

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

SEE

SPECTRUM 9/25/15

Greetings President Satish K. Tripathi and University at Buffalo Administration,

Attention: Charles F. Zukoski, Dennis R. Black, and Chair to the Department of Art

From its inception in 1967, The Black Student Union has carried the goal of preserving and perpetuating African American culture, dignity and self-awareness. As the first minority organization on the University at Buffalo's campus, we seek advancements in affiliating and uplifting individuals through means of education and community involvement. To align with the execution of these goal, the Black Student Union submits this letter to you on September 25, 2015.

The Black Student Union would like to thank you for extending the invitation to gather student leaders to discuss last week's events at length.

On Wednesday, September 17th 2015, The Black Student Union convened for its weekly general body meeting where students addressed the "White Only" and "Black Only" signs displayed on campus. At this general body meeting, students expressed feelings of, shock, grief, and trepidation.

As students shared their responses to the signs, it was evident that these discoveries took an emotional and psychological toll on the student body of this campus. One student professed to feeling threatened by the signs and fearing for her life. Another student proclaimed that her friends,

who are also UB students, did not know where to sit at a restaurant at the UB commons after seeing a "WHITE ONLY" sign in the vicinity.

There has always been an interplay between artistic expression and crime, and this case is no different. While graffiti is considered a style of art that has dated back as far as ancient Rome, it has also been seen as an illegal action. These signs evoked such a mass of negative emotions from students, and regardless of the intentions, people still suffered.

The Black Student Union stands by its position that this is not art. This project is likened to human subject experimentation in which all of the general population of our university was involuntarily exposed to these discriminatory signs.

Ashley Powell voluntarily admitted [in the Black Student Union's general body meeting Wednesday, September 17th, 2015] that she is solely responsible for displaying the signs for the UB art course, Installations in Urban Spaces. The Black Student Union believes the student body's right to move freely about the campus appeared to have been impeded on by the very plain discriminatory message on the signs.

In no way did Powell's presence in Wednesday's general body meeting inflate or increase the meeting's attendance. The Black Student Union's general body has been historically supportive and regularly active in all BSU programs and events. In fact, many other Stu-

dent Association organizations were represented in Wednesday's general body meeting. As the premier student organization for minority individuals at the University at Buffalo, it is not uncommon for weekly general body meetings to be widely supported and well-attended. The attendance to Wednesday's meeting will not be reduced to Powell's veiled attempt to incite racial tension. The minority community at the University at Buffalo stands in solidarity with the Black Student Union.

After Powell's confession and self identification as a graduate student, the general body members and other students present in the meeting immediately questioned how said "art project" was approved and how it could in any way fulfill a legitimate academic purpose.

While others have dismissed the displays offensiveness because it was supported by a sociocultural theory, the Black Student Union does not excuse the insensitivity of this display. Moreover, the nationality or ethnicity of Powell does not impact the Black Student Union's stance against her work.

However, Powell is not the only person responsible for these displays. The Black Student Union believes adjunct professor, Warren K. Quigley is also at fault. As students, we expect for faculty to be knowledgeable on the current academic standards set forth by the university for the array of respective schools and programs. As students, we also expect faculty's guidance and sound judgment

as it relates to achieving academic goals. Many students begged the question, "Did anyone consider the implications that this 'art project' would have on the people at the University at Buffalo?" Professor Quigley failed to provide the appropriate guidance in this matter. As a result, the project was carried out and people of all races and creeds remain profoundly distressed.

If this project is in fact in accordance with *any* university standard for academic work, a complete overhaul of these standards must be performed *immediately*. Failure to reexamine University policies and procedures that protect the freedoms of students' academic prowess and foster a healthy living-learning environment sends a single substandard message... that the University at Buffalo does not value its minority students, faculty, staff, alumni, donors, and affiliates.

Although Ashley Powell and adjunct professor Warren K. Quigley are the cause of this heinous act, The Black Student Union also finds the University at Buffalo's Police Department at fault.

The Black Student Union executive board noted a common theme in students' expressions at Wednesday's general body meeting. Students felt: angry, traumatized, unwelcomed, divided, discriminated against, belittled, dehumanized, fearful, unsure, and unsafe.

Multiple students contacted the University Police Department to report the findings. Later at the general body meeting Wednesday,

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students described their interaction with University Police as disheartening. Students expected for the officers to inquire about other display sightings, possible sightings of individuals posting the displays, and references to UB Counseling services. However, University Police officers merely disposed of the "White Only" and "Black Only" signs in trash receptacles. University Police dispatchers responding via telephone dismissed the students' feelings of fear by making insensitive statements like: "Why are you so upset over a sign?" Which does not reflect UB's official statement: "UB is a safe place that values diversity. Review is under way." (Twitter, @UBnow Thursday September 17, 2015; 4:24pm) Not only were responses such as this grossly inappropriate coming from public officials who are sworn to protect and serve the student body, their passivity to the historical context of these signs is equally disheartening and disturbing.

The Black Student Union and the minority community fully expect that the administration of the University at Buffalo ad-

dress each of the following questions publicly, candidly, and with urgency:

- What is art at UB?
- What is academic freedom?
- Does academic freedom justify or create room for racially charged art forms?
- Does academic freedom endorse unconscionable recreations of historically divisive work?
- Is our welcome, as people of color, at UB only as extensive as the next art project?
- Where does the University draw the line between freedom of expression and overt demonstrations of cultural trauma?

In conclusion, the Black Student Union fully expects that:

- President Satish K. Tripathi immediately address the aforementioned five questions and insist that this work is not art.
- President Satish K. Tripathi articulate University at Buffalo's vision for inclusion that encompasses matters like this during his Annual State of the University Address.
- The Chair of the Art Department

actively re-evaluate policies and procedures currently in place concerning art installations.

- University administration review, revise and train the University Police officers and dispatchers to respond to harmful acts more sufficiently
- Address why University Police officers merely disposed of displays in trash receptacles as opposed to inquiring about other display sightings, possible sightings of individuals posting the displays, and references to UB counseling services
- Address University Police dispatchers insensitive responses to concerned students

The Black Student Union will not stand idly by as new developments of racially charged interactions continuously take place in the UB community. The Black Student Union will not be silent and will remain steadfast in upholding the principles our organization was established upon in 1967.

This letter serves as a means to convey the message that the student body's con-

cerns will not be minimized. The Black Student Union will not rest until the above expectations are actively and effectively pursued.

In solidarity,
Black Student Union Executive Board

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