



11-5-1998

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Commission for Blacks

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Recommended Citation

Commission for Blacks, "A Position Paper by the Black Faculty and Staff Association (BFSA) at the University of Tennessee Knoxville, Tennessee" (1998). *Major Studies and Reports*.
http://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_blackmaj/13

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1st DRAFT

**A Position Paper by the
Black Faculty and Staff Association (BFSA)
at
The University of Tennessee
Knoxville, Tennessee**

November 5, 1998

A statement of concern indicating the urgent need to address racist practices, marginalization, denial of opportunity, and structured patterns of rejection visited upon African-American faculty and staff at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

Introduction

This paper emanates from the Black Faculty and Staff Association (BFSA) at the University of Tennessee. It is a statement of the concerns of African-American faculty and staff at the University of Tennessee, an indicator of our collective disenchantment with the University's hollow "commitment to diversity." We do not presume to speak for every black faculty or staff member or student at UTK. We understand that there is probably the odd African-American who is content with the status quo, as well as the odd African-American who, while they agree with the points raised in this piece, might not endorse what they may conceive as its confrontational tone. Nevertheless, we can safely say that the message we put forward in this piece, and the straightforwardness with which we put this message, reflects the sustained and increasing frustration of the vast majority (such as it is) of faculty, staff and students of African descent at UTK.

The University of Tennessee is considered to many to be a "world class university," equal in scope and breadth to some of the best institutions of higher learning in America. Most recently (August 1998), a U.S. News and World Report survey placed UTK among the top universities in the United States. Of course, UTK would like to improve and be ranked even higher in the future and this will take improvement in many aspects of the University. While there will be no shortage of suggestions for improving UTK as an institution, we the members of the Black Faculty and Staff Association (BFSA) would like to draw attention to UTK's failure to recruit, retrain, and promote African-American faculty and staff in general and in positions of authority in particular as a persistent problem.

As people of African-American descent in America, we understand that the struggle for equality of opportunity is a never ending battle against the perennial problem of personal, societal, and most importantly, institutionalized racism. We come to this juncture with an acute awareness of a long history of the sometimes incidental, often systematic ways in which African-Americans have been rejected, denied opportunities, marginalized, and otherwise discriminated against at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. While much could be written about this long and problematic history, we are concentrating in this paper with challenging the status quo of the presence and treatment of African-Americans at UTK. We are particularly concerned at this time with addressing recent examples of systematic exclusion of African-Americans from positions of leadership at UTK.

Racism and Affirmative Action and UTK

The University of Tennessee has had a policy promoting affirmative action since 1979 when the Board of Trustees approved a statement that reads "The University will take affirmative action to recruit, employ, and to advance in employment minorities, women, and disabled veterans of the Vietnam era."

It should be noted that the need to implement policies and programs promoting affirmative action in higher education grew principally out of the realization that higher education was one of the most segregated institutions in society, even in the 1970s and early 1980s. The data revealed then and, rather frustratingly, continues to indicate now (Fall 1997) that less than four percent of the students at American institutions of higher learning are African-American.

At UTK, the urgency of the need to implement such measures was heightened by the fact of continued overt racism on campus. More than a decade ago and several years after UTK's declared commitment to implementing affirmative action, a series of racist acts against African-American students, faculty and staff prompted the University administration to launch a full scale investigation of the extent to which it promoted a climate of inclusiveness. A blue ribbon committee was established to examine racism on the campus of the University of Tennessee.

There are, of course conservative Americans who contend that affirmative action was either never necessary or is no longer needed. They contend that affirmative action policies and programs provide "special treatment" for minorities and result in so called "reverse discrimination." As African-Americans we are under no delusions about our condition. We recognize that despite overwhelming evidence of the efficacy of affirmative action as a means of addressing historical forms of discrimination, there is a rising backlash against it by those who would turn the clock back to times of the "good old boy network" and uncontested manifestations of white male privilege in employment in general and influential and administrative positions in particular.

Although Tennessee has not had a "Proposition 209- California," nor a "Banniker Decision- Maryland," nor a "Hopwood Decision- Texas," what is emerging as the methodical exclusion and marginalization of African-Americans at UTK in recent times. This situation, in our view, adds up to at best to UTK unofficially ignoring its own stated commitment to diversity and at worst an unofficial endorsement of the forces that would turn the clock back to a time of taken-for-granted exclusion and marginalization of African-Americans.

