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Title: What message does the African American program send to UIUC students?

About the Author: I am a freshman at UIUC. I have taken a course in the African American Program. I am African American.

Keywords: race, african american

Abstract: My questions include what message does the African American program send to students. In order to find the answer to this i also had to know what the message was that they were trying to send. In order to figure this out i use textual evidence, interviews, surveys and department websites in order to form an opinion. My findings showed that the program promotes the knowledge of black history and the teaches about oppression.

Initial Exercises:

Question: What message does the African American program send to UIUC students. It sends the message that Blacks history is important.

Plan:

Data:

Discuss: <!-- /* Font Definitions */ @font-face {font-family:Calibri; panose-1:2 15 5 2 2 2 4 3 2 4; mso-font-charset:0; mso-generic-font-family:swiss; mso-font-pitch:variable; mso-font-signature:-1610611985 1073750139 0 0 159 0;} /* Style Definitions */ p.MsoNormal, li.MsoNormal, div.MsoNormal {mso-style-parent:""; margin-top:0in; margin-right:0in; margin-bottom:10.0pt; margin-left:0in; line-height:115%; mso-pagination:widow-orphan; font-size:11.0pt; font-family:Calibri; mso-fareast-font-family:"Times New Roman"; mso-bidi-font-family:Arial; mso-fareast-language:EN-US;} @page Section1 {size:8.5in 11.0in; margin:1.0in 1.25in 1.0in 1.25in; mso-header-margin:.5in; mso-footer-margin:.5in; mso-paper-source:0;} div.Section1 {page:Section1;} -->

Introduction

The University of Illinois prides itself on having a diverse group of students on its campus. However, the welcomed diversity that the university has brought to the campus has both positive and

negative effects. In attempts to educate the campus on some of the cultural histories of students we share our campus with. It is the duty of the cultural departments to educate the campus on a particular ethnicity. Thus, the way the program is perceived has a large impact on students who are new to a culture. The cultural programs have a responsibility to communicate with the students. Minority culture programs have a more difficult job to both educate and attract students. With less than ten percent of the current student body being African American the African American cultural program has the sizably more difficult job compared to other cultural groups (AFRO, para 1).

On campus minorities are represented by the ethnic program offered on campus. With so little representation of African Americans on UIUC's campus, students of other races often find themselves associating the message of the African American studies program with the thoughts of the African American Student body, therefore the program campus must be very conscience of the messages they send to the public. The African American studies program is a program where many students of different cultures go to learn about African American culture. It is interesting to analyze what message the African American studies program is sending UIUC students. In order to analyze their message I will consider data such as class syllabi, the program website, interviews, surveys, two research papers, and additional reading materials issued to students.

Body

I chose to use only information that was either accessible to students or opinions of the students because my main focus was to find the message that they received rather than the message that the program wished to send to them. It is more important to know what the students are getting from the program rather than what the program is attempting to say. At times the message can become distorted. Throughout my research I saw many recurring themes in the syllabi, surveys, and website. Some of themes included understanding Black history, Black oppression. These themes are very positive in to the black community. They encourage African Americans to have pride in their history. Every minority group needs a program like this at such a large university where they can sometimes be forgotten. The African American Studies program sends these messages through textual

information to the students, but how, the messages are received is really important to analyze.

In order to research the program I assumed that best site to get information about the program would be The University of Illinois Department of African American Studies website. The website continues to give viewers evidence that the site is both reputable and professional.

The format of the website is very basic. There are few pictures, and the pictures that are included directly correlate with the information being presented on the tab of the site. Also, on the side of each page there is a section dedicated to links. The standard set up of this website would lead one to believe that it were there only to inform the public, not for entertainment. Informative purposes are also reinforced by the information given on the bottom of the site homepage, where one can find the address telephone number and e-mail address one can use to contact the department (AFRO, para 2 see appendix II).

The website for the African American Studies program is not full of graphics or videos. The artwork is very basic. There is approximately one image that is relevant to the subject of each page (AFRO, para 3). The images look as if they were picked carefully. Each image corresponds with the information on the page. It seems as if the information on the page was more important to the creator of the page. By there not being a lot of graphics the page looks more professional, and causes the viewer to focus on the textual information. This aspect of the website makes me respect the creators of the website, because instead of using graphics to attract viewers they use the information to send their messages. The graphics that were used are pieces that are important to African American culture. They include painting by African American artist and photographs of African American leaders. The pictures show that the department supports not only the education aspect of African American culture but also African American art.

