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BLACK @ UT

An annual e-newsletter published by the UT Commission for Blacks

The Status of Blacks at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville

We have made significant progress, but there is room for improvement

The Black community at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, is growing and changing. More than 50 years after the admission of the first African American at UT, constituents of the Black community still question, if UT is “hostile to none and welcoming to all.”

Has UT truly evolved over the last 50-plus years? Do Blacks feel more welcomed, more supported, more integrated into the campus as a whole? Do Black faculty, staff and students believe that they can lean on one another for support and encouragement? The Commission for Blacks asked six UT representatives – **Gregory Cox, Rickey Hall, Dametraus Jagers, Shawnboda Mead, Cavanaugh Mims, and Mariah Moore** – to express their opinions regarding the aforementioned questions as they relate to UT’s Black community. Their responses were mixed, but all of the respondents agreed that despite the progress, there is serious work that remains to be done.

During the interviews, we discovered that like most of the UT’s Black community, these individuals had varied opinions regarding campus climate. For instance, Shawnboda Mead believes the atmosphere for Black faculty, staff, and students is “welcoming...progressive [and] supportive” while Mariah Moore explained that the atmosphere is “non-existent...and unaware.” Moore also says that when she talks



Gregory Cox

UT alumni and President Emeritus, UT Black Alumni Council



Rickey Hall

Vice Chancellor & Chief Diversity Officer



Dametraus Jagers

Associate Director of Student Retention and Engagement, Office of Multicultural Student Life



Shawnboda Mead

Associate Director of Diversity and Multicultural Student Education, Office of Multicultural Student Life



Cavanaugh Mims

President of Visionary Solutions, LLC and President-Elect, UT Alumni Board of Directors



Mariah Moore

Child & Family Studies Senior with a Pre-Medicine concentration

to other students, “they [students] know we’re here, but they don’t know [anything] about our community, they don’t know about the BCC (Black Cultural Center), and they know very little about OMSL programs.” From Cavanaugh Mims’ perspective, the campus atmosphere surrounding the Black community is “improving, changing, [and] incomplete.” In 1996, Mr. Mims graduated from UT with a degree in civil engineering; he explains that when compared to 1996, there are “almost two different UTs.” Mims believes that Chancellor Cheek has influenced many of the cultural improvements at UT; he says, “It is evident that he [Chancellor Cheek] is sincerely concerned by incivility and wants to do something about it.” Mims goes on to say that the campus is moving in the right direction; improving campus climate is a work in progress with regards to the successful recruitment/retention of diverse faculty, staff and students.

When discussing campus climate specific to the Black faculty, staff, and student community, the interviewees expressed different perceptions. Most commented on the strength and supportive nature of the faculty, staff, and student relationships, stating that they had positive experiences when they interacted with one another. Ms. Moore, the student representative, had a different viewpoint, stating that the staff, and students are “disconnected,

inactive, [and] lackluster.” As far as relationships are concerned, “some people don’t care, and some do care, but they don’t care enough to seek out [and nurture] relationships.” Regardless of how the interviewees described the relationships between Black faculty, staff, and students, they unanimously agreed that members of the Black UT community are important for the recruitment and retention of minority students. Gregory Cox stated that in order to “be truly diverse, students need to see faculty [members] who look like them and pertain to their culture.” Dametraus Jagers added, “ It

[faculty] doesn’t necessarily always have to be a Black person, but [it needs to be] someone of color.”

The respondents also agreed that it is imperative for students’ personal and professional development when they have opportunities

to interact and network with faculty and staff of color. For many students, relationships with faculty and staff become long-term professional and/or personal relationships that extend well beyond the classroom and after graduation. Mariah Moore pointed out that building these relationships also give students an “incentive to complete the degree.” Students are encouraged to meet high academic standards, engage in campus life, and immerse themselves in the university culture by creating and maintaining these relationships.

“ improving,
changing, and
incomplete ”

Involvement in student organizations offers the same opportunities. Rickey Hall discussed the “critical links” in student retention and student organizations. “The more places students can be connected, the higher the likelihood that students will be retained,” he says. Mr. Hall stated that “oftentimes, students will find a family away from home within various organizations on campus; having the support of those individuals and not wanting to disappoint them can often keep students striving to make the grade and put forth the best effort they have to offer.” Mentorship can also be found and oftentimes develops in student organizations; both are an important part of academic success, especially for students of color.

Each of the interviewees agreed that establishing a mentoring relationship with someone who has a similar career is helpful. Specifically, faculty/staff mentorship helps students to develop good decision-making skills, teach social lessons, and create relationships beyond graduation. Dametraus Jagers also makes the point that mentors “provide perspective,” sharing insight about how they dealt with complex situations and ways various experiences strengthened them and helped them overcome other circumstances. To support the development of mentoring relationships, UT has to uphold its commitment to diversity. Although UT is developing an intercultural perspective to campus life, Dametraus Jagers makes the point that,

“Everyone must acknowledge the fact that race still matters.”

Throughout the interviews, it was evident that these six representatives had a myriad of ideas regarding the status of the UT Black community. We learned that no one perspective is more credible than the other. The University of Tennessee, Knoxville has made significant progress; the takeaway is that there is room for improvement.

MEMBERSHIP

If you are interested in being a part of the Commission for Blacks, we invite you to GET INVOLVED and complete our membership form.

<https://tiny.utk.edu/cfb-member>