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Letter from Joel P. Smith to Black Student Union

Joel P. Smith

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To: The Black Student Union  
c/o Mr. Henry Durand  

From: Joel P. Smith  

While I respect the sense of urgency represented by your demands, we simply cannot respond in the categorical manner you have insisted upon. Decisions on such important issues should not be made that way in an institution in which responsibility is shared. But I nevertheless want to respond in order to express some of my views on the underlying issues and to propose a way of moving ahead.

I am eager to do that because of my principal concern that we must develop a sense of direction on black student matters and black studies at Denison. By a sense of direction I mean a statement of purpose -- an understanding of objectives -- which will overcome the random quality of our current efforts and which will help us to make decisions in the future. As it is now, very many people are making different, and sometimes contradictory, assumptions about what we want to accomplish and about our capacity to achieve those objectives.

As you know, Denison has moved in the last two years to attract, in comparison with previous years, significant numbers of black students. And I think the first question we should ask is what it is that we are trying to accomplish? The answer, I believe, is that we think Denison offers an education which will significantly benefit black people, as well as white, but we know that, because of the awful facts of history, black people are not likely, in the ordinary course of events, to be able to attend Denison. We must, therefore, intervene in order to make that possible.

There is a second motive, I think, although many of us are self-conscious about discussing it. But the fact is that many of us believe that black students can make Denison a better college, that your presence and effort can promote an understanding which the educational
process too long has neglected. We are self-conscious about that because we do not want to say that you should be used in the education of white people. But should we be so self-conscious if what we honestly want is an enhanced understanding of black people as well as black studies and black scholarship? That promises a different Denison but I believe a better Denison, and one which presents the tantalizing dream of an integrated community.

Yet, your demands challenge those motives and assumptions and argue that a Denison education is not of adequate benefit to black students and, secondly, that very thorough changes are mandatory if such an education is to be possible.

Denison's principal deficiency, as I understand your criticism, is that it lacks what might be called black understanding, which is to say that we have too little connection with the world of black people -- their history, their culture, their scholarship. I think that criticism has considerable merit, and I am sure that we must move, as promptly as we can, to remedy the situation. That means, I believe, that we must have more black students, more black scholarship within our curriculum and, perhaps most importantly, more black faculty members.

However, while I think that your criticism has merit, there are several additional questions I want to ask. Is a Denison education really as deficient for a black person as you have argued? And however serious the deficiencies, what can we do about them?

The first question, of course, is very arguable, and I can only offer my own observations. But I believe that, while a greater understanding of black people and their culture is urgently needed, the kind of education which Denison offers is of significant value to a black person. There is a lot of debate about the particular forms of liberal education, but there is substantial agreement that its theme is liberation -- the enhancement of the opportunity to live more freely. And because of my faith that the theme of liberal education has especial significance for black people, I want to be cautious about condemning ourselves as we admit some serious deficiencies.

But the second question is what we should do about the deficiencies. My own view is that, to begin, we should be realistic, by which I mean that we should keep in mind what we are as we seek to improve. We are a liberal arts college which is justified by its high standards and seriously concerned about its financial problems. And both of those points present limitations about what we may do to remedy the deficiencies I have discussed.

The problem of standards is a subtle one, in part because we have a
lot to learn about how to apply our standards most intelligently and most equitably. Our progress in the area of black admissions makes that clear. But it nevertheless is true that high standards of teaching and scholarship substantially define our quality, and I have a basic responsibility to protect those standards.

The financial limitations must also be faced, for we shall deceive ourselves and compound our disappointments if we are unrealistic about our resources. When changes are ardently desired, it is often difficult to accept such practical limitations. But the limitations appear very real to me, and I shall have to point them out frequently. I mention this point because I believe that we have not carefully enough considered the financial aspects of black student matters, and I want to urge that we must do that.

Thus, what I have said is that I believe we need to decide some basic questions, and I have also said that, for me, there are two points of central importance:

1.) As President of Denison I am committed to building a community in which black students can receive a first-rate liberal education, and I know that means there must be significant changes in the College and its academic program; but

2.) I put the emphasis on community and on quality because I am convinced that Denison should be an integrated community in which the controlling standard is the excellence of its academic program.

With those points in mind I want to comment more specifically on several of the issues you have raised.

A. Black Faculty Members

On the issue of black faculty members, I wish I could report more progress; but all I can report is effort and determination. Dean Lichtenstein is working with department chairmen, and black candidates are being sought for the openings we have. In addition, we have created an additional position in black studies for next year.

While we have not yet been successful in finding interested candidates, it does not follow that we are less than committed in our effort. There are, for many reasons, very few candidates, and it is probably true that Denison has some disadvantages, both social and geographical, in appealing to the few there are. But we shall continue to try, and if you know of candidates I repeat my request that you tell us about them, just
as I hope you will let us know if you believe our recruiting efforts can be improved.

