

# **Central Black Student Union: Is it Still Needed in 2006?**

## **EPS 500\_06-01**

### **EVOKE**

#### **About the Ethnographer**

I am an African American female and I am in my senior year of Undergraduate study at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. My major is Psychology and my minor is Sociology.

### **EXPLORE**

#### **Question**

**What questions is your inquiry contingent upon?**

- 1.) What is the historical background of the Central Black Student Union (CBSU)?
  
- 2.) Does CBSU still perform the same actions and hold fast to the same traditions and beliefs that they once fostered in the 70's, 80's and 90's and if so, Are these actions, traditions and beliefs still relevant in UIUC's current racial climate?
  
- 3.) Is CBSU's main purpose to be a politically charged organization or does it have the primary role of meeting the socio-cultural needs of African American students?

#### **Plan**

**How will you go about answering your inquiry?**

- 1.) Tell me something interesting about the history of CBSU & what it means to you.
  
- 2.) Do you think the lives of African American students would be different if CBSU did not exist on campus? Why or Why not?

same question as # 2 but framed differently.

\* Imagine the UIUC campus without CBSU. Tell me how you would envision it to be.

- 3.) Is CBSU having a positive impact on the UIUC's campus?
  
- 4.) Do you think that the current population of African American students still care about CBSU like the prior engineers who created it?
  
- 5.) Do you think CBSU is too hardcore or softcore in its approach to dealing with perceived racial injustices within the UIUC campus and Urbana-Champaign community?
  
- 6.) Do you think CBSU has strayed too far away from its initial purpose or do you think CBSU is on the right pathway to serving our current and future generations of African American students?

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These questions will apply to only some of the interviewees.

7.) Why do you attend CBSU meetings?

8.) Why are you on the CBSU Executive Board?

9.) The CBSU Executive Board has recently worried over the low-attendance rates of those who attend the meetings. Why is this so and do you know of ways in which this can be rectified.

10.) Why did the CBSU Executive Board of 200\_ go on sabbatical? When you'll resumed, what were the changes that were implemented and did you'll fix what was "broken"?

## **OBSERVE**

### **What observations, or findings are you encountering in your research?**

So far, I have had really great interviews! My participants are very talkative and seem to enjoy giving me information about CBSU. Thus far, my interview questions are doing a great job answering my 3 three main research questions. For example, in relation to my question, Tell me something interesting about CBSU and what it means to you, The following is just a sample of one of the responses that I have received: X said that "CBSU has a legacy for being militant. Regardless of time, CBSU will always be perceived as the organization that is concerned with the emotional and potential state of African Americans on campus. What does it means to you? I do not think CBSU is as militant as it has in the past, Changes have occurred with each executive board, even if these changes are slight. For the most part, the answer to this question is a good representation of the participants' feelings towards CBSU's historical roots. They seem to reverence the past or the "glory days" of CBSU. They believe CBSU has changed in some way.

A few of the examples of some of these changes include, the fact that students are not participating in CBSU like the once did. The participants have cited factors such as underclassmen (freshman & sophomores) might feel alienated and decide not come to the meetings, students often cite a lack of time due to academics and etc. As a consensus, it seems as though the "time commitment factor" is a recurring theme that keeps coming up in the interviews. Interestingly, my research has cited time commitment as one of t he factors that keeps African Americans from participating in CBSU. I am eager to find out if this theme will be present in my other interviews as well. As of now, it seems to be a pretty significant factor for why African Americans are not participating in CBSU like they once did.

Another trend that is occurring in my data is the fact the even though it seems like CBSU has been having problems such as low attendance rates, "the lack of concern for it by a large population of the African American student population, participants still imagine the UIUC campus as having a bleak future without CBSU. They also seem to

contend that CBSU is one of the main organizations on campus that fosters the unity of the African American community. One of the participants even said CBSU is the “elitist” black organization that is on campus. As of now, it seems like even though CBSU needs some major structural changes, participants are still insist on having CBSU remain on the UIUC campus.

In relation to my third question, which asks about the socio-cultural aspect of CBSU, my data is split on this question. Some participants maintain that the “pubing” of events are necessary to CBSU. This way the African American student population is aware of what is going on in their community. On the other hand, others have stated that the socio-cultural part of CBSU has actually strayed too far from the initial ground that CBSU was founded on.

Although I still have a substantial amount of interviews and data collection to go, I am elated with the rich amount of information that I have gathered so far!

## **DISCUSS**

### **Discuss your inquiry, taking care to separate speculation from fact or data**

The Central Black Student Union

Is it still needed in 2006?

By: EPS 500\_06-01

University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign

The Higher Education Act of 1965 had an extraordinary impact on predominately white universities and colleges across the United States. As a result of this act; which banned discrimination in education, more black students were admitted into white institutions of higher education than ever before (Rogers.2006). Just because black students were permitted to come to these institutions, it does not mean that they were welcomed with open arms. Many black students perceived the racial climate on these campuses to be aversive towards them. In an effort to combat this racial hostility, unite black students on campus and organize social and political activities, James Garrett founded the first black student union on the campus of San Francisco college in 1966. James Garrett was no stranger to black activism.

