

11-12-1992

## Chief minister explains Black Student Union concerns

John Smith

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.denison.edu/writingourstory>

---

### Recommended Citation

Smith, John, "Chief minister explains Black Student Union concerns" (1992). *Writing Our Story*. 82.  
<http://digitalcommons.denison.edu/writingourstory/82>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Black Studies at Denison Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Writing Our Story by an authorized administrator of Denison Digital Commons.

# QUORUM

## Chief Minister Explains Black Student Union Concerns

By JOHN SMITH



This is what led to the Homecoming-day protest by the BSU: the incident between Andrea [Wedderburn] and Dr. Ralf Remshardt took

place on Tuesday, and Andrea brought her concerns to us on Friday. She was very upset about the incident and repeated exactly what she got from the conversation. That was what we addressed in our first letter to the theatre department and our open letter to the community, which was that we agree with Andrea: the statements were racist and Remshardt definitely appeared to be speaking on behalf of the department. Later he said that all comments were his own opinions and not those of the department, but at the time, Andrea—as well as the BSU—took those statements to represent the

Artist directed a play called *Pearly Victorious* two years ago. Ryan Palmer and Christine Burden both had lead roles. The only time I saw Andrea in a play prior to *The Cavern* was when she played a maid last year in *The Real Inspector Hound*, and she told me that was the only part she was allowed to read for.

We, as black students, not only were furious about what was said to Andrea but also about the reality of the theatre department, which is that due to Denison's selection of plays, black theatre majors are turned off from auditioning although they're talented, and they should have an equal chance to participate in mainstage productions.

That's the immediate historical background; the evidence that the theatre department is going to present is that these past four years are not indicative of the department's entire history. But our concern

stage offers no plays that speak to their experiences or to any experience outside of the European perspective. Any play that restricts itself in character should not be on the main stage, because then you cannot actually say that you practice color-blind casting and open casting because the play automatically limits itself to the type of actors who can be cast.

Denison's good for dealing with statistics—if you look at the President's open letter to the community, it's full of statistics. But statistics don't deal with the individual. They don't deal with the pain that Andrea

feels when she has to play a role she's not comfortable with.

A prime example of the University ap-

pealing to statistics occurs when you look at the retention rate: the statistics don't touch on that group of students who struggle every semester just to stay here. Every year ap-

does not—or cannot—take into account the reality that when many of us go home for the summer, if we are even lucky enough to find a job, often we're expected not just to save that money for school but also to contribute to the household.

This is not exclusively an African-American problem: the problem is that it affects black students disproportionately. If the University is really committed to diversity, it needs to make funds available so that the black students it recruits can afford to stay here for four years.

Denison needs to set up programs to help black students be able to apply for grants and scholarships. Black students generally have lower GPAs than white students, and it's not because we are not as smart or not as prepared as white students.

In general, we have a lot of outside priorities that may interfere with our studies, like money concerns and social pressures—most of us don't come from backgrounds that are 88 percent white, and that's something we have to consider.

*To get to the heart of the BSU's concerns, Denison has not dealt with the problems it faces.*

department's views.

This wasn't the first time black students have had problems with the theatre department. For example, Ryan Palmer (who graduated last year), Christina Burden and Andrea are all black theatre majors who have had the same complaints about the department. They feel that black students and other minorities are slighted in the department and the only times they really get to showcase their talents are when Vail Artists-in-Residence come to the department.

The only time during my four years I can remember black actors having lead roles in mainstage productions was when a Vail

is this: it's easy to say to black performers that they ought to audition for whatever comes their way, but how can someone give the best audition or the best performance if they're not comfortable with the role from the beginning because the plays are not representative of their experience and not something they really want to perform in?

Andrea had major problems playing a maid because of the historical context. It's easy to say, "At least she had a part," but we must remember that in that particular incident, it was the only part she was allowed to read for. There are a lot of African-American students who would be interested in acting at Denison, but they feel that themain

proximately 30 African-American students come to Denison, but at the end of four years, twelve individuals in that group won't graduate. If Denison as a whole had a retention rate of 60 percent for the entire community, then the school would be dealing with the issue a lot differently, because then it would be a crisis.

We also run into problems with financial aid. Even with the relatively large amount of aid that most black students receive, there are still students every year who leave Denison for financial reasons. What the University doesn't take into account is the fact that black students come to Denison with heavy financial burdens. The financial aid office

What I want Denison to realize is that when it recruits African-American students, we come in with financial, social and family baggage—extra burdens that interfere with our ability to get an education. Denison can and must do more in the areas of academic, social and financial support if black students are going to feel welcome on this campus. To get to the heart of the BSU's concerns, Denison has not dealt with the problems it faces. The University must face the fact that black students have concerns, and it must make a genuine effort to recognize and deal effectively with those concerns.

*Smith, a senior, is chief minister of the Black Student Union.*