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Recognition of Student Protestors during the "Black Demands"

Feb. 23, 2006

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On Monday, March 16, 1970, an exasperated group of black students staged a sit-in occupying Doane Administration Building. By 1:30 that afternoon, Doane had to be cleared out because of a bomb scare. The next day, as faculty gathered to discuss ways to meet the set of demands that students had issued in December of the previous year, a large group of students, frustrated with the pace at which the college was moving to respond to their concerns, entered the faculty meeting, refused to leave after being asked to do so, and in effect, caused the faculty meeting to disband. On March 18th, the next day, over 1,000 members of the Denison Community met in Huffman Dining Hall and left supporting a proposal to boycott all classes and to set up an alternative College until such time as the College accepted the Black Demands. By Spring Break, nearly everyone had resumed classes.

Denison was becoming part of a broader national stream of student activism which, until the mid-60s, had been confined largely to black colleges and communities in the South. By the Spring and Fall of 1968, the black student rebellion connected with the militant activism of white student radicals in the North and West. At Rutgers, Cornell, Columbia, San

Francisco State, the University of Chicago and countless other educational institutions, “a familiar scenario was repeated. Students would go on strike (sometimes occupying buildings) and present the administration with a list of demands (sometimes ‘non-negotiable’) that usually included a demand for admission of more black students, hiring of more black faculty, and initiation of a Black Studies curriculum.”¹

What were the conditions leading to this catalytic state of affairs? The first prevailing condition is to be found in the fact that there was a national crisis, educationally and politically, and on most large university campuses these two were inextricably linked. Universities were seen as not only failing to offer socially and culturally relevant curricula, but they used their campuses as ROTC recruiting stations and promoted research in support of the rapidly expanding military industrial complex. Besides, the same abridgement of civil rights prevalent in the larger society resulted in the marginalization or outright exclusion of African American students on white college campuses. “The impact of the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights Movement, the politics of the new left and the unrest on college campuses across the nation [set in motion] a major eruption of events late in the decade. 1968 is a year of demonstrations and assassinations, marked by violent protests at Columbia University and the Chicago Democratic

Convention and the untimely deaths of Martin Luther King Jr. and Senator Robert Kennedy.”²

This, my friends, was a dangerous era. If students of that period are lauded for no other reason, they should be admired for their bravery in the face of often violent opposition from authorities and praised for their tenacity in taking charge of their own education. It is a broadly held misconception that the rising tide of student activism on college campuses was deep and wide. But a 1968 Harris poll found that only 4% of U.S. students identified themselves as radical or far left; by 1970 only 11% identified themselves in that way. 70% agreed that school authorities were right in calling in police when students occupied a building. And even after the tragic killings at Kent State, 42% of the students surveyed felt that “the national Guard acted responsibly in most cases when called onto campuses.

Student activists such as Henry Durand, David McBride, Darrell Brown, Monroe Little, and our honored guest, Bonita Poe Curry were a rare breed at Denison. They were visionaries with charisma and the organizational ability to mobilize the masses. In a Faculty Luncheon presentation in 1985, the then Provost Lou Brakeman enthusiastically praised the students for their passion, as he quoted from the Preface of “The Black Demands:”

“The Following are the specific demands and necessities of the Denison Black student Union. These are the reworked and enumerated measures we feel an absolute must for the continued existence of a black population at Denison University. We feel that each and every one of the demands are essential to the package that would make Denison a viable community for Black Students. Therefore, the Black Student Union will accept only a commitment in writing for compliance with all the demands or the total rejection of all the demands. Let us make this clear, all or none ---not one, not a few, not this and that one and maybe the other one, and not referral to various committees scattered across the community, a definite yes or no answer is demanded.”

Now what were the specific demands? The students asked that a minimum of 5 black professors be hired for the 1970-71 academic year; that each hired had to be approved by a committee of the black student Union; that a black studies program be established with the autonomy to hire and fire its own faculty, and that a minimum of 100 black students be brought to Denison in the next year to avoid mere token integration.