As a teenager, Garrett “participated in the sit-ins of the 1960s, the Freedom Rides in 1961, massive demonstrations by the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in Mississippi and the Watts Riots in 1965...He was arrested seven times and survived many vicious beatings...Garrett proudly proclaims that he went to college for two reasons...to avoid being called into the military and to organize” (Rogers.2006).

Garrett molded the black student union out of an already existing organization on San Francisco’s State University; the Negro Student Association. The Negro Student Association was a black socio-cultural organization. Rather than a black socio-cultural organization, Garrett envisioned “not simply an alliance or an association, but a union. It was a coming together of a broad sense of Black people. So Black and student and union all had meaning and were connected” (Rogers.2006). Garrett’s black student union (BSU) gave birth to many BSUs around the country. These BSUs demanded that their institutions provide them with the tools that they deemed to be a necessity for them to succeed. BSUs asked their administrators for more Black students, faculty,

administrators, athletes, and coaches, student publications, financial aid, offices of Black student affairs and cultural centers. They also wanted schools of ethnic study, black studies departments and resources to help “uplift” the black community. In many instances, the BSUs got what they wanted. However, the fight to get these essentials for black students was not an easy one. Contrarily, it was a hard one; one that included protests, strikes, building takeovers and other tactics so that blacks could come out victorious in their battles. According to Garrett, “People of color in academia owe us a tremendous amount. They don’t pay it, but they owe a tremendous amount to the sacrifices of people who lost their hands, their fingers, their eyes; people spent time in prison—students” (Rogers.2006). The 1960’s proved to be not only a significant period of time for student’s like Garrett, it was also an important time in history for black people around the country. Dr. Joy Ann Williamson, assistant professor of education at Stanford University and author of *Black Power on Campus: The University of Illinois 1965-75*, has written extensively on student activism in the 1960s. Williamson believes that the establishment of San Francisco State’s BSU was a reflection of the “Black Power movement ethos on campus”.

As defined by Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton in their book *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America*, Black Power is “pride rather than shame in blackness, and an attitude of brotherly, communal responsibility among all black people for one another. They further defined it as a call for African Americans to recognize and be proud of their heritage, build a sense of community, define their goals, and control their own organizations” (Williamson. 20.1998).

Furthermore, in the 1960’s the word Negro was replaced by Black. The term Negro turned into a derogatory term. This had significant implications on college students who participated in the Black Power movement on their campuses. “Students who were part of the Black Power movement created Black student associations instead of the Negro associations to demonstrate that they would be much more aggressive, proud of their Blackness, would self-define and self-direct” (Rogers.2006). Thus these students were displaying the totality of their transformation, which was largely more assertive and prideful than had ever been before.

The call for Black Power was answered by many. During the summer of 1966, Kwame Toure took over as chair of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and first uttered the word Black Power. Floyd McKissick, the Black Nationalist was initiated as the national director of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and Huey P. Newton and Bobby Scale established the Black Panther Party for Self Defense in Oakland, California. For blacks to fully achieve Black Power, they had to successfully unite. This union was to be accomplished by group solidarity. “Group solidarity is necessary before a group can operate effectively from a bargaining position of strength in a pluralistic society”. Under the banner of Blackness...blacks would be able to address their grievances and demand their share of the American pie” (Williamson.20.1998). Black students at predominately white universities decided that enough was enough and it was time to get their slice of the American pie; which was held by the dominant white majority.

Several books have been written about these students activist stances. “Some of these books include Richard McCormick’s volume on the protests that took place at Rutgers

University in New Jersey; Donald Down's account of the black student protestors at Cornell in 1969; and Werner Sollors, Caldwell Titcomb and Thomas Underwood's discussion of black student life and activity at Harvard University. Most recently, Wayne Glasker described black student protests at the University of Pennsylvania between 1967 and 1990" (Bradley.163).

The protests that took place on the campuses of Rutgers, Cornell, Harvard and the University of Pennsylvania all have the same catalyst. Black students demanded Black Studies programs and the belief in the Black Power ideologies in order to reach their desired goals. Student activism through BSUs also increased during 1968, "the apex of the Black Power Movement when Dr. King was assassinated. "King's assassination spurred a dramatic upsurge in the creation of new BSUs. The University of Florida, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and The Ohio State University, for example all established BSUs that year"(Rogers.2006).

Just as the Black Power Movement swept across the campuses of San Francisco State, Rutgers, Cornell, Harvard and the University of Pennsylvania, the Black Power Movement also touched down on the campus of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. According to Joy Williamson (1998), the author of *We Hope for Nothing: We Demand Everything: Black Students at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign*, says that

"The first step in a concerted effort to implement Black Power on campus was the formation of Black student unions. Some were called The Black Student Association (BSA), others the African American Students Society, still others United Afro-American Students, but all were geared to provide Black students with a solid, legitimate power base from which they can bring about needed changes in the colleges and universities involved... In his work on Black student unions, Harry Edwards, found that Black student unions, regardless of the university setting, shared certain traits and goals. He found that they were exclusively Black membership, monolithic in appearance, highly self-conscious, and motivated by sociopolitical terms. Furthermore, he found that most were formed for the explicit purpose of creating solidarity and unity, expressing Black culture, and forcing significant change in the university or college"(Williamson.1998).

