

PSU Black Student Caucus Takes A Stand

By Barbara Gertzen

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The December meeting of the University Faculty Senate at Penn State-University Park ended abruptly when a group of students invited to address the senate about racial issues introduced a list of demands and insisted the senate respond immediately to their concerns.

Because the UFS had not read the students' document prior to their presentation, the senate chair adjourned the meeting, prompting the students to take their grievance directly to university President Graham Spanier. Spanier convened another meeting that evening between the students, university administrators and faculty leaders.

Spanier's meeting lasted four hours and ended with all parties signing a document that, in part, expressed the university's support of a student-appointed committee to further examine and discuss the students' claims.

John Nichols, professor of communications and chair-elect of the UFS, concedes that the students' action was unexpected, but he says "the spark that lit the fire" was a series of hate mail directed to several people at University Park last fall. Among those who received hate letters was the student president of the Black Caucus and a black member of the university board of trustees.

PSU officials do not know where the hate mail came from and are still looking into the matter, but Nichols posits that the incidents "provoked introspection" on campus, culminating in the students' meeting with UFS. Nichols stresses that while the senate chair adjourned last month's meeting in view of the unanticipated development, "it [UFS] did not adjourn the issue."

Nichols confirms that modifications to the African and African-American Studies curriculum was one of the chief objectives of the students' directive. Nichols particularly praised the students' proposal for a course geared toward providing community leadership training, skills students can take back to their communities and "tackle the problem [racism] at its roots."

LaKeisha Wolf, president of the Black Caucus at University Park and a broadcast journalism major, discloses that the day-

long confrontation between students and administrators at University Park resulted from events that occurred well before hate mail was received on campus. Wolf, who received two hate letters in October, points out that "the black student population [at University Park] noticed that the African and African-American Studies department was slowly shrinking" and wasn't receiving the support it should. Comparing the situation to the problems faced within black communities, Wolf says "it didn't make sense that a department designed and set up to address these issues was shrinking."

The Black Caucus, Wolf says, would like to see a mandatory course that "treats the historical implications of racism and

vide more awareness of what blacks have been through in the past and increase tolerance to our issues." Myra Miller, vice president of PSH's Black Student Union and a applied behavioral sciences major, adds that "the more people realize our differences, the more they also realize our similarities." Walton also feels students coming to PSH should be encouraged to take African and Afro-American courses. "Just because the classes are here doesn't mean they [students] will be taking them," Walton says.

Dr. Clem E. Gilpin, PSH assistant professor of community systems and Afro-American studies, supports Walton's assessment. In the '60s and '70s, Gilpin says he typically had between 35-40 students enrolled per semester in his "Contemporary Africa" class; this semester he has 16 students in his PSH class.

While Gilpin concedes there are many factors affecting student enrollment (including the self-acknowledged "Gilpin Factor"), he believes that interest about race relations was generally much higher among Americans 30 years ago and, today, many students incorrectly assume African-American studies "are for the black students." Gilpin, nevertheless, contends "there are many routes to get to a desired goal" and he expresses a wish "that at some point in time every white student had a chance to be a minority."

The environment at PSH makes it easy for students to avoid African-American studies, Gilpin asserts, but he challenges students to take a class that examines another culture or race "because there's something that can be learned there"

Gilpin predicts the University Park confrontation will ultimately produce positive results, although he readily admits he is not opposed to conflict. "Conflict - yes, the more the merrier!" Gilpin exults, although he advises that "finals week is not a great time to take on the university administration." Gilpin continued by saying, "Conflict indicates that PSU is an institution going through changes so some things need to be resolved, and if issues are not presented and addressed, change cannot occur." A crucial component of conflict, he concludes, "is [that] interaction is taking place."

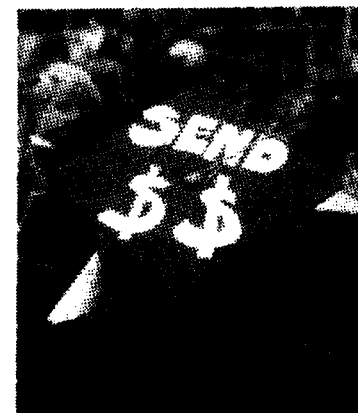


how it affects all Americans," not just blacks and whites. "Racism affects everybody," Wolf says, and "the issues this class could address are not necessarily the truth a lot of people realize currently."

The student committee to oversee future discussion of racial issues at University Park has been named the Gyenam Committee, according to Wolf. "Gyenam" is a Ghanan word that signifies: "I die when God dies," a saying that Wolf admits reflects her life-long commitment to study racial issues. Wolf also reports the Black Caucus is hoping to conduct a black student summit including all commonwealth campuses at the end of February. The summit is being coordinated with Gabriel Bryant, president of Commonwealth Campuses Student Government and a member of the Black Caucus. "This is everybody's struggle," Wolf declares.

Damon Walton, president of the Latino Student Union and a sociology major at PSH, echoes Wolf's assertion. Walton believes that even though PSH is a small campus, improvements in the Afro-American studies curriculum "could pro-

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