Black University of Washington students campaign for inclusion, United States, 1968

- U.S. Civil Rights Movement (1950s-1960s)

January
1968
to: May
1968

Country: United States
Location City/State/Province: Seattle, Washington
Location Description: University of Washington campus

Goals:
From the University of Washington Black Student Union’s (UWBSU) second letter to University President Odegaard, May 6, 1968:

“(1) All decisions, plans, and programs affecting the lives of black students, must be made in consultation with the Black Student Union. This demand reflects our feeling that whites for too long have controlled the lives of non-whites. We reject this control, instead we will define what our best interests are, and act accordingly.

(2) The Black Student Union should be given the financial resources and aids necessary to recruit and tutor non-white students. Specifically, the Black Student Union wants to recruit: 300 Afro-American, 200 American Indians, and 100 Mexican students in September.

(3) We demand that a Black Studies Planning Committee be set up under the direction and control of the Black Student Union. The function of this Committee would be to develop a Black Studies Curriculum that objectively studies the culture and lifestyle of non-white Americans.

4) We want to work closely with the administration and faculty to recruit black teachers and administrators. One positive effect from recruiting black teachers and administrators is that we will have role models to imitate, and learn from.

(5) We want black representatives on the music faculty. Specifically, we would like to see Joe Brazil and Byron Polk hired. The black man has made significant contributions to music (i.e. jazz and spirituals), yet there are not black teachers on the music faculty.”

The UWBSU’s third letter to University President Odegaard, May 16, 1968, requested $50,000 be allocated for UWBSU initiatives, and that the money be deposited into the UWBSU bank account by June 1, 1968.

Methods
Methods in 1st segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 048. Protest meetings
- 122. Literature and speeches advocating resistance

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 048. Protest meetings
- 122. Literature and speeches advocating resistance

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 048. Protest meetings
- 122. Literature and speeches advocating resistance

Methods in 4th segment:

- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 013. Deputations
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 122. Literature and speeches advocating resistance

Methods in 5th segment:

- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 048. Protest meetings
- 122. Literature and speeches advocating resistance

Methods in 6th segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 013. Deputations
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 122. Literature and speeches advocating resistance
- 162. Sit-in
- 199. Nonviolent confinement
Classifications

Classification:
Change
Cluster:
Human Rights
Group characterization:

- Black Panther and SNCC Members
- Seattle Central Area Residents
- University of Washington Students

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:
Larry Gossett, Eddie Demmings, Aaron Dixon and the Black Student Union of the University of Washington; Carl Miller and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee; the Black Panther Party
Partners:
Not known
External allies:
Black and White Concern Organization; American Civil Liberties Union
Involvement of social elites:
University of Washington Professor Arval Morris

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:
- Black Panther Party

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:
- American Civil Liberties Union

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:
- Black and White Concern Organization
- Professor Arval Morris

Segment Length: Approximately 25 days

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence
Opponents:
UW President Odegaard and the University of Washington Administration

Nonviolent responses of opponent:
Not known

Campaigner violence:
Not known

Repressive Violence:
Not known

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:
6 points out of 6 points

Survival:
1 point out of 1 points

Growth:
3 points out of 3 points

The 1960s was a time of national turmoil for the civil rights of African-Americans, and Seattle was no exception. However, up until 1968, Seattle’s civil rights movement was subdued, compared to the fervor and tension of campaigns in other cities. The Seattle Black community’s frustrations were first given voice when Stokely Carmichael, the chair of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), spoke in front of a crowd of thousands at the University of Washington, urging them to embrace the Black Power movement and begin organizing for their representation, in education and elsewhere.

Students from a variety of backgrounds founded the University of Washington Black Student Union together, at the beginning of the Winter Quarter at the beginning of 1968. The Black Student Union (BSU) was a merging of the University chapters of the SNCC, and Afro-American Student Society. Their goals were mainly around representation for themselves as black university students, but they also felt some duty to Seattle-area’s black secondary students, both to help them find voices and representations in their own schools, and to help them find their way to the University of Washington, to increase the enrollment of students of color.

Throughout the winter, The BSU began to worked toward its goals by writing a letter to University President Charles Odegaard, requesting more black professors and administrators, courses in Black History, African language courses, and a program to encourage the graduation of students of color. They also stated their belief that steps should be taken to eliminate racism in sports programs, fraternities, housing, and other university systems. The BSU received no response to their letter, and were soon spurred into more direct action by a series of controversial events. In addition, the BSU began working to open Black Student Unions in area middle and high schools, and by March, eight schools had Black Student Unions, totaling nearly 900 members combined. The BSU received no response to their letter, and were soon spurred into more direct action by a series of controversial events.