The BSA was founded in October of 1967 on the UIUC campus. The organization adopted the motto: "We hope for nothing; we demand everything. This slogan linked itself to the Black Power Movement and affirmed that it was the organization through which Black students would force the UIUC to recognize and act on Black issues. These issues included but were not limited to hostility and seclusion. Evidence of this can be found in the following quote,

"Preconditions such as alienation and isolation on campus provided Black students with the foundation on which their frustrations with UIUC built. Off-campus events and on-campus experiences precipitated the formation of a Black student union as a way to allay their alienation and to act as a mediating body between themselves and the institution. The organization filled the social and psychological needs for Black students and provided a forum in which they could plot a course for change" (Williamson.1998).

With the strong willed nature of the BSA, changes, changes and more changes were

implemented on the UIUC campus. For instance, BSA oversaw several publications that were in its introductory stages to the UIUC campus. One of them was Drums. “In the first issue of Drums, BSA outlined the organizations purpose and ideology in an article entitled, “Goals are Black Unity and Black Consciousness”... “We are not discriminated against because we are Baptists or Methodists; we are discriminated against because we are BLACK” (Williamson.61.1998). In addition to their publications, members of the BSA demanded African American focused courses, recruitment of both faculty and students who were black, the formation of an Afro-American Cultural Program and a Black Studies Program. All of these demands were granted by the administrators of UIUC.

The precursors in order to attain these rights and privileges that the BSA was allotted was not easy. BSA members were involved in protests, sit-ins and faced numerous disciplinary actions (ex. arrests) in their fight to improve the racial climate for blacks. For instance, when members of the BSA protested and staged a sit-in at the Illini Union as a result of a gross disparity in housing assignments between blacks members of the Special Educational Opportunities Program (SEOP) and white students; the BSA was blamed for destroying the property of the Illini Union and several members were arrested for their alleged involvement in the act (Williamson.102.1998). While the BSA was strong in the 1960’s, eventually this organization reached its zenith and quickly disintegrated due to the termination of the Black Power Movement nationwide.

As stated by Williamson (1998), “By approximately 1975, Black Power faded in both the national and campus context. Many possible explanations for such a decline exist not all of which include the fact that prominent Black Power figures strayed from the cause, the police actively and purposely helped disintegrate the Black Panther Party, the government effectively declared war on Black Power, the escalation of national and world economic crisis focused attention elsewhere, and the American public exhibited a kind of socio-political retrenchment in the middle 1970s. Though the Black student movement at UIUC declined as other Black student movements did across the country, it did manage to leave a lasting legacy” (p.180).

This “lasting legacy” that exists on the current UIUC campus is an array of over 30 organizations that “sprang” from the BSA. One of these organizations is the Central Black Student Union (CBSU) of the UIUC. The Central Black Student Union is the umbrella organization for the black student unions that exist at each Undergraduate Residence Hall on the UIUC campus. Beautiful and Together Sisters (B.A.T.S.) is the BSU for the Lincoln Avenue Residence Hall. Ebony Umoja means Black Unity and is the BSU for Illinois Street Residence Halls. Eusa Nia means Black Purpose and it is the BSU for Allen Residence Hall. Ewezo translated means Black Power and serves the needs of the students of Florida Avenue Residence Halls. Ma’at which means, the laws of God by which the universe was created is the BSU for Champaign Residence Halls. Mariama which means gift from God caters to the needs of the women of Busey-Evans Residence Hall. Salango, which means we come together to create something beautiful out of love is the BSU for Pennsylvania Avenue Residence Halls.

As mentioned previously, as the Black Power Movement dissipated, so did the black student union activism. Garrett believes that the activism of the BSUs decreased because “the initial wave of the student activists began to leave campus. Some graduated; others

were expelled, jailed or killed. In the mid-1970's when the counter-revolution occurred, BSUs began reverting back to socio-cultural organizations, only becoming politically active if an incident occurred" (Rogers.2006). The notion that BSUs become active only if a significant event takes place on campus was also echoed in a 1975 Illio (UIUC yearbook). The author of the article said, "Black students at one time dissidents, have now turned to more traditional means of dealing with inequities or else they have forsaken the movement altogether. In particular, participation continues to be crisis oriented. As various crises flared, so did participation; as they faded, so too did participation" (Williamson.181.1998). Others reasons why the activism of the BSUs lessened was because students became more focused on their own studies. This in turn meant that the Black campus community was left largely ignored. The following quotes from Williamson's (1998) *We Hope for Nothing: We Demand Everything: Black Students at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign* are illustrative of students laying down their fight for power in order to concentrate more on their studies. "According to Mr. Shelley (former director of SEOP), she yelled at her son, I sent you down here to school, and you go to jail? Edna Long's mother had a similar reaction. The day after the incident her daughter called to tell her how the university was denying the Black students their rights and that she planned to protest. Ms.Long remembered her mother saying, You're going to do what? I am sending you money to go to the University of Illinois so take your Black...to class tomorrow" (Williamson.104.1998).

