

THE 'VINE

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The University of Rochester
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Week Ending: February 18, 1983
Volume I, Number 1

SPECIAL EDITION

INSTITUTIONAL RACISM: PASSING THE BUCK

Institutional racism is something that black students must contend with everyday. While today's racism may no longer be overt, it does however still exist. As one student so aptly put it, racism can be detected in the "little things, the subtle things." Still, eventually even the little things add up. Racism is behind the continual harassment of black students by members of security who seem to feel that any black male on campus after dark automatically constitutes trouble, or that more than one black student using the facilities in Zornow merits an identification check. We see racism in the small number of black faculty here and in the lack of black oriented courses. We feel racism in the attitudes of some of our professors, the comments of some of our peers, and the misdirected advice of some of our academic advisors. Most sadly, racism is behind the unwillingness of our administrators to answer our questions directly, and to address the concerns of the black community. Institutional racism is alive and well, and living at the U of R.

In the last months, the Black Student's Union has taken its concerns to the doorsteps of three administrators, only to have their questions circumvented and their problems belittled. Initially, the BSU approached Provost Richard D. O'Brien asking him to attend an open forum with black students to hear their concerns and offer any answers that the administration might have. On December 2, 1982, the Provost attended a meeting of the BSU. In his opening remarks, the Provost related the administration's knowledge of the problems that black students face here. He then stated that the "concerns of the black student are concerns we all share." Still, beyond that concern, O'Brien had little else to offer to the students attending the meeting. Question after question put to the Provost was circumvented as he either answered them vaguely, or advised that perhaps they would best be answered by President Sproull or other administrators. On the subject of the attrition rate among black students, and the possibility of programs designed to diminish that rate, O'Brien stated: "We study the problem a great deal." He further stated that in

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his opinion, the problem is of a social, rather than an academic nature, and as such, would best be addressed by the Vice-President of Student Affairs, Bernard Gifford. When asked what the administration does to insure that faculty and staff are sensitive to the needs of the black student at the U of R, the Provost replied that students should "report specific incidents to their deans or other administrators," thus removing the burden of responsibility from the administration and placing it on the student. Conspicuously, the Provost did not venture to say what action would be taken once students reported examples of racism, to insure against a recurrence. Although the Provost met with the members of the BSU, fielding questions for nearly an hour, very little information was actually conveyed. The members of the BSU left the meeting with their questions vaguely answered.

Following the advice of the Provost, the BSU next took its questions to the Vice-President of Student Affairs, Bernard Gifford. The results, while not surprising, were nevertheless disappointing. Dr. Gifford displayed even more reticence than had Provost O'Brien. The majority of questions put to the Vice-President were also vaguely answered. Still, the answers he did supply were indeed unique. Dr. Gifford told the BSU that he felt that the major problem facing black students here is the inability of black students to create an atmosphere of black life. Therefore implying that their major problem lies within themselves. When asked what he had done to help students deal with institutional racism at the U of R, Dr. Gifford simply replied that there was not much one person could do. Once again the BSU had gone to an administrator and had come away empty-handed.

Opting to try one last time, the BSU finally went directly to the top. On February 10, 1983, President Sproull attended a meeting of the BSU. It is a meeting that will go down in infamy. Having been passed along the administrative trail, the BSU understandably reasoned that with the President, the proverbial buck would stop. Surely, if anyone held the answers to their questions President Sproull would be that person. Unfortunately, that was not to be the case. Far from offering any answers to the problem of racism at the U of R, President Sproull professed to be totally unaware that it existed at all. When told of the harassment of security and of the insensitivity of some faculty and staff, Sproull

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expressed sympathy but stated there is generally not much he can do. He further stated that he does not "turn knobs" at the university though that is how it may appear. These are interesting statements from a man who was Provost when the BSU seized the Frederick Douglass Building in 1969; interesting statements from the man who negotiated with those 25 students. Look around. The racial climate has not changed that drastically. Has our President been residing in a hole? His subsequent statements, however, are indicative of the kind of covert racism that is the basis upon which the problems endured by black students are built. During the meeting, a graduate student addressed the President relating some of the problems he had witnessed here in his four years as an undergraduate and two years in the Graduate School of Management. The President asked the student if he didn't like it here, why had he returned? Sproull told the student that he "must like it rough." Are these the words of a man who is sympathetic to the concerns of black students? That kind of sympathy we can do without. Unfortunately for both black students and for the administration, the solution is not as simple as President Sproull's "love it or leave it" attitude would imply. Black students will not simply disappear from this campus. It is time for the administration to realize that the black population here is one that is viable and one that must be contended with. We are tired of our concerns being ignored. The buck stops here.

-Lori C. Doneghy

** For further information, please see two letters to the Editor that appeared in the Campus Times on Wednesday, February 16, entitled "Students Analyze Racism On Campus" by Kai R. Pederson, and "BSU Attacks SAAC Budgeting Decision" by Leonard Patterson, N. Ahvay Orara, Alison Williams, and Zachary Harris.

