

# Tripathi speaks on 'White Only' art project, issues in the Heights

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Satish Tripathi often gets asked how he wants to leave UB when his time as its president comes to an end. He usually responds that he simply wants to have made the university better for students, faculty and the community and have improved the overall institution.

"I'll leave it up to others to judge how I did it," he said.

Tripathi sat down with *The Spectrum* for a wide-ranging interview in his Capen Hall fifth floor office Thursday afternoon. He was passionate, often hitting his hand on the table to emphasize his points when speaking of issues like the "White Only" art project and the University Heights neighborhood, and upbeat when speaking of positives like record donations and his plans for UB's future. He was candid when speaking of his own legacy.

He also said he would meet with *The Spectrum* again next semester.

Tripathi and UB have been dealing with fallout from the controversial art project in which graduate fine arts student Ashley Powell hung signs reading "White Only" and "Black Only" around campus. Students, some of whom were fearful and outraged over the signs, have been waiting for university response and action since September.

Tripathi said a College of Arts and Sciences policy committee is still making a policy with clear guidelines on expressive art in public places on campus. He said it's a difficult line to walk, however, as a university is a place for students to express themselves



KAINAN GUO, THE SPECTRUM

President Satish Tripathi sat down for an interview with *The Spectrum* in his Capen fifth floor office on Thursday. Tripathi spoke of issues facing UB like the "White Only" art project and the Heights, as well as record donations and his goals for the university.

and to "push boundaries," but not at the expense of others feeling unsafe.

"Arts are going to be controversial. But when it's put on the wall, one should say that this is art. So there must be a policy on the campus," Tripathi said.

Members of the Black Student Union (BSU) peacefully protested Tripathi's annual State of the University address last month with questions they wanted Tripathi and UB to answer about the line between art and cultural trauma. Tripathi was supposed to

meet with BSU the same day as his interview with *The Spectrum*, but said the meeting had to be rescheduled because some members could not meet.

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He said he's looking forward to meeting with BSU sometime this week.

"One of the things I want them to understand is their concerns are my concerns," Tripathi said. "I want to make sure [that] if they feel insecure ... I really need to address that issue."

A 2013 *Spectrum* poll revealed that 82 percent of students surveyed did not feel Tripathi had a visible presence on campus. Tripathi said while he misses the "intense interactions" with students that comes with teaching, he sometimes must use his time getting students the resources they need rather than interacting with them.

"I try to walk around and see the students and talk to them, but I definitely could do a lot more," Tripathi said. "But at the same time, my job is to make sure students get better education here — they have the resources, they have the faculty. So I feel I could do a lot better if I'm getting resources somewhere for them."

One of larger problems students have is life in the Heights right off of South Campus. The district had 523 crimes, including 272 larcenies and 118 burglaries, in 2012 and many students live in unsafe housing conditions with absentee landlords. Residents have also complained of the student partying in the neighborhood and Buffalo Police has increased crackdowns on drinking this semester.

"This is a thing that's going to take time but it's a problem — I own it," Tripathi said. "It's something we really need to work on."

Tripathi said UB has taken several steps to improve the neighborhood, like paying City of Buffalo inspectors overtime to inspect homes in the Heights and incentivizing UB faculty to buy homes in the neighborhood with a loan program. UB will also soon announce a new grant program where loans will be forgiven if faculty members live in the homes for a certain number of



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Tripathi said UB is working to revitalize South Campus and the Heights neighborhood, like moving graduate schools to the campus and incentivizing faculty to buy homes in the area.

years.

But Tripathi said the Heights can't be truly revitalized until South Campus is revitalized.

The campus is ridden with temporary buildings from the '50s and '60s and is losing the medical school to the new downtown campus. Tripathi has pushed for more money from the state and to move the Graduate School of Education and the School of Social Work to South Campus. Tripathi said doing so would also help alleviate the shortage of space on North Campus.

When asked about his vision for South Campus 10 years from now, Tripathi used terms like "vibrant," "alive" and filled with "student life."

"As the plans progresses, I want all the three campuses to be better than where they are," Tripathi said. "It's a tough thing because I don't want any of the campuses to be worse. I want them all to be better and that's exactly what we're trying to do."

Tripathi said UB's recent string of deans stepping down, including College of Arts and Sciences Dean E. Bruce Pitman, is more "timing" than a trend. He said UB's deans actually serve longer than the national average, which he says is about three and a half to four years.

"It's definitely an issue for a short time while we search for a dean, but it's normal in the university context," Tripathi said. "Of course, in a given situation you might say, 'Oh my god, the dean left.' But it's not the case."

He said the university must think long-term when finding solutions for the loss of enrollment in humanities that is happening at UB and across the country. UB's arts, history, English and foreign language departments have all had enrollment decreases of more than 40 percent during the past decade.

"So if I told my provost, 'I've doubled my enrollment, give me double the faculty,' then enrollment went down and they'd say, 'OK, give back the faculty' — you can't run a

university like that," Tripathi said.

After losing an election that was later deemed invalid, former Student Association Senator Yaser Soliman plans to write an open letter to Tripathi asking for more university oversight of SA, which brings in about \$4 million in student funds.

"I can't tell you that it should have more oversight or not," Tripathi said. "They need to learn how to do it. Otherwise you would have an observer who says do this, don't do this ... We talked about academic freedom, we talked about learning. On a campus, you should provide an environment for the students."

Tripathi said the UB Foundation (UBF), the private organization that handles nearly \$1 billion worth of donations to UB, has enough transparency. UBF currently has the organization's 990s and audited financial statements available on its website.

"The private entity is why people give money. They don't trust the state. That's why it was created," Tripathi said. "So this is something that I think is open enough for people to look at, but we can't give the donors names and things like that."

But Tripathi was upbeat for the majority of the interview — he rarely goes long in a conversation without smiling. He took time to discuss personal matters, like his limited food options on campus as a vegetarian and how he knows little about sports — although he did know the football team is just one win away from bowl eligibility and has just one difficult opponent — Northern Illinois — left on the schedule. He even recommended a book that he's been enjoying.

He also said he appreciates student journalism and role it has on a college campus.

"It's fantastic," Tripathi said. "You not only learn how to practice journalism, but you keep the campus honest. You sort of have a sense of people and finding out what's going on. I think it's great."

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