By laying down their activist stance and putting more effort into getting their degrees; many black students believed that they were having a more direct effect upon the condition of their race because they interpreted their "individual attainment and success as a means for uplifting their race" (Williamson.181). Thus, while they were not having an immediate affect upon the condition of blacks on campus; they could find contentment in the fact that they could use their degree in the future to improve the quality of life for not only blacks on the UIUC campus, but for the entire African American community as a whole.

In a sense, the BSUs that Garrett created have turned back into the thing that he disliked the most; socio-cultural organizations. According to a Diverse 2006 survey that was administered to 23 BSUs across the country, "All the BSUs surveyed were found to be mainly sociocultural organizations. Close to 40 percent of them have few or no ties to the larger community, as a mere nine of the 23 leaders surveyed say a community service program is one of their major initiatives each year" (Rogers.2006). Out of the initial BSU that Garret founded 40 years ago, BSUs around college campuses now host "banquets, BSU weeks, fashion shows, parties, step shows, alumni gatherings and beauty pageants. Cultural events include lectures, panels or forums with leading Black scholars, Black History month programming and Martin Luther King Jr. Day celebrations" (Rogers.2006). It seems that the current BSUs have lost sight of Garret's primary purpose for their creation.

While today's BSUs have more socio-cultural roots than political ties to their campuses; being a socio-cultural organization does fill a very important function for blacks who attend predominately white colleges. According to Aisha Brunno, a BSU treasurer at Brooklyn College, she says the main goal of the BSU is to "focus on the African diaspora and just to make Black people feel at home when they come to campus... We throw

parties, we have social events and we go on education trips. We're social, but we get political when necessary" (Rogers.2006). Feeling like they are apart of a college campus is a thing of great importance to blacks.

For instance, "it is still difficult being a minority student within a largely white educational and social environment. The authors of *How to Succeed on a Majority Campus: A Guide for Minority Students*, write that involvement in organizations such as BSUs have a political influence on students of color...In addition to finding a supportive community in these groups, students can band together to promote change on college campuses" (Rogers.2006).

In addition to feeling an important social niche, Black student unions also play a key role in providing support in the survival process and persistence to graduation. Thus, one may deduce quite accurately that while "currently on many university campuses, the BSU serves primarily as social organization and parties are a favorite BSU past time...The role of the BSU has shifted from responding to the more political and racial climate of the past to that of a social organization. This social purpose notwithstanding, the BSU does intermittently serve as an important part of the university infrastructure as a symbol of a more racist past an as social network for faculty, staff and students of color on predominately white campuses" (Rogers.2006).

The BSUs have been a staple on college campuses since 1966. However, just because they have existed for almost 40 years, it does not mean that they are still performing vital functions for the black students that attend college in 2006. For the purposes of this research project, I am trying to answer the question, Is the Central Black Student Union of the University of Illinois still needed in 2006. The reason why I pose this question is because through informal conversations that took place prior to conducting this study, I learned that some students consider CBSU to be a separatist organization on campus because while it promotes unity within the African American community; it largely ignores the promotion of inclusiveness and contact with other students who are not of African American descent. Other students have expressed the fact that CBSU has become nothing more than a social organization that promotes parties and the occasional fashion show and talent show. Others have pointed to the low attendance rates at the CBSU meetings and have asked Do African Americans students really care about this organization? In an effort to separate fact from fiction, I decided to conduct an ethnographic study of CBSU. The research questions that will guide this study are as follows: What is the historical background of the Central Black Student Union (CBSU)? Does CBSU still perform that same actions and hold fast to the same traditions and beliefs that they once fostered in the 70's, 80's and 90's and if so, Are these actions, traditions and beliefs still relevant in UIUC's current racial climate? Is CBSU's main purpose to be a politically charged organization or does it have the primary role of meeting the socio-cultural needs of African American students?

#### Methodology

For the purposes of this study, I conducted a series of interviews; specifically 8 in total. I also attended numerous CBSU meetings and compiled field notes through observations and collected CBSU agendas from all meetings that I attended. I was also placed on the CBSU mailing list which allowed me to obtain access to CBSU mass e-mail mailings.



