

**Author:**

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**Title:**

40 years later: Comparing Black life of the past and present

**About the Author:**

My name is Simone Williams and I am a junior here at the University of Illinois. Often times I am asked to identify myself and I find that difficult on the occasion because I am constantly growing and changing. Currently I would describe myself as a pre-law student majoring in psychology and minoring in french. I came to the university declared as a psychology major and have enjoyed learning about psychology. I am interested in learning about the social aspect of psychology because I love that it relates to my everyday life. With that being said not only am I a pre-law student, but I am a student interested in going to graduate school for psychology. I not only want to fulfill my childhood fantasy of being a lawyer but I want to study in the field of psychology in academia and one day in the future also teach psychology.

**Keywords:**

black; student experiences; Black House; Black Greek System; Residential Life

**Abstract:**

My research is a compilation of nine interviews to understand how African American student experiences have changed over time? The proceeding questions were supporting questions to provide insight into student experiences. What is the role of the African American Cultural Center in student life on campus? How does dorm life play a role in the student experience on campus? How does the Black Greek System effect student life on campus? The interviewees ranged in diversity based on age, hometown location, high schools, and majors. The results of the research concluded that current students use and refer to the African American Cultural center as home where as a couple of alumni were unaware of the center and wished they had the opportunity to take advantage of its resources. Interviews revealed that many students believed the dorms to programs to promote culture, and lastly there was an overwhelming consensus that the Black Greek System is a social outlet and that the system needs to improve. Although the research is extensive it relies on personal experiences therefore results change per person.

**Initial Exercises:**

Simone Williams

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EPS 500

Priscilla Fortier

<http://www.aasrp.uiuc.edu/>

Upon reading the narrative of the Department of African American Studies, assumptions are made within the first sentence, by making an existential assumption. The first sentence states, "we welcome our first cohort of undergraduate majors!" The reader is force to assume that there was no program of study for a major prior to the current webpage for the Department of African American Studies.

The continuation of the first paragraph presents the reader with a host of value assumptions with the usage of punctuation and joyous words. Within the paragraph the exclamation marks and words such as "excited" illustrates the joy that the Department of African American Studies portrays in its narrative. By analyzing the paragraph holistically one notices the usage of words with positive connotations therefore eluding that welcoming the major to the department is a desirable event.

The narrative then continues with the assumption that readers knew where the Afro-Americana library was prior to it move to room 246 Main Library. This is a noticeable presumption the department takes it upon itself to denote the change in location. Although the presumption of it's prior location was made, the department does not assume that the readers have knowledge on the sources in the library. The narrative list different types of sources that can be found in the library and a few of the topic areas of the sources. The last paragraph of the narrative concludes with another value assumption, assuming that readers will enjoy classes offered by the Department of African American Studies.

Overall this is a narrative that makes logical implications based on prior knowledge readers may have and value assumptions. As a whole this narrative was a value assumption. As a reader one can deduce that staff such as Jennifer Hamer, Interim Head of the Department of African American Studies is proud to be an option for students here at the university. By illustrating the pride in the department readers can gain a sense of ease and comfort and possibly chose to partake in classes offered by the department due to open arms illustrated in the narrative. Lastly the value assumptions give readers a sense of comfort therefore one may not question the shortness of the narrative, due to the overwhelming feeling of acceptance after reading the narrative.

**Question:**

How has student life experiences changed over the past forty years for African American students at the University of Illinois?

How do the changes with the African American Cultural Center reflect and relate to the changes of student life? How does the African American Cultural Center connect to African American student life?

How do the dorms impact African American student life?

How has the influence of Black Greek system changed over time? How does the Black Greek system effect student life?

**Plan:**

Interview Project 500 alumni and current African American students to understand student life of the past and present.

**Assumptions:**

I will be interviewing current and alumni African American students of the University of Illinois. My research is ethnography of student's experiences as a black student on campus. To better understand my main purpose of my project I will investigate the impact of the African American Cultural Center, the dorms, and lastly the Black Greek system. It is my assumption that overall my interviewees that are active on campus, or were active on campus have positive experience while at the university. Also it is my assumption that I will get two polar (positive and negative) responses from students active in the Greek system and those not active.

**Interview questions**

How old were you when you entered the university? Describe your family.

