

UB students walk out of Tripathi's speech

Response to art project on race called weak

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Two dozen University at Buffalo students quietly walked out of President Satish K. Tripathi's annual State of the University address on Friday to protest how the university handled a controversial, racially charged art project that riled the campus in September.

The students, seated in the third and fourth rows of the auditorium in Slee Hall, rose in unison about a third of the way into Tripathi's speech, which mostly highlighted UB's successes over the past year. They stood and held signs in the air for a few moments before filing out of the auditorium on the North Campus in Amherst. Tripathi paused momentarily from his prepared remarks but did not address the students directly.

The silent protest overshadowed Tripathi's announcement that the

university is exploring whether to grow its enrollment by 2,000 students over five years.

"We are experiencing growing demand that is translating to rising enrollment yields," he said. "With this evolution, it only seems right and natural to consider growing our enrollment."

Combined undergraduate and graduate headcount enrollment currently is 29,806. That's down slightly from 2014-15, but still about 250 students more than what university officials had anticipated for this fall.

Undergraduate enrollment was at its highest level in five years, and the university was seeing stronger interest from students from outside the state, including New Jersey, Pennsylvania and California. In recent years, UB had been reducing its freshman class targets, only to see more students accept the university's admissions offers. Combined with higher rates of retaining students, that increased "yield" – the percentage of incoming freshmen who accept ad-

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Students felt hurt and confused

ADDRESS • from BU

mission - has helped spur the overall enrollment increase.

UB officials have floated enrollment growth before, most notably as part of the original UB2020 blueprint in 2009 that called for an additional 10,000 students. State funding never materialized to put that plan into action. Tripathi did not provide details during or after his speech of the mechanics of growing enrollment by 2,000 students. He said discussions were ongoing on campus "to see if it is feasible."

The student protest stemmed from the Sept. 16 posting of several Jim Crowesque "White Only" and "Black Only" signs outside restrooms on UB's North Campus. The signs turned out to be the art project of graduate student Ashley Powell. Powell, who is black, said in a letter that she had hoped to expose what she called "white privilege" at the university.

Some black students were outraged by the project.

"Many students on campus felt hurt, confused, disgruntled," said Samirra Felix, a sophomore from Brooklyn who joined the protest. "We weren't told what was going on."

Some students said that university dispatchers downplayed their concerns when they first started calling university police on Sept. 16 with reports about the "White Only" and "Black Only" signs.

The fact that Powell is black doesn't change the university's

Seeking students

UB officials are exploring whether to grow enrollment by 2,000 students over the next five years.

Year	Enrollment
2011	28,860
2012	28,952
2013	29,850
2014	29,944
2015	29,806

NOTE: Combined undergraduate and graduate headcount in the fall semester.

feeble response to the project, said Felix, a member of the Black Student Union, which organized Friday's silent protest. University police issued no alert about the signs, she said. The student newspaper, the UB Spectrum, revealed the origin of the signs on its website the same afternoon the signs were first spotted on campus. But by then, the signs already had become a social media phenomenon.

Tripathi, who already has met with some members of the Black Student Union, reflected on the signs during his speech, saying that Powell's project has stirred new discussions on campus on the "boundaries of freedom of expression within an inclusive and intellectually open academic community."

About 300 people, including Buffalo Mayor Byron W. Brown and Assemblywoman Crystal People-Stokes, attended the ad-

dress, Tripathi's fourth since becoming UB president in 2011.

Some students said Tripathi didn't go far enough in his remarks to assuage their concerns about how the university treats students of color.

"We didn't want generic statements about how the university appreciates diversity," said Tiffany Vera, a senior from Westchester County. "We wanted the president to immediately address our questions."

When asked whether UB had a race problem, Vera replied that "there is improvement that could be made with race relations on this campus."

The Black Student Union sent Tripathi a letter two weeks ago asking that he deem the project not to be a work of art and calling for more training of university police and dispatchers.

His speech didn't address the group's concerns, Felix said. In fact, Tripathi specifically referred to the "controversial student art project that has sparked debate across UB."

Tripathi called the student walkout "respectful" and he did not appear bothered by it. He defended the university's response to student concerns.

"We are really working on everything that they have asked for," he said following his talk. "I respect them. They came and had a peaceful walkout. That's fine."

Tripathi is scheduled to meet again in November with members of the Black Student Union.

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