The participants in this study were between the ages of 19 and 22. Five of those who were interviewed were males and three were female. Six of the interviewees were African American and two were of Nigerian descent. All but two of the interviews took place at the Illini Orange. Those interviews that were not conducted at the Illini Orange took place at UIUC residential dormitories. Each interviewee was asked the following questions: Tell me something interesting about the history of CBSU & what it means to you, Do you think the lives of African American students would be different if CBSU did not exist on campus? Is CBSU having a positive impact on the UIUC campus? Do you think that the current population of African American students still cares about CBSU like the prior engineers who created it? Do you think CBSU is too hardcore or soft core in its approach to dealing with perceived racial injustices within the UIUC campus and Urbana-Champaign community? Do you think CBSU has strayed too far away from its initial purpose or Do you think CBSU is on the right pathway to serving our current and future generations of African American students? In addition to these questions, a select group of participants who held positions on the CBSU executive board were asked the following questions? Why do you attend CBSU meetings? Why are you on the CBSU Executive Board? The CBSU Executive Board has recently worried over the low-attendance rates of those who attend the meetings, why is this so and do you know of ways in which this can be rectified? Why did the CBSU Executive Board of 2005 go on sabbatical and when it resumed, what were the changes that were implemented and did you'll fix what was "broken"? There was no specific amount of time allotted for each interview. Typically, the interview lasted a total of 15 minutes with some spanning to 30 minutes and a few went beyond 30 minutes.

The Central Black Student Union of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign  
It is 4:00 p.m. and I just arrived at the Illini Orange. CBSU has weekly meetings every Tuesday inside the main room of the Illini Orange. The room is cool and dark. It still bears witness to the snack bar that it used to be in 1960, the year that it was built. Although it is empty, there is a menu that hangs lifeless behind a countertop where one could easily conjure up images of a cash register and burgers and fries being made to order. I decide to sit in one of the booths and wait upon the CBSU attendees to come in. My time alone in this vast room is disrupted by Jonathon Edwards, the President of CBSU. Although Jonathon's main concern is to get the room illuminated for the impending meeting; he takes out time to politely welcome me to this week's CBSU meeting. After a friendly greeting, Jonathon quickly rushes to set up the seating for the meeting. Jonathon informed me that in the past, CBSU meetings have not always taken place at the Illini Orange. They used to take place at Clark Hall. Jonathon, who is currently a junior, remembers attending the CBSU meetings at Clark Hall. He told me that at Clark Hall the members of the CBSU Executive Board (president, secretary, treasurer...) sit at a "reserved" table while the attendees sit in neat rows a few feet away from them. He believed this created somewhat of a hierarchy between the CBSU Executive board members; who could be perceived as having more authority and a higher ranking than the rest of the students who come to partake in CBSU's weekly meetings. In order to destroy this perceived hierarchy, Jonathon arranges the chairs in a circular fashion at each CBSU meeting so everyone will feel that they are all equally qualified to address certain issues that they think should be discussed. Thus, Jonathon's seating arrangement demolished the CBSU setup of yesteryear; No longer did the CBSU

Executive Board talk “at” students; now an egalitarian atmosphere of pure group dialogue was created where all students were permitted to equally participate in the discussion. Secretly, I am an advocate of Jonathon’s seating style. Even upon my first time attending a CBSU meeting; I felt right at home and comforted by the opportunity to be in the midst of a congregation of black students who were passionate and eager to discuss issues that pertained to the black student experience at UIUC. At CBSU, I was able to enjoy something that white students at UIUC are able to take for granted. They have the luxury of being in the midst of those who share the same racial and ethnic heritage as themselves. Even though the faculty of UIUC has become more diversified through the years, the majority of UIUC’s faculty and its student body are still white. The commonality of white skin runs widely in UIUC’s classrooms, while ethnic minorities like blacks; stick out like sore thumbs in many of their classes. However, after attending only one meeting; I began to realize that CBSU is a place of refuge for the black student. In the comfort zones of CBSU; black students are given the opportunity to share and discuss issues such as perceived racial injustices, opportunities to participate in and plan socio-cultural activities such as talent and fashion shows and they are able to connect with other black students in an atmosphere where one is not simply “branded” as the other in a setting, such as the classroom, which is largely dominated by whiteness. For the most part, all first year undergraduate students, regardless of their race or ethnicity usually have a narrative that contains elements of excitement, anxiety and an overwhelming pressure to conform one’s old and tired “high school” study tactics to ones that are more useful and will prove successful throughout the rigors of college. While all students share the previous communalities; it is one thing that divides black and white students when they attend predominately white college campuses; race is this great divider and conqueror of college campuses.

From her interviews on the cohort of black students that entered the UIUC in the 1960s, Williamson found that black students had to adjust socially, emotionally and psychologically to the majority white campus of UIUC that they were expected to call home for at least four years. According to her informants, Williamson discovered that black students had to get accustomed to their new racial environment if they planned on succeeding at the UIUC. Take for instance James Eggleston perspective on his new college setting.

“As Eggleston noted, when I got there [UIUC], it was the biggest shock. Similarly, fellow student Rodney Hammond stated, “It was a phenomenally White campus, more than I had anticipated” Describing how the low number of Black students amidst White students affected daily interaction, Dan Dixon explained, My first semester I saw one Black person on campus Monday, Wednesday, and Friday between my 2:00 class and 3:00 class. That was the only Black person I ever saw... When I found a Black milieu, I ran for it” (Williamson.42.1998).

The key to overcoming the initial shock of the racial climate and composition of the UIUC campus was involvement in an organization that allowed black students to feel connected to the greater community at large. Students assimilated into the UIUC racial climate by

“Joining academic associations, social organizations, or student athletics. Others found an outlet for their civil rights concerns...In the early to middle 1960s, African Americans

worked together in organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)” (Williamson.42.1998).

