for white students to scrutinize the way we interact with blacks on this campus.

The first question we ought to ask ourselves is whether we think a racial problem does exist on this campus. Many white students may not take this question very seriously and will perhaps dismiss it altogether. After all, there are comparatively few signs of overt and violent racism on this campus and most white students would say, if asked or accused, that they are not racist.

The problem with this line of reasoning, by which we pat ourselves on our backs, is that it is too narrow and contorted. And, it misses the underlying cause and significance of the grievances voiced by the BSU.

Racism does indeed persist even when it does not, or does only rarely, assume overt and violent forms. It is an illusion for white students to think we can entirely escape racial prejudices which are so closely interwoven with the whole fabric of American society. On this campus, racism manifests itself most visibly in the pervasively white-dominant social and cultural atmosphere.

It may be difficult for white students to grasp how the overwhelming white presence and control of this campus appears to, and is experienced by, black students. For most of us our basic social, cultural and educational needs are fulfilled but those same needs are, by and large, denied blacks. No reasonable person

can deny the unfairness of such conditions and still we continue to ignore this problem.

We think that our unwillingness to face up to these realities stems chiefly from two sources of misunderstanding. First, white Americans have never been prepared to accept black people on their own terms--a prerequisite for solving any racial problem. That is true whether we have been segregationist or integrationist; in neither case has there been much respect for black self-identity or black culture.

The second source of misunderstanding is the belief that we as white students are in no way responsible for this state of affairs and that there is little we can do to change it. Most importantly, we do have very real, if limited, powers to implement some changes. If that is so, what can we white students do?

The only logical starting point is to seriously consider the demands raised by the BSU. For obvious reasons the BSU must be the central force in this process. More than any other group it holds the key to attracting more black students to this campus, to providing a support network and in general to creating an atmosphere more conducive to black students.

If the CT-report (2/11) is correct, it seems evident that the all-white SAAC has decided to effectively prevent the BSU from assuming such an expanding role on this campus. Two of the arguments directed at the BSU struck us as particularly misguided and unfair.

One SAAC-controller claimed that we cannot allow a BSU picnic on Dandelion day because that "would promote segregation". A prominent SAAC-member opposed an expanded program of black cultural entertainment on the grounds "that just because an entertainer is black he does not necessarily represent black culture."

The logic and implications of these arguments are both serious and dangerous. Clearly, the very *raison d'être* of the BSU is that it is a black student interest group. To chastise this group for holding events for black students and to label this segregationist (a term whose origin and connotation should guard whites against using it too loosely) is therefore equivalent to deny the BSU its very right to exist.

The second claim suggests that the BSU cannot be entrusted to make up their own cultural program since they allegedly don't know what black culture is. Is the SAAC proposing that its members--white students--are to determine what black culture is? We hope not.

We urge the SAAC to reconsider their arguments and adopt a more positive attitude toward the BSU.

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