Not surprisingly, the College via separate resolutions by the faculty, the Board and a lengthy reply from the President endorsed the need for a greater black presence in the student body, in the faculty and in the

curriculum at Denison, but then went on to give reasons why demands were not the most constructive route to these ends. As provost Brakeman explained the college's dilemma: On the one hand, "You cannot be humane unless you recognize the black demands." On the other, "Quality educational structures are not governed by demand rhetoric." And of course, against the wishes of the students, the College set up a Task Force which ended finally in meeting some of the student demands and not others. The dynamics of the conflict are vintage and I wish I had the time to go into all of it here. But suffice it to be said that progress was made. In 1972, Art Zebbs became the first full-time director of black studies and the Program has offered a major and minor for over 30 years. In 1979 Denison became the first college in the country to require its students to take a course in minority studies or women's studies as a graduation requirement. In 1982 there were 109 black students on campus and at one point we had more than five black professors.

As Jack Kirby points out in his 1990 account of the Evolution of Black Studies at Denison, "Denison's own black revolution proceeded to shape the essence of black studies program." Indeed, the Program owes much to the black student radicals of the 60s. But I want to make a reciprocal point, one often overlooked in the chronicling of events. Black Studies at Denison also gave rise to the intellectual forces and social analysis

that produced the Black Demands and the boycott. In the Fall of 1968, one year prior to the black demands, now emeritus Professor Bill Nichols of the English department and Charles Henry, then a black senior at Denison who would later return to direct Black Studies after earning his Phd in political science, created and taught the first Black Culture course at Denison.

Nichols reports that all 13 black Denison students over 60 white students enrolled in that course. Student left that course fired up to effect change here at Denison. Here is another connection to the course:

Armstead

Robinson was an undergraduate at Yale who had a lot to do with the creation of an early Afro-American Studies program there. I was at Yale in 1969-70, and Bill was so impressed with Robinson that he asked if he'd be willing visit Denison. He came as a consultant the week of the boycott, and although I wasn't here, Bill has the impression that Robinson had something to do with the Black Studies thrust of the boycott and the alternative college. (People opposed to the boycott, of course, claimed Robinson was an outside adjitator. Folks worried a lot about outside adjitators in those days.)

The institutional matrix is a pervasive dimension, because it is a constant, embracing our corporate existence and private lives on college campuses and in the larger society. I am a child and product of the 1960s. We never

trusted institutions, especially academic ones, because they so often used their high intellectual ideals of objectivity as a cloak for reactionary and conservative politics. We began to see them, following the lead of many sociologists before us, as self-interested entities with structures that were slow to change and with policies and procedures designed to protect and perpetuate the status quo. This is the reason we challenged them, questioned them, petitioned them, attacked them, occupied them, blockaded them, interrogated and examined them, and eventually undertook to transform, and even revolutionize them. To use an illustration, we wanted to know what relevance Greek myths had for the realities of our daily struggles. This is not to say that Greek myths are in-and-of-themselves irrelevant. For example, some of us began to see in the work of existentialist philosophers such as Jean Paul Sartre an application of the *Myth of Sisyphus*--- as Sisyphus relentlessly, repeatedly and yet futilely pushed the boulder up the hill only to have it, over and over again, crush him to the ground --- that reflected more than the mere inevitability of death, but also the constant need to struggle passionately and uncompromisingly against what would appear to be insurmountable odds to attain a better future than our parents were forced to endure. Therefore, it was not that our liberal arts curricula were irrelevant, it was just that an institutional matrix bent on preserving the status quo failed

to make it germane to the concreteness of our daily lives – not so much to the concrete realities of finding a job, but the nitty-gritty work of creating an Aquarian age of justice and freedom, and of carving out a future in which peoples of diverse cultures and racial backgrounds could live together (or apart) in peace. It was an activist spirit that propelled us.

My sense is that we need to recapture some of that spirit today on our college and university campuses.

¹ Allen, Robert, "Politics of the Attack on Black Studies", *Black Scholar*

² <http://www.factbites.com/topics/1968>