The feeling of alienation and or culture shock that black students of the 1960s encountered upon entering a predominately white institution like UIUC still exists for the black student that attends UIUC in 2006. To help black students adjust to these new and ever intrusive feelings lie in the lap of CBSU. In fact, CBSU believes very strongly that this is one of its most important missions. When asked the question do you think the lives of African Americans students would be different if CBSU did not exist on campus, Tiffany said “without CBSU, campus would be a lonely place for African Americans. Initially CBSU helps to decrease the level of culture shock for incoming African American students”. Another student, Sarah gave the following response when asked the same question, “If CBSU didn’t exist, African American students would not have an outlet”. Charles answered the question by saying that “I think it would be a situation where a lot of students would have a lot of problems and no where to go. Enlightened racism would be rampant. African American students do face a lot of disparities and they need this organization to adjust”.

Alexia responded by saying, “Lives would be different for incoming freshman... CBSU helps with problem solving and supports black students. CBSU is the central place to get information as a whole about the African American community. It serves as a resource guide”.

Before attending my first CBSU meeting, I fancied a room with members of the CBSU Executive Board as well as an audience of about 60 black students (I thought I was severely underestimating). Boy, I have never been more wrong in my life. When I attended the meetings, I was appalled and shaken by the fact that there were only about 25 students at the CBSU meetings. These 25 students were a combination of the CBSU Executive Board members as well as representatives from each Undergraduate residential hall BSU and members from some of the supporting organizations that CBSU gives aid to in order to put together certain programs on campus. For the most part, it is mandatory that each CBSU Executive Board member as well as representatives from each BSU attend these weekly meetings. (\*Supporting organizations such as Alpha Phi Alpha, MAFA, Project Youth, Soul Starr Select and ..., are not obligated to come to the meetings). If CBSU is so important to the acclimation and survival of the black students on the UIUC campus, why are all of the meetings so sparsely populated?

Sarah, a sophomore said “black students take CBSU for granted”. I believe this to be true to a certain extent. Part of the reason why black students might take CBSU for granted is because they do not really know the history of CBSU. When I asked students to give me some historical facts on CBSU, many of the students kept telling me that CBSU was a very militant group. Yet, they supplied me with no specific instances in which CBSU took extremely confrontational stances which would show how aggressive they actually were. Saying that a black group was militant on campus in the time period from 1960s throughout the 70’s is pretty much a given. It is almost as easy as the initial question that is asked of contestants on the game show Who Wants to be a Millionaire. Lester, a longtime member of CBSU said “the pioneers of CBSU had a vision and this vision has since been lost since they left. Students who come in do not even know what the vision

was ...their only vision is graduating”. Lester’s comments helped me to understand why only members of the CBSU and BSUs were able to supply me with historical facts about CBSU such as it is due to the non comprising stance of CBSU that UIUC has a black cultural house and black faculty members. In order to get at the many mitigating factors that caused black students to “call” for an organization like CBSU and the effects of CBSU on the UIUC campus, I had to resort to using Joy Williamson’s 1998 dissertation, *We Hope for Nothing: We Demand Everything: Black students at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign*.

In the early 90’s, the CBSU found themselves in an uncomfortable position. Specifically,

“CBSU members had to defend their organization from White students who considered it separatist and self-segregating. Black students reminded the academic and student community of the historical need for such an organization on campus and its role in educating Black student, acclimating them to campus, softening the cultural shock they experienced on campus, and providing a voice for Black students” (Williamson.187.1998).

In the year 2006, when there is more now there ever a push for racial diversity and integration, is there a place for CBSU on the UIUC campus if it is indeed found guilty of being a “separatist and self-segregating” organization? Although the majority of the students that I interviewed did not believe CBSU was either separatist or self-segregating, one of the students that I interviewed said that he envisioned a campus where there was no need for CBSU. He believed that an organization like CBSU would not have to exist if all students simply took responsibility for themselves and treated their neighbors with the kind of deference that they deserved. While he did see CBSU as being a “safe-haven” for black students, he wanted the need for this place of refuge to be eliminated. While none of my interviewees wanted to see the death of CBSU, Charles in particular wanted to see an improvement in race relations for all students. Ultimately, this would create a campus that would be free of victim narratives not just for black students, but for Latino/a, Native American and Asian Americans students as well.

Since none of the students that I interviewed wanted to see CBSU obliterated from campus, what is preventing black students from coming to and participating in CBSU? One answer to this question is because of academics. Even though Tiffany was able to attend CBSU meetings on a weekly base throughout her freshman and sophomore years; during her junior and senior years, her participation dwindled down to almost nothing. Tiffany said

“the meetings do not work with my schedule. Academics are more important to me. Meetings can go on for over an hour. So I do not go on a regular basis, only when time allows me I do. There is a sacrifice between academics and CBSU”.