What high school did you come from? Was it a public or private school? How diverse was your high school? How well did your high school prepare you for college?

Describe your hometown. How diverse is it?

What is your year and major?

Did you know anyone upon entering the university?

How did you meet people?  
 How different was it coming to the university?  
 Describe your best and worst experience here at the university?  
 How do you like being at the university? Are you enjoying your time?  
 What type of meaningful experience have you had at the university, that crosses racial lines?  
 What helped you to get acclimated to the university?  
 How often do you use the Black House? How helpful of a source is it? How comfortable do you feel using the Black House?  
 What helped you to form your identity here at the university?  
 What helped promote your culture here at the university?  
 How long did you live in the dorms? Where did you live? Was living in the dorms a enjoyable time for you?  
 What dorm did you choose to live in and why?  
 Did you feel welcome in your dorm?  
 What do dorms do to promote your culture?  
 Are you apart of a Black fraternity or sorority? Why did you chose to join? How connected do you feel to your fraternity or sorority?  
 How do you think the Black Greek system impacts/ contribute to student life here at the university?  
 (for those not in the Greek system) What do you think of the Black Greek system?  
 (for alumni) How do you think the Black Greek system has changed over time?  
 How do you define legacy?  
 Do you think you will leave a legacy here at the university? (for alumni)Is your legacy still present?  
 questions are written in present tense but will be changed to reflect questions geared towards alumni

#### Discuss:

Many people refrain from attending large universities because as an incoming freshman the size can be daunting. Coming from a high school where I graduated one of almost eight hundred students I was ready to take my first step at the University of Illinois. My first semester was filled with learning about the different activities and services the campus offers. Quad day was the initial step, and at which I was able to sign up for the many activities in which I had previously participated in high school and many new activities that I was eager to learn about. As a psychology major, I had an information orientation class for the first 8 weeks highlighting the psychology major. Not only did I form a relationship with my guidance counselor in that class but I learned about the different research opportunities available to a psychology major. 100 Strong was another activity that helped to acclimate me to the campus. As freshmen year progressed I meet faculty, staff, and students and before I realized it the huge university became a tiny petri dish full of familiar buildings and faces.

I was active my freshman year but not nearly as active as some are, especially in the black community. Now, as a junior, I have experienced more organization programs, group meetings, class discussions, and discussions with individuals relating to the black experience at the University of Illinois. It was the consensus with many black students that the lack of representation creates an unwelcoming feeling at the university. With less than five hundred black students per class, the ability to form a connection is almost impossible for many students. Isolation can manifest in many different ways, some of which are due to the small number of black professors to identify with and the lack of campus activities that cater to the cultural needs of black students. Often times, students are intimidated by being the only black student in a classroom because they feel as if they are the spokesperson of the black community. The common belief among the black community is that students are strong and able to cope with the difficulties of the university if they are actively engaged on campus. With this perception in mind I began to think about the topic for my research. I wanted to not only understand current student experiences but also take advantage of the Black Alumni All Class Reunion, a celebration of the forty-year legacy that is Project 500, and interview alumni such that I can understand the history of black students on this campus.

Interest in the history of black students at the University of Illinois greatly influenced my research. Joy Williamson's book *Black Power on Campus* and her dissertation entitled "We Hope for Nothing; We Demand Everything": Black Students at the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign were two academic resources that I used for my research. Her writings were filled with history that gave foundation to my research such as the first African American student to attend the university, living accommodations for black students in the past and during Project 500. This motivated me to want to research and determine the changes in black student experiences.

In 1887, Jonathan Rogan was the first African American to attend the university and he stayed for one year and another African American did not follow until 1894. The first African American did not graduate from the university until 1900, and in 1906 the first African American female attended. African American students were unable to live in the dorms because of discrimination laws. The few that lived in the dorms lived together, and those that didn't live in the dorms lived outside campus with the support of African American families in the community. The Special Education Opportunity Program also known as Project 500 is an initiative by the administration of University of Illinois that began in early May of 1968. The goal of the program was to recruit five hundred disadvantaged students, especially African Americans. The legacy of this program has aided to the continual numbers of black students on campus. This however is a forty-year plan that has yet to improve and increase the number of black students it recruits. Times are changing. Why doesn't the administration increase the number of black students on campus? Students' experiences have changed and students should be able to handle the challenges of the university today, right?

