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Stim Bullitt Civic Courage Essay

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The Black Student Union of the '60s at UW

National media often demonizes college student protestors: deemed as threats, news organizations and schools alike portray them as reckless and ineffective. Yet, where the media and schools shame protestors, history rewards them by painting a different story—one where college student protestors, whose hands are often tied by unyielding administrations and unsupportive publics, show remarkable civic courage by pioneering initiatives for equity, in a way often ahead of their time. In the late '60s and throughout the '70s in Washington, no group better embodied this commitment than the Black Student Union (BSU) at the University of Washington (UW). Not only did their bold, militant protests and campus occupations pave the way for increased multicultural enrollment, but their advocacy for Chicano students pioneered their entry into UW, and later, the establishment of the United Mexican American Students group (UMAS). Their dedication to becoming pioneers for racial justice—without support and risking personal safety—for the Black community as well as racial groups outside of their own even when it did not directly benefit them, evidences our understanding of this group as demonstrators of civic courage.

As the Civil Rights movement grew and calls for racial justice dominated the nation, Seattle was certainly no exception to the calls for change that characterized the '60s (Robinson). However, when Black students like E.J Brisker and Eddie Demming arrived at UW looking for

an organizational base to put those calls for change in motion, all they found was the Afro-American Student Society, an organization hoping to encourage dialogue between Black Africans and Black Americans (Robinson). Feeling like the Afro-American Student Society was insufficient for their vision, the need for an organizational base was further solidified through varying conversations with Black political leaders on the West Coast. (Over Thanksgiving break, future BSU founders would go on to attend a Black Youth Conference in California where the idea of BSU chapters was proposed, and earlier that year in April of 1967, Brisker and Demming had heard leading member of "Black Power" Stokely Carmichael speak at the University of Washington (Robinson). Demming would later say that Carmichael inscribed in them the idea that "things could no longer stay the same" (Doctor)). Thus, in early 1968, UW's inaugural Black Student Union was founded.

UW's BSU was established with the mission to accomplish three separate initiatives: increased minority enrollment, the hiring of more minority faculty, and the creation of a Black Studies program (Robinson). At a time when BSU members could have focused solely on addressing the needs of Black students, they instead made it part of their key mission to focus on a bigger picture of racial justice. Recognizing true equity could only be achieved through solidarity with other marginalized communities and not isolation, BSU's allyship exemplified a key component of civic courage: advocacy not just for one's own sake but for the greater good and a willingness to embrace the stakes fighting for a cause that isn't necessarily yours.

Perhaps then it isn't surprising just how far BSU was willing to go in their efforts for multi-racial justice. Although initially willing to work with the University, BSU members would become further radicalized by the events of March and April in 1968, including the assassination of MLK and a protest that had happened at Frankin High School, where a 100-person walkout

started after school officials expelled two young Black women for wearing Afro hairstyles (Robinson). By May 1968, the BSU felt the time had come to assert their demands. On May 6, 1968, the BSU drafted a letter to UW President Charles Odegaard, outlining a list of BSU demands and specifically calling for the recruitment of other POC students in demand number 2: "The Black Student Union should be given the financial resources and aids necessary to recruit and tutor non-white students. Specifically, the Black Student Union wants to recruit: 300 Afro-American, 200 American Indians, and 100 Mexican students in September" ("Letter from BSU to Odegaard, May 6, 1968"). President Odegaard must've disagreed with their later justification though, that "Quality education is possible through an interaction of diverse groups, classes, and races," because a week later BSU had yet to receive any response. When Odegaard did eventually respond and claim he supported their initiatives in principle, he refused to allocate funds for BSU's objectives, including the funds to bring two Black men to UW to begin a Black Studies department. When Odegaard then once more ignored BSU's next demand for $50,000 funding directly deposited into their club account on May 16th, the students knew their advocacy would require direct action before the year would come to a close where they'd lose momentum in summer. As they stated in their first letter to the administration, "We feel the University of a thousand years does not need another thousand to determine action on these proposals. If you, Dr. Odegaard, do not act promptly, we shall use any means that we deem necessary to ensure that freedom and justice prevail on this campus" (Curtis).