Thus, I think you are right to point out that we shall be significantly handicapped in what we are trying to accomplish until we have more black faculty members. We are trying to find them, and we shall keep at it. But I want also to say that I believe we need to be certain to seek qualified candidates, not because of a fascination with credentials, but rather because no one's interests will be served if we compromise our standards.

Finally, I disagree with the view that black students should have the right "to approve" the appointment of black faculty members. As with other appointments, I believe student participation in various ways is often appropriate. But the right to approve in any formal sense would deny the primary responsibility of the faculty to act on academic appointments. And, again, it is not protocol but rather the question of standards which causes me to say I think that would be a fundamental mistake.

B. Afro-American Studies Department.

In discussing an Afro-American studies department, I want to separate two questions -- the question of a major and the question of a department. I believe it should be possible for a student at Denison to develop a trans-departmental major in Afro-American studies, and I hope that program can promptly be worked out.

However, a separate department is a different proposition. I believe there are very serious questions about our capacity to finance such a department, as there are about our capacity to attract competent personnel. But the even more serious problem in my mind is the risk of separatism. A strong black identity which promotes separatism may be beneficial in some situations, but I find that prospect at Denison extremely troublesome. This kind of college and this kind of educational program depend upon this being a community where ideas and indeed lives are shared.

It follows, I believe, that we should be very concerned about a separate department which could be predominantly for black students, precisely because it would intercept the possibility of community. If black studies and black scholarship have merit, as I believe they obviously do, then they should be educational opportunities for all Denison students, black and white.
As there are increasing numbers of black students at Denison, the community will change in many significant ways. It should and it will. But I believe it must remain a community, and I therefore am opposed to offering a separate program for black students. Our failures to be adequately sensitive to black studies and black scholarship should be remedied, but not through separatism. Perhaps it is enough to say that, unlike some other institutions, I doubt that we could build a first-rate program in Afro-American studies, but the pervious question in my mind is whether we should want to if that would increase the probability that black and white students would be separated from one another.

C. One Hundred Black Students and a Full-Time Recruiter.

In my opinion, our recruiting program, in spite of your effort, has not been adequate, and in some ways it has placed an unfair responsibility on black students. As you know, I have tried through more adequate compensation to make the situation more equitable. Moreover, on the question of a recruiter I have had extensive conversations with a particular individual, and I hope we are close to working out an agreement.

I, therefore, begin by saying that I believe we should have a recruiting program, and I want to work with you to improve it. But I do not think we should make commitments in terms of quotas. We do not have a quota now -- defined by HEW or anyone else. That simply is not true. And my view has not changed since I wrote to you in November and said: "I do not think it would be honest for me to pledge that we will have at least 100 black students at the beginning of the 1970-71 academic year. Perhaps we will, but the number of black students enrolled at that time will be a function of many things, including, among others, the number and quality of the applications we are able to attract as well as our capacity to provide financial aid. While it might be argued that such a quota is necessary to make our commitment to diversification more credible, I believe that the opposite is more likely to be true; i.e. quotas of that kind are rhetorical and often unrealistic. We should be judged on the quality of our effort, not the quality of our promises."

D. Black Advisors.

Denison has acknowledged the need for black advisors, and there currently are two. Because Mr. Rice will leave at the end of this year, we have initiated a search for his replacement; and I have invited you to participate in that search. The additional duties of black advisors will depend upon the individuals, and I believe that it is important for them to have additional responsibilities, although those responsibilities should not interfere with their working effectively with black students.
While I have to admit that I have not done all I should have done -- and intend to do -- in enhancing the participation of the Advisors in the administration, I do not think they should be "representatives" of black students if that means they should be told what views to express. I would want their independent judgment, freely expressed, and I believe that is the way they would want it too.

As for committees, their participation depends on the circumstances. Often it would be important and would be arranged, but I do not think it would be fair or practicable for them to move in and out of all committees.

E. Departmental Commitment.

Dean Lichtenstein has been ready for a long time to have a meeting with Department Chairmen and black students. There is no reason why that meeting should not be held promptly.

In conclusion, I want to make a proposal which I think will help us to move ahead more effectively, and it is that I shall ask the faculty at its next meeting, which is January 19, to establish a Task Force, which would include black student members, to develop recommendations on the purpose of the black student program at Denison. I think we need a statement of purpose if we are to have a sense of direction, and I believe the way to begin is to address some of the issues I have raised in this letter. I shall ask that the Task Force be requested to proceed with a sense of priority and urgency so that we may anticipate a prompt report.

Respectfully yours,

cc: Denison Faculty
    DCGA Executive Committee
    Student Senate
    Denison Board of Trustees

with copies of the black student demands