The website uses different ways to educate its audience through these forms of art and text. The website's content tabs include home, about, people, education, news, events, and resources (AFRO, para 4). The variety of topics the webpage offers leads one to believe that the department is well rounded. A student who truly has an interest in the department could gain plenty of information, the

website is designed to attract a student who looks past visual stimulation for textual content.

The language that the site uses is very literal; the overview gives direct facts on the program. The welcoming page also included a provocative story article concerning another minority group (AFRO, para 5). By adding a story concerning another minority group the African American Studies department shows other minority groups that the oppression they face is also a concern of the African American studies department. Including why the program was implemented, the founding date, and its primary goals. They also mentioned that African American Studies is offered as a minor and major. The website is essentially being summed up in the overview (AFRO, para 6). The setup of the website is effective.

The website provides the viewers with redirect information about the program, in an orderly fashion. The information is important to understanding what the program is about. It sends the message that the program is there to “integrates courses and research from the social sciences and humanities in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences with other academic areas throughout the university such as fine arts, education, journalism, and law” (AFRO, para 7)). From the information presented on the website they are doing a sufficient job.

The textual information the website offered was information that would help anyone learn more about the program, they have not only new information, but information from the past also. Under the “About” tab of the website there is a brief overview stating when the African America Studies department began and some of the goals within the program (AFRO, para 8). The website shows that the program is creditable. They have been rewarded for their outstanding papers and an array of other awards, from other influential people. Each award has a link in which you can view exactly what the award was given for including the overview, eligibility, criteria, nomination, selection, award, and the contact information for more information on the award.

Under the “Education” tab, the site makes the connection to the classroom by incorporating some of the reading materials that are used in African American Studies classrooms. The reading is one that the student had a choice of using for a weekly essay. It can be downloaded from the library achieve under the professor’s

name. The method in which one can find this article shows that the program is interested in making their teachings accessible to anyone who is interested. They are not excluding students who are not in the class from viewing the articles. The African American website describes this article as one that will “enlighten you, challenge your thinking, and broaden your viewpoint” (Afro, para 9). Being that it was recognized by both the African American department website and the library achieves, one can assume that this article is a good representation for the type of material the African American program promotes.

In recent surveys I asked random students questions to find out the message they received from the African American Studies program. Twelve out of twenty of the students who were chosen for the survey were black (Survey, para 1). Out of the twenty students who took the survey eleven of them had taken a course in the African American Studies program, eight of which were Black and three were of other races (Survey, para 2). One of the survey questions I asked was, “did you feel comfortable in the African American Studies class?” Seven out of the eight Black students answered yes, while all of the other students answered no (Survey, para 3). In attempts to find out why the students did not feel comfortable discussing African American Studies I performed an interview on an Asian student who had also taken an African American studies course.

In my recent interview with an Asian student who attended a class in the African American Studies program, I asked if he ever felt uncomfortable discussing any of the material in class, he responded “Since I am not familiar with slavery and indentured servants, it was hard to accept that fact, and I always wanted to avoid this topic.” (Ha, para1) When articles such as “The N Word: Who Can Say It, Who Shouldn't, and Why” were integrated into the course students like Jun were received a message of how over a century Black were denied human liberty in American solely based upon race (The N Word, para 1).

The title of the article is “The N Word: Who Can Say It, Who Shouldn't, and Why”. Immediately this title caught my attention. I realized that racism would be a large portion of the curriculum because African Americans have been oppressed for such a long period of time, I assumed that the classes would focus more on history than oppression. When the class is forced to face Black

oppression they are forced to confront issues that are still sensitive on our campus (The N Word, para 2).

The essay by Jabari Asim “The N Word: Who Can Say It, Who Shouldn't, and Why” gives a well argued case of why the N word should be eliminated from the English vocabulary. He uses both colonial and post-colonial American history to describe where the word originated, and goes further to describe how it has evolved. He claims that the use of the word promotes the subjection of Blacks to racism regardless of context (The N Word, para 3).