Michael Roberterson, a regular attendee at the weekly CBSU meetings said, “Many black students main goal is getting into college and getting out. Thus, many black students do not enjoy their experiences and look forward to leaving Champaign”. All in all, it seems like juggling academics along with making a commitment to a part of a group like CBSU is a difficult transition for some. The looming time commitment is there and while some may collapse under it, students like Michael are able to take the stress all in stride.

During one of the last CBSU meetings that I attended, several of the CBSU members had to leave early. Lily had to go home and start on her paper while Timothy had a midterm exam for one of his major classes. Both students apologized for leaving the meeting early. Wow, I thought to myself. What dedication these students have to CBSU. Even though they could have opted not to come to the meeting at all, they stayed for a little over half of the meeting in order to help their fellow members in any way possible. Interestingly, I found that almost every member of CBSU that I interviewed was involved in more than several extracurricular activities. Take for instance Michael Robertson. Michael is a member of a prominent black fraternity, is president of a student registered organization at UIUC and works two jobs. Another tremendously busy black brother on campus that is a member of CBSU is Donald. Donald is involved with the African Cultural Association, is a participant in the Campus Honors Programs, and is a member of a civic leadership program. Even in the midst of his studies and numerous extracurricular activities, Donald believes that one should not worry about the low participatory rates in CBSU among black students. According to Donald, "People suffer from thinking it has to be a lot of people, and then we know we are making a difference... People who not just come, but do work are those ones that are the most committed to CBSU. Five people can do the work of over a 100 people...I come here for the issues that are at hand".

After speaking with Donald, I no longer looked at all the idle chairs and space that could be filled by numerous black students. Instead I looked at the room as being "filled to capacity" with students who were willing to put in the sweat, tears and long hours that it takes to keep CBSU running on a continual schedule. These are the students who should receive accolades of praise for carrying the torch of CBSU for the black students who attend UIUC. They are leaders and should be recognized as such.

CBSU Executive Board members have done almost everything that is humanly possible to try and garner the attention of black students and get them interested in this heavenly driven, grassroots organization. All undergraduate BSUs have ornamented display boards that showcase the missions of their specific BSU and the mission statement of CBSU and etc. During the school year, BSUs host events like ice cream socials, pizza parties and movie nights in Undergraduate Resident Halls in order to provide a social outing for black students and give students who do not attend BSU and CBSU meetings to learn more about their organization or things that they feel that every black student on campus should be informed of. At the beginning of each school year, students are also mailed informational brochures from the UIUC that gives students a preview of what CBSU is like before they get to campus every fall. They have even tried scare tactics. As stated by Tiffany, "CBSU went on sabbatical because the attendance had dramatically decreased and CBSU wanted people to see how students on campus would react without CBSU". Besides a shocking sabbatical, CBSU has even used food to grab the attention of the "starving college student". Sara told me that at one of the first CBSU meetings of 2006, food was provided in order to try and get a larger crowd to come to the meeting. Sara found this to be problematic. According to Sara, "CBSU should not have to bribe people to come meetings... We should not have to use food". When Sara said this, I had to inhibit myself from shouting Right on Sister, Testify! Why should CBSU feel that need to spend money supplying pizza and pop for students who will most likely attend this sole meeting because they want to avoid whatever dreaded meal that is served in the

dormitory hall? CBSU should use their money for things that are imperative to the ongoing function of CBSU.

During the fall semester of 2006, the white, Greek sorority Delta, Delta, Delta and the fraternity of Zeta Beta hosted a racially themed party that has come to be known as the "Tacos and Tequila Party". This party, which severely stereotyped Mexicans in less than positive ways in costumes and etc. brought outrage to many students at UIUC. In a concerted effort to share their disdain for the actions of Tri Delta and ZBT, members of CBSU, Mexican American students and countless others participated in a rally and protest on the UIUC campus. As a result of this, Charles placed questions regarding the rally and protest on the weekly CBSU agenda for all to discuss. A sampling of some of the questions that was asked is as follows: Was the rally organized, roughly how many people attended? Are numbers important, what was the purpose of the rally, Did it serve its purpose? In regards to the Protest, How do you feel about the Tri Delt's and ZBT's reaction, Did the Chancellor/Vice-Chancellor have anything to do say about what was done? What is next? Have we accomplished our goal? What was/ is our goal? As a consensus, the CBSU members all agreed that the rally and protest were organized, the rally and protest was well attended, however the number of people that attended the meeting was not that important. The most important aspect of the rally and protest was the show of unity among the crowd of different racial and ethnic backgrounds and the fact that they were demanding changes to be implemented.