On March 19, 1968, an altercation occurred at Franklin High School, a majority black high school in South Seattle. The nature of the altercation is contested, but involved either perceived or actual racial discrimination by the principal of the high school in reaction to one or more students’ behavior. Regardless of the incident itself, two black students, Charles Oliver and Trolice Flavors, were suspended as they neared graduation. Flavors, concerned about the future of his education, contacted Carl Miller, the former head of the University of Washington’s SNCC, and current member of the BSU. Miller, along with Aaron Dixon and Larry Gossett on behalf of the BSU, attempted to meet with Loren Ralph, the principal of Franklin High, to convince him to reinstate Flavors and Oliver. They were unsuccessful.
Franklin students, angered by the outcome of the negotiations, began threatening to “burn the school down.” Worried about the potential of a riot, the UW BSU members ushered students to an eatery across the street, where they plotted a nonviolent response to Principal Ralph’s decision. Later that day, 100 students, 60 of them Franklin students, marched on the Principal’s office, chanting “Ungawa, Black Power!” As they sat-in, they demanded that Oliver and Flavors be reinstated. Four hours later, Principal Ralph agreed to their demands, and the confrontation ended (see “Seattle's Franklin High School students sit-in for reinstatement and civil rights, 1968”). The next day, however, Gossett, Dixon, Miller and Oliver were arrested on charges of unlawful assembly. Although they were all arrested on bail shortly after, the arrests of Gossett, Dixon, Miller and Oliver motivated them to use more radical means to achieve equality at the University of Washington, as well as elsewhere.

On May 6, 1968, the BSU submitted a second, more detailed letter to President Odegaard, demanding that: (1) decisions about black students be made in consultation with the BSU, (2) the BSU be provided with financial resources to recruit and tutor non-white students, in the number of 300 Afro-Americans, 200 American Indians, and 100 Mexican students, (3) a Black Studies Planning Committee be set up under the control of the BSU, towards the formation of a Black Studies department, (4) the administration recruit black faculty and administrators, (5) there be black representation in the music department, specifically that Joe Brazil and Byron Polk be hired.

Soon after, President Odegaard sent a response letter, stating his support for many of the ideas in the letter, and indicating his willingness to discuss their implementation. On May 10, BSU representatives met with University Administrators, with a certain degree of success. However, the BSU requested that the University fund their students to spend time recruiting students of color, and President Odegaard stated that it would take significant time to located those funds. Similar concerns were raised at a follow-up meeting focused on the formation of a Black Studies program. Although the University supported the department in theory, they were reluctant to devote funding to its creation. During the meeting, nearly 300 BSU members gathered around the building’s perimeter in support, and white students, many members of the Black and White Concern rallied in support of the proposal as faculty members exited the meeting.

As the school year ended, much agreement had been achieved, but no funding had been secured the BSU hadn’t secured any funding, and no real progress seemed imminent. On May 16, the BSU drafted a third letter, requesting that President Odegaard allocate $50,000 for the BSU initiatives and deposit it in their bank account by the next day. There was no response from the President’s office. On May 20 at 5:20pm, approximately 100 BSU members and allies entered President Odegaard’s office suite, where they interrupted a Faculty Senate Executive Committee meeting. Odegaard and others retreated to his inner office, where they were barricaded in by protestors, as more and more students occupied and sat-in throughout the entire floor. A single professor, Arval Morris, joined the students in solidarity. Although police attempted to threatened force, a heavy office door made it difficult for them to clearly communicate with the protestors, and negotiation did not begin until Michael Rosen, an ACLU lawyer, who had been an ally of the BSU in the past, arrived and began to establish arbitrations.

At 8:45pm, President Odegaard signed the BSU’s proposal, and protestors exited his office, chanting “Beep-beep, bang-bang, ungawa, Black Power!” The school year ended two weeks later, and the University spent the summer implementing the policies that they had agreed to. BSU members were hired to lead an recruitment drive of African-American, Chicano and Native-American students. The following year, African-American student enrollment increased by 310%. Black faculty doubled, including Joe Brazil in the music department, and two history courses were taught on African-Americans. An official Black Studies department was established, including courses in Swahili. Joe Brazil was hired as a music professor.

Over the following years, the University of Washington Black Student Union continued to be an active force on campus. They were instrumental in the creation of an Office of Minority Affairs, the Educational Opportunity Program for tutoring, and the Ethnic Cultural Center, throughout the 1970s. They participated in a variety of other campaigns at UW, as well as on behalf of others, most notably in support of desegregation at Brigham Young University. The extreme success of the actions of the BSU inspired other students across the country to campaign for similar changes on their own campuses.
Research Notes

Influences:

The formation of the Black Student Union at the University of Washington was spurred by a series of speeches that Stokely Carmichael gave in April of 1967 in Seattle. Additionally, many of the founding members attended the Black Youth Conference, where they met and coordinated with members of the Black Panther Party, Black Socialists, Black Nationalists, United Slaves and others. (1)

Sources:


Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:
Hanna King, 31/10/2010

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