The purpose of my research is to further the aforementioned question and get an understanding of black student experiences on campus and compare them to the experiences of alumni to determine if how the black student experience has changed, if there were any. The role of the African American Cultural Center, residential life, and the Black Greek System were components I used in my interviews help identify specific experiences. The usage of these three components will help provide insight on the black student experience and potential solutions to improving the quality of life for black students at the university.

In this study nine interviews were conducted. Four of the nine interviewees were alumni (1 male and 3 females) and the five remaining interviewees were current students (3 males and 2 females). For the purpose of this research pseudonyms will be used in reference to the interviewees to maintain anonymity of the study. All interviewees are African American. The alumni, Kayla ('66-69, '75-77), Charles ('75), Valerie ('79), and Anna ('96) were chosen based on a basic interest in their narrative of their time at the university. Of the current students interviewed Jeffery and Junior (both male) are seniors, Nicole and Loraine (both female) are juniors, and Tony is a sophomore (male). All but one of the interviewees went to public high schools. Of the interviewees one attended school in New York, two attended high school in Chicago, and the last six attended school in the suburbs of Chicago. One interviewee describe their school as majority white, two describe their school as majority black with a lack of preparation for college, and the others described their school as very diverse. The current students were selected based on their activeness on campus in the black community. The interviews lasted from forty-five minutes to about an hour or so and the questions consisted of demographic questions and questions supporting my sub-questions about the cultural center, residential life, and the Black Greek System.

It was my assumption prior to completing my interviews that students who are actively engage in events and organizations on campus have a positive experience as a black student on campus and complete their studies. High activity for the purpose of my research is activity in the more than one organization and activity in the black community. For example, Carol Hillsman-Sagers, graduated in 1979, describes her college experiences in the Archives at the University of Illinois. Hillsman-Sagers was involved in Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority incorporated, the Advertising Federation, and Campus Chest for All Campus Charities, Pan-Hellenic Council, African American Club, and wrote articles for the Illio. Hillsman-Sagers was greatly involved in organizations and still had a social life. She wrote reminiscing how she would play her music loudly and dance to it outside. She also described the Quad side of the union, the "Stoop," as her favorite place to hang out. Albert Spurlock, graduated in 1938, is another alumni whose story can be found in the Archives at the University of Illinois. Spurlock ran track at the university and he was a member of Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity Incorporated. Spurlock spent six years at the university reported his experiences at the university as satisfying in the Archives. Hillsman Sager and Spurlock are perfect paper prototypes of actively engaged black students.

To control my results I only interviewed students that were active on campus. In terms of this research activity on campus is defined as doing more than just academics on campus and participating in more than one organization. Secondly, I presumed that students connected with the black community gain a sense of unity amongst one another. Lastly it was my belief that those not in the Greek system perceive it to be ineffective and a social outlet.

#### Findings

##### The Role of Residence Halls

Prior to entering college, many people imagine their time in the dorms. TV shows and movies portray the dorms as a friendly and welcoming location where the doors to rooms are always open. The dorms become an individual's home for the time being because that is where they live, study, and hang out with friends.

Overall the interviews revealed that residential dorm experiences depended on individual effort to engage in activities. All but one participant stated that they enjoyed their time in the

dorms. Of the participants that stated they enjoyed their residential life experience I expected someone refer to their dorm as their campus home, interesting enough no one did. The participants refrained from identifying the dorms, as a home. This could be the result of students feeling a lack of cultural promotion within the dorms. Ironically the sole responsibility of a multicultural advocate (MA) in dorms today is to develop programs that promote culture. According to the university housing websites, MAs were added to the housing staff in the academic year of 2002-2003. MAs work to make the resident halls safe and welcoming for all students. The planned programs and learning events are meant to address diversity, multiculturalism, and social justice issues. Ultimately MAs work to develop a multicultural community in the dorms.

Charles a previous resident advisor (RA) stated, "race was a white persons problem," but believes the solution to solving racial issues was education. As an RA on an all white floor he worked to bring cultural programs to the dorms and integrate the African American culture into programs. Outside of his responsibility to plan programs for the residential hall Charles greatly enjoyed his time at the dorms, which was very interesting because he did not live in the dorms as a freshman or sophomore.