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We are outraged and the time has come for that rage to be conveyed. For years, black students on this campus have been the victims of racist attitudes and actions designed to undermine our confidence and place us in the realm of second class citizens. Yet, the stories of these incidents have seldom been told outside the black community, nor have the reactions of black students to these occurrences--until now. The recent meetings of the BSU with administrators, and other incidents on campus, have convinced black students that the time has come for them to step forward and have their opinions heard. No longer will anyone be able to claim ignorance. No longer will anyone be able to say they are unaware of racism at the U of R.

The following is the result of a series of interviews conducted by the editors of the vine. Seven black students were asked their opinions on several issues of importance to member of the black community. Those seven students were:

Sherrilyn Parham: Class of '86; member of the BSU board.

Kennedy Brayboy: Class of '85; Poli. Sci. Major; Senator on the Extra-Curricular Committee(ECC); Community Affairs Chairperson, BSU.

Duane Burton: Class of '85, Sociology Major; member of the BSU.

Lisa King: Class of '84; Neuroscience Major; member Student Emergency Squad; member Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority; member of the BSU.

Michael Torres: Class of '84; Psychology Major; President, Gospel Choir; member of the BSU.

Zachary Harris: Class of '84; Poli. Sci. Major; President, Black Student's Union.

Ahvay Orara: Doctoral Candidate, Clinical Psychology; member of the BSU.

VINE: What are some of the problems black students at the U of R must contend with? Causes

Ahvay Orara: "What stands out most are the glaring omissions--what is not present. There are no courses that speak directly to the conditions, problems, issues, concerns, needs, or aspirations of Afrikan Americans. The U of R, like society in general, evidences callous indifference, sometimes hostile disregard toward black students and the resources relevant to meeting their needs. It's not so much what they do overtly, but covertly. They always ask if you can site individual specifics. It is not what is experienced individually, but what we experience collectively. We are not discriminated against individually, but as a group. For example, individuals harassed by security are not being treated that way because of something they have personally done. It emanates from the fact that we are members of an oppressed group."

Michael Torres: "I can't say there are always big or obvious things, but rather little subtle things. There is often a lack of friendliness or respect from our peers. Last year I had accidentally left posters for the Gospel Choir in the Music Rehearsal Room after choir rehearsal. When I went back to get them, members of the Men's Glee Club had opened the package of posters

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and were making airplanes out of them. It's not so much the actions, but the attitudes behind them. Day to day things add up. That is what is happening now. Too many people are experiencing them. Maybe we haven't been expressing our problems, but it is definitely time to do something about them."

Kennedy Brayboy: "Blacks are denied their culture at the U of R. Many white students, because their need are fulfilled, are unaware that blacks are not necessarily happy. There is a need to satisfy the members of all cultures. Security is definitely a problem. If a person can't walk across his own campus, it's sad."

Lisa King: "The major problem is the lack of role models for black students in black professors and staff members. The University hired a few black faculty, but not in the areas we need them, like statistics, biology and math. Another problem is the attitudes of some staff. Freshman year I went to Academic Advising to petition a grade. I was told I should change my major because "you people don't belong in science related fields."

Zachary Harris: "The environment at the U of R is such that it is not sympathetic to the needs of black students. The constant harassment of security has been and continues to be a major concern."

Sherrilyn Parham: "A major problem is a lack of awareness on the part of the University, but it also shows in some of our peers. You may be studying in a group and know the answer to a question but you'll be the last person they will ask. I think apathy among black students is also a problem. We don't do enough for each other."

Duane Burton: "Unity and solidarity are lacking among black students. We don't have a consolidated organization and it is needed. Some of us want to become part of the mainstream so badly, we give up part of our culture. People tend to get lost in the game. Also, something must be done to produce a more congenial atmosphere on campus. Some feel that they don't want to get involved, but in not getting involved they perpetuate the situation."

VINE: Do you feel that the administration has been sensitive to the needs and concerns of minority students?

Lisa King: "The University has made big promises with no real results. I asked President Sproull if he was aware of the racial climate on campus. He claimed he was completely unaware of the racial situation. I told him it wasn't only on the peer level, but in the administration, faculty and staff."

Sherrilyn Parham: "In their meetings with the BSU, all the administrators were evasive, I think Dr. Gifford knew we had indisputable grievances and that he hadn't fulfilled all he could have while he was here. I was most impressed with Provost O'Brien but in retrospect, he didn't really answer our questions either. After meeting with the Provost and Dr. Gifford, I figured that President Sproull would have some answers. Instead, he was hostile and even more evasive."

Michael Torres: "There is a lack of a leadership role in the administration to show a desire to be aware or a tendency to be concerned about the problems of black students. The main thing that struck me about President Sproull is that he seemed to accept the fact that we have problems simply because he expected us to have them. Yet, he never tried to look into what's going on."