A History of Neglect/Opportunity Lost

The history of neglect and lost opportunity for African-Americans at the University is much greater than our collective memories can document.

Any effort to chronicle the list of persons of color who left the University because of lack of support for their careers and/or research, failure to have their work and contributions fully valued and acknowledged, lack of or misguided mentoring, the university's failure to grant them deserved tenure, and their perceptions of UTK as a "no growth environment" falls far short of reality. Nevertheless, a cursory examination of the employment profile of African-Americans at the University of Tennessee over the last decade makes it quite evident that diversity has had a poor history at UTK.

For example, there have been few African-Americans in administrative positions and other positions of authority. To compound this problem, we have witnessed an alarming rate of attrition of even these few people at the University. The following is an incomplete list of the few African-Americans who held positions of influence and authority at UTK within the last ten years, and who are no longer at UTK:

1. Assistant to President~Dr. Michael Nettles
2. Dean College of Law~Marilyn Yaraborough
3. Associate Dean Social Work~Dr. Jeanette Jennings
4. Head of Department History~Dr. John Marrow
5. Head of Department Political Science ~Dr. Lenneal Henderson
6. Head of Department of Music~Dr. Kenneth Keeling
7. Dean of Admissions and Records~Susie Archer
8. Food Services Managers
 - A. Gibbs~David Wyatt
 - B. Catering~Howard Clark
9. WUOT Announcer~Jacquelyn Jones
10. WUOT Announcer~Marshall Stephens

There has been ample opportunity for UTK administrators to demonstrate their commitment to diversity. With the exception, perhaps, of the Division of Student Services, which has had several African-American administrators, and the Athletic Department, which boasts more than its share of African-American staff and assistant coaches (but not head coaches), the employment diversity records of academic units and administrative support units in general have been abysmal.

There are a number of glaring examples of missed opportunities to promote or hire African-Americans into positions of authority that we can point to:

There are no African-American administrators at the University of Tennessee system's level.

There are no African-Americans holding the position of dean or associate deans in any college.

The College of Communications, the College of Architecture and the College of Veterinary Medicine have no African-American faculty members.

There is only one African-American faculty member and one staff person in the College of Business, and the College of Human Ecology.

An African-American experienced fund-raiser, with a proven track record in heading up the 21st Century Campaign, was passed over as the Vice Chancellor for Development, despite having served in an acting capacity for more than six months. The Black Faculty and Staff are enraged at the treatment accorded to this individual, who demonstrated loyalty, expertise and fidelity to the University of Tennessee.

The College of Arts and Sciences remains a bastion of bigotry and indifference. It has failed miserably in its efforts to diversify faculty, staff and department heads. With more than thirty-five department heads and coordinators, there is only one African-American in a leadership role.

For more than five years, the Advising Center in the College of Arts and Sciences has not had an African-American advisor, although it has had many opportunities to diversify its staff. It has the largest percentage of African-American students in this University, yet it has never had a full time African-American male professional staff person.

Most recently, the College of Arts and Sciences consolidated the Department of Romance Languages and Germanic and Slavic Languages. Both former department heads were considered inappropriate for the new leadership. The most experienced faculty (published, tenured faculty) in both the former departments, an African-American full professor in German was passed over as the new head.

The privatization of Food Services to Aramark was initially predicted to be a policy that would have a negative impact on the employment profile of African-Americans in food service on the UTK campus. The number of African-American cooks and managers has declined significantly since the arrival of Aramark. The most glaring example of racial discrimination in Food Services is the decision to remove the Assistant Director of Food Services, an African-American woman, by rewriting her position description. A loyal and effective employee of Food Services for more than thirty-five years, she was positioned to be the director of all Food Services until the advent of Aramark. All other African-American managers have either left their positions or been demoted to cooks or hourly workers.

Dr. Orlando Taylor, a viable African-American candidate for the position Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs, was conveniently dismissed from consideration when Dr. John Quinn resigned as Chancellor. Dr. Taylor

was a highly competitive candidate with impeccable credentials and had the support of many faculty and staff, both black and white.

The perceptions of African-American faculty and staff regarding the process of competing for administrative and faculty positions within the University became significantly tainted during the selection of the last deans of the College of Arts and Sciences, Education, and Social Work. The process changing depending on whether African-Americans are interims, potential candidates, etc.