And use any means necessary they would. On May 20th at 5:20 p.m., approximately 100 BSU members and allies marched from the Husky Union Building to the President's office in Gerberding Hall, where they interrupted a Faculty Senate Executive Committee meeting. Odegaard and others retreated to his inner office, where they were barricaded in by protestors, as

more and more students occupied and sat in throughout the entire floor (King). Naturally, the subject of the meeting quickly changed from administrative conversation to the BSU's demands. By 7 pm, the number of sit-in participants had grown to 150 students, all of varying ethnic backgrounds. In spite of the efforts of the University's Police Department to cut off the activists, protesters and supplies (such as groceries and a record player) were lifted up to the third-story office by ropes outside the building (Robinson). Although at 8:15, Vice-President Donald K. Anderson and UW Police Chief Ed Kanz tried to deliver an ultimatum to the protesters—telling them to either leave on their own by 8.30 pm or they would be removed by force—the protesters held their ground against the risk of their own personal safety (Robinson). Eventually, with the help of ACLU lawyer Michael Rosen, BSU was able to draft a proposal that outlined its objectives. At 8:45, the proposal was delivered to President Odegaard and once he signed, the sit-in was finally over. The protesters left Odegaard's office chanting "Beep-beep, bang-bang, ungawa, Black Power!" (Robinson; King).

At great personal risk, BSU's continued advocacy not only paved the way for their own community but others, especially at a time critical to the growing Chicano/Latino movement in Washington state. Just a year later, African-American enrollment at UW increased by 310%, from 150 students in the fall of 1967 to 465, while the enrollment of Native Americans rose from 25 to 100 students and the Chicano student body went from 10 to 90 undergraduates (Simer). (Chicano enrollment may have been as low as three undergraduates—before 1968, the UW's only census of students by ethnicity had been an estimation based on observing students on the Suzzallo Quad.) The successful Black Studies program BSU helped create later encouraged students to demand a Chicano and Asian-American Studies program, eventually creating the shared Department of American Ethnic Studies.

But these aren't numbers that simply spawned from a president agreeing to his students' demands. To ensure Chicano enrollment, eight BSU members and a UW professor went on a recruiting trip around the state to convince Mexican-American students to attend in the summer of 1968. Visiting the fields and farms of Yakima Valley to recruit Chicano youth, Black students were intentional in ensuring Chicano students had equitable access to education, especially at a university that had previously denied their entry (Castañeda; Simer). In coming to campus, and in collaborative events once on campus, BSU's support was instrumental in the burgeoning student Chicano pride movement. As the *University of Washington Daily* mentions, "The Chicanos are fully aware that most of them wouldn't be here if it hadn't been for the BSU's successful drive for and execution of a minority recruitment program. The UMAS-BSU alliance is fairly tangible. The BSU welcomes a UMAS representative…And three BSU officers attended the UMAS conference held in Toppenish during vacation. The Chicanos say, 'The two groups give each other mutual help—time, effort, funds and active support" ("Mexican-Americans Tell Opposition To Grapes"; Castañeda, "The Fusion of El Movimiento and Farm Worker Organizing in the 19'60s").

BSU recognized that in other parts of the country, what could've been separate struggles for justice, would prosper better as a one coalition effort between two marginalized groups in their fight for racial equality. Inspired by the actions of BSU in the fall of 1968, just a little more than a month into the academic year, Chicano students had enough support to mobilize and form the United Mexican American Students (UMAS). (In the interim, BSU had accepted students like co-founder Guadalupe Gamboa as a member of BSU, despite not being Black). That same fall, UMAS led a campaign for one of the Chicano Movement's central objectives: farmworker equality, by boycotting California table grapes to secure better conditions and wages

(Castañeda). With the support of other activist organizations and BSU, UMAS petitioned the dormitories to stop selling grapes in their eating facilities and later achieved victory in 1969 as the UW Grape Boycott Committee was victorious as the Husky Union Building officially halted the sale of grapes. Their successful picketing made UW the first campus in the United States to eliminate grapes from eating facilities, and the news attention they garnered helped pave the way for later wage victories in 1970, all of which never would've been possible without BSU (Castañeda).

As an incoming college freshman, and a student passionate about immigration reform who currently works with seasonal migrant farmworkers in Yakima County, UW's BSU's dedication to multiculturalism is not only a lesson in advocacy but an inspiring one in civic courage. From the creation of a Black Studies program, the increased enrollment of Black students, and the founding of BSU chapters not only at UW but at local high schools, the members of BSU at UW in the '60s and '70s undeniably led the way for the UW we know today, where now 30% of its student population are students of color, instead of four (Vuylsteke). But they faced risks not only for their own gain–by helping pave the path for Chicano students and others, BSU acknowledged that systemic change must be inclusive, and ultimately solidified the idea that equity must be universal.

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