Zachary Harris: "Not one administrator has addressed the concerns of black students directly. Their approaches have been vague, nebulous. Provost O'Brien said he could not do

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anything without the permission of his superiors. Dr. Gifford really didn't address our concerns. He left out many things we wanted to hear. He should remember that no matter how high he is in the administration, he is still black. Our concerns should be his concerns. The President says he is sympathetic, but can't do anything. Does he mean he can't or he won't?"

Kennedy Brayboy: "One thing that impressed me is that they all evade very well. They're all giving us the same line that they can't do anything. In my opinion O'Brien is the one with the most power for change. Last year, I expected big things from Bernard Gifford, but he has let us down. The students at the BSU meeting were not very respectful to Sproull. What he must understand is that he must earn our respect. I don't think he has done anything to earn it."

Ahvey Orara: "The administrators of this institution are carrying out the mandates of a racist society. Their alleged ignorance is a testimonial to their acquiescence to the racist system of society. Sproull asked an individual at the meeting if he hadn't liked it here after four years as an undergraduate, why had he returned as a graduate student. The message behind that is "love it or leave it." He also told the student that he must 'like it rough.' The message behind that is that it is tough here and the administration is not going to do anything to change it. Afrikan-American students should not have trouble drawing a conclusion as to who our President represents based upon those kinds of statements."

ne Burton: "The administration is producing temporary solutions for long term problems. These solutions don't change the basic problems-- the reasons why things are as they are. The administration is not going to really change things until we show them that it is necessary."

VINE: What is your opinion of the recent budgeting process of the Students' Association Appropriations Committee (SAAC) for the BSU?

Ahvey Orara: "The budget of the BSU sought to fill a cultural void that exists here. The treatment received by the BSU from the SAAC is an example of callous indifference and hostile disregard for the needs of black students."

Zachary Harris: "The BSU should have a guaranteed level of funding. Where will we be in ten years if this continues. At the same time, I would say that the time is now to stop being so dependent upon whites. We have great resources in the black community, many of which have not been tapped. Let's be more dependent upon ourselves."

Michael Torres: "It is clear to see that there is a lack of desire to know what the BSU is about. I was bothered that the members of the SAAC responded to our budget requests according to their personal feelings. Mark Rogers said that the BSU doesn't do enough to cater to the U of R community. It is clear that they want us to do things the way they think we should do them. It is frightening that thirteen white students have the authority to govern the well being of the black community."

Sherrilyn Parham: "I feel that what went on in that meeting was the result of institutional racism. The questions and comments of the SAAC showed that they didn't understand where we were coming from; the nature of our group. They were trying to tell us what we should be doing for blacks as blacks."

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IN PROTEST

I am President of the University of Rochester Gospel Choir, and also a supportive member of the Black Students Union.

I was present at the SAAC budgeting for the BSU on Tuesday and I am deeply disturbed at its outcome. The SAAC is made up of white students with very little awareness of Black culture or of the need of Black students on this campus to develop this culture. Further, the SAAC has not even shown the desire to increase their awareness-- no more than two or three of them have ever supported any programs sponsored by the BSU. However, based on what they feel is appropriate for us these same students have the power to tell us what we ought to do as a social, cultural, and educational organization. For example, we made three proposals that were met with negative responses. We proposed to have a picnic and games in the Towers area on Dandelion Day, as a supplement to those activities offered in the Wilson Commons area. This was deemed inappropriate on the grounds that it would promote segregation. We proposed the development of a cultural center; our need for it was not realized. We proposed to bring in a prominent black artist for a concert; it was said that a black performer (who draws from the rich tradition of black music) does not necessarily represent black culture. I cite these three proposals out of the many presented that night to respond to the CT article on February 11. These responses, and others made that night by SAAC members indicate that some white students feel that their interests, desires and ways of doing things should be ours. We are not white and do not want to be white. Day after day we (black students) are in classes in which we are few in number and in which we are educated mainly by whites. Is it then so hard to understand why we sit together in the cafeteria; why we propose to have functions where we are in the majority; why we propose to develop a cultural center where we can educate ourselves about our people's contributions to this society; why we propose to bring in a black performer who plays or sings the styles of music that we enjoy???? Not all white students are so ignorant and closed minded, and it is unfortunate that those who are have the most influence on this campus.

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I was also at the BSU meeting with President Sproull on Thursday, February 10. I found that the lack of awareness of black students needs can be attributed to a lack of effort by the administration to increase their own awareness. Many facts that we expressed about the conditions here surprised President Sproull. And so we expressed to him the importance and need for his office to foster an environment of sympathy, concern, and problem solving action. Moral, not financial support was stressed.

I am tired of the negative attitudes that are nourished at this university. I share these feelings with other members of the BSU. Be it known that this only the beginning. We will continue to speak out, write, and fight until changes are made.

By: Michael Torres