Jeffery and Anna have a little more than a ten-year difference between their times at the university but their dorm experiences are very similar. Both lived in their dorm of choice and both were introduced and participated in the Black Student Union (BSU). The BSU's are student organizations in the seven residential halls that work to provide culturally specific programs. The names of each BSU alone illustrate the African American culture; B.A.T.S "beautiful and together sisters," Ebony Umoja "black unity," Eusa Nia "black purpose," Ewezo "black power," Ma'at "the laws of God by which the universe was created," Mariama "gift from God," and Salango "we come together to create something beautiful out of love." For Jeffery the BSU not only provides a cultural outlet but it also helped him to realize the importance of organization, "academics had to be done first."

Charles, Jeffery, Anna are just a couple examples of positive experiences in the residential halls. Junior is the only participant that explicitly states that he disliked his dorm experiences. He chose to live in his dorm because it was air-conditioned and co-ed but in his opinion it was the location "where they stick all the black people," in a building where there was racial slurs consistently on the elevators. In the gamble for roommates he lost and had to live with a messy roommate who in his opinion was condescending towards him, especially when he prayed. Junior did however mention that the dorms had some culturally relevant programs but he did not attend them.

#### The Role of the African American Cultural Center

Apparently, the dorms are not creating enough of a welcoming and safe space for black students for them to call their dorm home. So if the dorms are not home for black students where is home at the University of Illinois for black students? Everyone except Valerie and Kayla identified the African American Cultural Center as their home. Valerie and Kayla were unable to consider the Black House as their home because they unaware of it as students. Prior to the interview they had never heard of the Black House. It was clear in their interviews that they recognize the importance it has for students and wish they had taken advantage of its resources when they were students. They were so impressed with the Black House that if I had a time machine, they would instantly go back in time and use the Black House. Besides Valerie and Kayla, the other students identify so strongly with the cultural center that the common term for the center is the Black House. During the interviews I began by stating the African American cultural center. Only after a participant stated the Black House himself or herself did I continue by saying the Black House. By calling the cultural center the Black House students show a sense of possession and connection.

"The Black House is mine." "I feel like I am at home." "I used the Black House a lot, I practically lived there." These are just a few direct quotes from interviews illustrating the role the Black House. Participants used the Black House as a resource and a place to socialize. Many also used the Black House to take a break from the busy day, Anna stated in her interview that "naps were an integral part of student experience." Comfort and safe were also synonymous descriptions used to describe the Black House.

Without fail, when asked what on campus promotes your culture interviewees stated the Black House. Prior to the Department of African American Studies receiving its on location it was located in the Black House. As of today there are six workshops that reside in the Black House; The Griot Literary Magazine, Where Black Music Lives-WBML (radio station), OMNIMOV Dance Troup, Black Chorus, Expressions, and Soul Premier. Each workshop highlights the African American culture differently whether through song, dance, or writing. As stated on the BN-AACC website one of the cultural center's goals is to encourage a sense of pride base on cultural heritage and to provide cultural awareness for African American students. It is this goal that aids students in learning about their cultural heritage and developing a sense of unity with the center.

#### The Role of Black Greek System

Throughout history the Black Greek organizations have been pivotal in black student experiences on campus, and for my research I chose to focus on the impact of the Divine 9 at the University of Illinois. The Divine 9 are historically Black Greek organizations that make up the National Pan-Hellenic Council. The Divine 9 consist of Alpha Phi Alpha, Alpha Kappa Alpha, Kappa Alpha Psi, Omega Psi Phi, Delta Sigma Theta, Phi Beta Sigma, Zeta Phi Beta, Sigma Gamma Rho, and Iota Phi Theta.

What are your perceptions of the Black Greek System, "oh gosh this will take a while" and "terrible, I think they need to improve" were the first response by two interviewees. The Black Community the Greeks are often times the subject of debates. It is the common perception that the Black Greek System needs to improve and that it is a social outlet.

Although it is the conclusion amongst my interviews that the Greeks provide a social outlet, all of my interviewees looked beyond the socials aspect and anticipated more from the Greeks. Valerie and Kayla stated in their interview that they were not interested in the Greeks because of the cost and the pledging process, "I was turned off from the Greek system because of the pledging process." In my interview with Charles he stated in his opinion the Black Greeks were not as involved with social activism of the time.