This essay primarily discussed the racism surrounding the N word. It was clear that the author was against all use of the N word whether it was by a Euro American, Blacks, or any other minority group. It is clear that he has sufficient research to form a developed analysis, by using historical support to justify his beliefs on the word. He claims that the word was created by Whites to demean Blacks. The work classifies Blacks as inferior subordinates (The N Word, para 4). Text such as this being taught to a diversity University has the ability to cause students to feel uncomfortable in a class. It could cause White students to feel shame that their ancestors were a part of the oppression of a group. Asim argues that “THE WORD NIGGER to a colored person, is like a red rag to a bull”, insinuating that the provocative word invokes fury amongst a group who has made strides to escape their roots of slavery (The N Word, para 5).

Jun went on to express that what the course taught him changed his perception of American society, “I was not really aware of why racial discrimination is so serious in this country in American society, but I now know that they had a miserable time in the past, and I finally reached a better understanding of African-American people.” (Ha, para 2) Through his discomfort of what he was not familiar with, Jun now feels as if he has a deeper understanding of African American culture from taking this course. Articles such as “The N Word: Who can say it, Who shouldn't, and Why” are necessary to understand the history and culture of African Americans thus it is needed in the course. With the integration of these essays students like Ha would have never been forced to gain a better understanding of the African American identity.

Jun's association of the African American Studies course with the perceptions of African Americans, which is understandable seeing

that Ha came from a background of very little exposure to African Americans. The high school he attended was majority white with only 3% Black (Ha, para 4). So when entering a diverse university what his first in-depth encounter with African American Culture is what he presumed to be true. An essay entitled Student Identity and Cultural Centers makes the connection between student identity and the ethnic programs.

The essay Student identity chose to focus only on the cultural centers. However, the cultural centers are linked to the programs. So in discussing the connection of identity and cultural centers is was the connection to the ethic programs. In the essay author Ryan Odell Files questions why minority groups tend to identify with cultural centers (Files, para 1). One of his conclusions is that they feel more excepted by people who share the same race as them. He concluded that historical tensions between racial groups such as Blacks and Asian have caused the groups to separate. His second claim is that the programs are primarily established to educate Whites (Files, para 2).

Files claims are interesting too compare to Ha opinions of the African American program. He used similar methods of research including Interview and textual references. He derived that the student identity of minorities is displayed by the cultural centers (Files, para 3). Ha also found that he was educated on African American identity by attending a course. However, Ha's experience differs from Files second claim that the programs educate Whites, as an Asian American ha was enlightened on African American issues.

Conclusion

In conclusion my research shows that African American program sends the message that they are at the University to educate students of African American history and to provide a current perspective for the underrepresented group. The African American Department website contains information that would engage someone who was serious about gaining a better understanding of African American Culture. The site is composed of factual information and artwork that is significant to understanding black history which in term helps one I understand the Black perspective today.

The program goes further to send the message that they are there to educate students on the Black perspective today but the African American history that evokes these emotions in order to explain why these feelings are felt. By choosing essays such as “The N Word: Who can say it, Who shouldn’t, and Why”, the program forces students to hear the Black prospective and respond to it. When an essay discusses an issue that has emerged from pre-colonial times and is still current students are aware that there is a problem that will continue if not understood and confronted.

The research that I collected was only from small group of people who could have had similar feelings towards the program. Whereas, other U of I students such as graduate students might have a different perception of the African American Studies program, thus changing the message they receive. In order to get more accurate results, I would have to chosen a much larger and diverse group of students on campus. Fifty percent of the students a surveyed where Black this could have had major effect on my results. For further research I could interview someone who has taken multiple African American courses rather than one. Regardless of the limitations I face during my research the information that was collected delivered a clear message.

Overall, I would assess the message of the African American Studies program as positive. From my data I can assume that the majority of students who have come in contact with the African American Studies program have left with a self acclaimed better understanding of the Black community. I find that through promoting the education of African American Studies the program is ultimately cultivating a more united campus, were students of different ethnicities can understand the viewpoints of ethnic groups. The African American Studies program is a model of how racial unawareness should be resolved.