More than a year ago, Dr. John Peters, Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs, and Dr. William Snyder, Chancellor, made a verbal commitment to a group of Black Faculty and Staff to "ensure diversity in the selection of new deans". There were four deanship vacancies (Arts and Sciences, Social Work, Education and Human Ecology). Since that time (April 1997), two more major administrative positions have become vacant (Vice Chancellor for Development and Vice Chancellor for Continuing Education). While we are not aware of any persons of color being considered for these positions, we are aware that no African-American have been promoted to these positions and in some cases no African-Americans were in the final pool of candidates.

The Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs (Dr. John Peters) informed a leadership group of the Black Faculty and Staff that he did not promote acting deans to deanships and that he failed to promote Associate Dean Jeanette Jennings, who is an African-American woman, because he considered her a viable candidate for the position. Several months later, Dr. Jennings left the University while her other two other colleagues, at that time Associate Dean Lorayne Lester and Associate Dean Glennon Rowells both Acting Deans of the Colleges of Arts and Sciences and Education respectfully, assumed the position of permanent deans of their colleges. African-American faculty and staff remain stunned and outraged by this act and only hope that our colleagues would recognize this act of racial injustice. The University should be hard pressed to try to justify its position on these acts.

Did the University miss a grand opportunity to demonstrate a commitment to diversity just as it did when it failed to promote African-Americans to the positions of Vice Chancellor for Development, and Dean of the College of Social Work?

A common excuse for not filling these positions with people of color centers around the argument that "they are difficult to find", and that "there are few in the pool". Black faculty and staff are frequently asked to provide leads or to forward information on position vacancies to potential minority candidates. This practice has become insulting given the usual total disregard of names of qualified minority candidates. Referrals are rarely selected to be interviewed. Search committees often change criteria when it comes to reviewing minority candidates.

The most recent example of lack of respect and insensitivity that University of Tennessee Administrators have had for the views and concerns of the black community was made glaringly vivid when the system's presidential search committee was established. There were no African-Americans on the original search committee. It was only after the media pressure that a black woman was selected to serve on the search committee.

What we have documented here is a slice of the problematic situation that exists at UTK as far as hiring, retention, and advancement of African-American in positions of authority in general and in faculty and staff positions in general is concerned. The examples indicate that there is an urgent need for this situation to be addressed.

The Road to Diversity: What Must be Done

The blue ribbon committee which was established in 1987, to examine racism against students, faculty, and staff at UTK presented a report to the then Chancellor Jack Reese in which it made twenty-two (22) recommendations. This report and its recommendations have been reviewed at least twice by the Commission on Blacks, an advisory group to the Chancellor. The commission has apparently had minimal effect in promoting diversity in the areas of faculty employment, promotion, and leadership.

We are well aware that the first measure institutions are apt to take when challenged to improve conditions is the setting up of a task force to "examine the issue." We point to the Task Force on Race Relations Committee of the 1980s and to the work of the Commission on Blacks to indicate that there is no need to reinvent the wheel. Regretfully, and frustratingly, many of the concerns that trouble African-Americans today (1998) were prevalent in 1988. It has become clear that few of the recommendations contained in the task force's report have been implemented.

What we are demanding be undertaken by the University are the following:

Revisit and take concrete steps to implement the 22 recommendations made in the task force report.

Directly challenge department heads and faculty to dramatically increase the number of African-American administrators and faculty.

Have the Office of Diversity Resources and Educational Services play a more overt role in fostering diversity on campus and have the University's units and general population take that role and recommendations emanating from DRES seriously. There needs to be an

accounting of what effect DRES has had in terms of influencing the attraction and retention of African-Americans at UTK.

There needs to be an accounting to the University community of what effect, if any, the FIPSE project. "A Change Model," a program designed to positively alter racist attitudes and behaviors of faculty at UTK has had on employment, promotion, and leadership opportunities for African-Americans at the University of Tennessee.

Publish the desegregation report compiled by Drs. Elliot and Levy and conduct several open forums with department and unit heads responding to the published results.

The Commission for Blacks should be empowered to request all department and unit heads to come before it to progress toward diversity. This process should be made public and all unit and department heads should be required to attend.

We recognize that we must continuously engage in both education and agitation if progress is to be made on addressing these disturbing issues and developments. We are urging the University of Tennessee to pay attention to the issues we have raised here and to take swift and sustained action to address them.