Current students don't instantly consider money as a factor when they think of the Greeks. Instead current students think about the improvements the Greeks need. The perception of the pledging process still remains, many students stated in their interview about the suspension of certain Greek organizations due to the hazing that goes on. The numbers within the Greek system are also decreasing and therefore limiting the organizations. There are less beneficial programs and more parties. It was also mentioned in an interview that the Greek System is becoming a popularity contest. Nicole stated that the Greeks are losing grips with the goals and missions of their organizations.

Prior to interviews I assumed that those within the Greek system would perceive it as a positive for the black community. Ironically the beliefs of the Greek system by those not in the system is similar to those who are apart of the Greek system. Of the participants interview two where in the Greek organizations. Anna is in a historically black sorority and Junior is in a Black Greek organization.

Junior stated in his interview that Greek organizations should focus on providing academic support, programs to help students learn about the campus community, and more community service opportunities. He stated that it is important for students to realize the importance of helping the community that surrounds the school. He said that refusal to help the community is "ignorance to history." Historically the community was the only means of support Black Students had at the University of Illinois. Williamson's book Black Youth Forcing Change, she describes that in the past black students were unable to live on campus in the dorms so they either lived with African American Greek organizations that had houses or live with African American families of the community.

It is very intriguing that Junior and others state the need for Greek organizations to change and focus on community because many students keep to themselves and the bubble that is the University of Illinois. Although students say they would partake in community service projects when presented with one they withdraw from the opportunity. Don't get me wrong there are some students that are highly active with the community but an overwhelming high number of students do not. When confronted with the question of lack of participation students use the excuse that they have school work to do and their primary concern is their academics. The excuse that there is school work is just that...an excuse. When students find out about a party they drop their work in a second to attend the party, Even if there wasn't another engagement procrastination is like a disease that takes over the student population. All excuses aside it is truly unfortunate that some students do not care to help the community because it is truly a rewarding experience to help others.

Anna was able to explain to me changes she has seen in the Black Greek System because she was active with it as a student and is currently active as well. In her opinion she believes that the Greek organizations are no longer operating with the "honesty and integrity" that they organizations once had. Believes the organizations to be "some what egotistical, self-centered, and arrogant." Anna believes that the organizations are losing grips with the original goals of their organizations because they do not ask for assistance from elders therefore they are unable to live up to the traditions of the organizations. Rather than try and receive help the organizations resort to an easy solution and provide social activities (too many centered around drinking in Anna's opinion).

Although Anna and Junior agree with the common perceptions of the Black Greek System it is important to realize that they are still active with their individual Greek organizations. Both stated that they were drawn to the organization because of the mission statements of the organizations and the work they were doing. This is important because both seemed hesitant to state the negative about the Greek system. Yet they both shared their opinions.

#### Discussion

The interviews proved to be fascinating for myself as a researcher and a current student as well attending the University of Illinois. The narratives provided by the alumni provided me insight into student life experiences during times chaos within and outside the university. One thing that stuck out to me was during Valerie's interview she told me how she walked across the quad in her ROTC uniform on her way to the armory. As she walked to the armory she received such words of hatred that she dropped out of ROTC (mind you this during the peak of the Vietnam War). It was also interesting to me to notice that although some things change with time other do not. Similar to Carol Hillsman Sagers, Charles explained to how the union was a regular hang out space for the black students. Charles and Anna were particularly notable because they still spend time on campus today. They were able to provide insight on the campus environment when they were students and compare it to the campus environment today.

#### Implications

There are few limitations to be considered in my research. First the small sample size affects the reliability of the study. By increasing the number of interviewees the reliability will ultimately increase as well. In addition to a small population, there was a lack of variable changes amongst the interviewees. All people interview are considered highly active. For further research it is important to increase students that are not active, do not use the cultural center, in similar majors, and students that either dropped out of school or transferred. One important factor to consider in this study is the context of time and the external situations associated with the time period. Upon continuing this research, it is important to critically analyze the time period and how the external situations may play a larger role on student experiences at the University of Illinois. Another limitation to consider is that the research is based on self-reports of the individuals. Individuals may be unable or unwilling to answer questions accurately.

Lastly, participants may have modified their experiences to report socially desirable responses. This could be due to any research biases available or the need to portray oneself positively. Another interesting component to denote about the responses is that some responses seemed practiced. Some people interviewed were either an MA or RA in which they have training on answering questions particularly those about diversity on the campus. Others seemed to have thought about similar questions before therefore some responses were in more depth than others.

Upon continuing this research it would be interesting to also analyze black student experiences within the classroom. Although there are limitations present in the study it is important to denote the importance of the study. The study can be used to highlight the importance of the African American Cultural Center for black students and the need to reconstruct transition and retention programs. As previously mentioned many participants highlighted the importance of the Black House in their student experience. Also in the interviews some stated that high school prepared them for college and others stated that their high school did not provide provisions needed for college.

It was the overall conclusion in the interviews that there was no way high school could completely prepare an incoming freshman for college. With that being said transition and retention programs can use my research and determine the needs of black students such that can be modified to efficiently aid black students.

#### Conclusion

To conclude, the experiences of black students cannot be generalized to assume causation, but the collection of experiences can be used to illustrate correlation. Even though there were many differences amongst the participants (time period included) there were many similarities. The Black House is more than a resource for black students on campus, it is a home where students are welcomed and able to relax, socialize and learn about their heritage while at the University of Illinois. The residential experiences depend on an individual's determination to engage. Some are able to form connections with their dorm through organizations such as the BSUs while others use their dorms as a resting spot for the night. However the lack of cultural programming and roommate situations can produce barriers preventing inclusion for many at the dorms. Lastly the Black Greek System is a social outlet that needs to change to further provide beneficial programming and services for the black student community and the community outside the campus.

Research on the Black House, residential life, and the Black Greek System did not lead to any main changes in student experiences cross the campus. Students still feel unprepared for college, students that use the Black House still feel at home, students experiences with the dorms depends on their self-efficacy, and students still perceive a need for change within the Black Greek System.

With black student experiences remaining consistent cross the decades it is time for a change at the administration level rather than the individual level. Although the participants' experiences were not sugar filled with positive experiences neither were they gloom and doom of negative experiences. The sum of their experiences were positive enough giving them ability to graduate and continue their studies here at the University of Illinois.

#### EUI Links:

The Blackhouse: Is home really where the heart is?

This project analyzes the mission of the Black House and determines if it is maintain in the present. This will help me to understand the mission and determine if the necessary changes have been made

Recruitment and Retention of underrepresented students at UIUC

This projects analyzes retention methods used by the university. This is a great source to compare the university's retention projects and those of the Black House

What does La Casa Cultural Latina mean to its active student population

This project researches the problems that Latina students face. This is a good source to help guide me through out my research.

The projects are a great source of precedent for my research. The project researching the missions of the Black House is a great source to compare students perceptions of the Black House and the actual mission of the Black House. This relates to my project because it allows me to discover how the Black House factors into student life as an African American. Although the project on La Casa focuses on the Latina population it is a great source that I can use to help me critically think of problems affecting the African American community. Lastly the project on retention helps me to see if the retention programs positively or negatively effect student life at the university.

#### Reflect:

The findings from my research can be used to show the importance and promote the need for improved transitions and retention programs for African American Students. The programs should be designed to orient new students about the resources the university provides specifically for African Americans and organizations that promote the African American culture. One of my findings showed that students involved in organizations, in particular African American organizations formed not only their identity but a sense of ownership which ultimately led to their continuing to attend the university. Lastly my research can be used to illustrate the relevance of the African American Cultural Center. An overwhelming number of students stated that they feel comfortable and at home at the center, and those that did not know about it wish they had. It is important for students who are miles away from home to have a comfort/safe place while away at school and that is the role of the African American Cultural Center.

#### Recommendations:

The findings from my research can be used to show the importance and promote the need for improved transitions and retention programs for African American Students. The programs should be designed to orient new students about the resources the university provides specifically for African Americans and organizations that promote the African American culture. One of my findings showed that students involved in organizations, in particular African American organizations formed not only their identity but a sense of ownership which ultimately led to their continuing to attend the university. Lastly my research can be used to illustrate the relevance of the African American Cultural Center. An overwhelming number of students stated that they feel comfortable and at home at the center, and those that did not know about it wish they had. It is important for students who are miles away from home to have a comfort/safe place while away at school and that is the role of the African American Cultural Center.