Although all of the questions that Charles posed to the group were important and caused very interesting dialogue to come to surface, I was most interested in the conversation that sparked from Charles's last question, what should be done next? This is because, in the past, CBSU has been criticized for its lack of involvement in important political issues on campus and its perceived over emphasis on social events. These social events are inclusive of CBSU's promotion of parties by fraternities and sororities, Cotton Club: an annual talent show that showcases the black talent of UIUC's very own students and a once a year fashion show and etc. Charles, the president of CBSU laughed as he told me that during his freshman year, he was told that CBSU was the place where one goes in order to find attractive members of the opposite sex in hopes of potentially dating them. Every year, the CBSU revamps itself at the requests of each Executive Board that takes control of power for a particular year. This year, CBSU has added a Social Action Chair to its roster. Christina is the name of the young lady who holds this position and she is "all about her business". She will be graduating in May with a B.S. in Molecular & Cellular Biology. She has aspirations of going to medical school and fulfilling her life long dream of becoming a doctor. After listening to her fellow members comments' that a further action must be done in response to the "Tacos and Tequila Party", Christina happily went about making plans for a quad display on racism that the CBSU members collaboratively thought was needed. In addition to displaying posters and passing out handbills, members of CBSU will also wear T-shirts; which will bear one or two quotes that pertains to racism. The possible thoughts for the quotes were original pieces of work by members of CBSU. The quote or a quote that gains the majority vote will win the honor of being placed on the T-shirt. So far, the following quotes that were mentioned are as follows: The Secret is Out, Racism Exists in the past and present... Stop It in the Future, Do You Want to Hang out with US ( picture of someone getting lynched will be included)? Two, Three and Picket... Close your Eyes. We were Marching then and

Marching Now, and Racial Equality is Important but it starts with U and I. When casting preliminary votes for which quote to use, the majority of the CBSU members voted against the phrase, Do You Want to Hang with Us? When Ashley first uttered the quote, the members thought that it would bring a great deal of attention to their cause. However, after a few minutes, they decided to strip away the quote entirely from the ballot. They believed the saying was just too controversial. They did not want to bring unwanted attention that could potentially have ill effects on CBSU's reputation. Later after the meeting was over, I asked Donald and Christina if they thought CBSU was too militant or soft core in respects to perceived racial injustices that take place on the UIUC campus. While Donald wishes that CBSU was more militant in nature like the CBSU of former years, Christian has a strikingly dissimilar view. As stated by Christian, "CBSU is where they need to be. CBSU hasn't gone to any extremes. We look at both sides before action is taken...Not just punishing someone for wrong doing but also educating them". As is demonstrable by the abandonment of the t-shirt idea, "You left of hanging", the majority of CBSU's members do not believe in 2006, militant actions need to be taken on campus in order to express their frustrations with alleged injustices. They believe times have changed and as a result, they must change also. Due to this fact, the combative tactics employed by CBSU doing the 1960s and 70s have no place on the UIUC campus in the year 2006. Some of the more appropriate methods of "fighting back" that CBSU deems as acceptable include holding peaceful rallies and lectures on the campus.

All in all, CBSU serves the "totality" of the black student on the UIUC campus. It helps them get over the "culture shock" of attending a predominately white university and dealing with perceived racial injustices through peaceful protests, community service involvement, and social gatherings; such as parties, fashion shows and etc. Thus, CBSU acts as a point of contact between the black student who feels alienated and isolated against on campus and equips them with the proper forms of psychological and social agencies that will ultimately help the black student succeed not just on the UIUC campus, but in the very "real" racially hierarchical world that we live in. However, we must remember that CBSU can not help those who do not seek its services. In order for CBSU to continue in its pattern of progression, new leaders must come forth and demand equity, justice and peace on the UIUC campus. If this is done, CBSU will be able to continue to educate and encourage black students. It seems like it is only appropriate that I end this paper with a prior quote that sums up the basic reality that "UIUC would be a lonely place for African American students without CBSU". Thus, through my ethnographic study of CBSU, I have found that it is beyond necessary to have CBSU stay a permanent fixture on the UIUC campus.

So far, I have had really great interviews! My participants are very talkative and seem to enjoy giving me information about CBSU. Thus far, my interview questions are doing a great job answering my 3 three main research questions. For example, in relation to my question, Tell me something interesting about CBSU and what it means to you, The following is just a sample of one of the responses that I have received: X said that "CBSU has a legacy for being militant. Regardless of time, CBSU will always be perceived as the organization that is concerned with the emotional and potential state of African Americans on campus. What does it means to you? I do not think CBSU is as

militant as it has in the past, Changes have occurred with each executive board, even if these changes are slight. For the most part, the answer to this question is a good representation of the participants' feelings towards CBSU's historical roots. They seem to reverence the past or the "glory days" of CBSU. They believe CBSU has changed in some way.

A few of the examples of some of these changes include, the fact that students are not participating in CBSU like the once did. The participants have cited factors such as underclassmen (freshman & sophomores) might feel alienated and decide not come to the meetings, students often cite a lack of time due to academics and etc. As a consensus, it seems as though the "time commitment factor" is a recurring theme that keeps coming up in the interviews. Interestingly, my research has cited time commitment as one of the factors that keeps African Americans from participating in CBSU. I am eager to find out if this theme will be present in my other interviews as well. As of now, it seems to be a pretty significant factor for why African Americans are not participating in CBSU like they once did.

Another trend that is occurring in my data is the fact the even though it seems like CBSU has been having problems such as low attendance rates, "the lack of concern for it by a large population of the African American student population, participants still imagine the UIUC campus as having a bleak future without CBSU. They also seem to contend that CBSU is one of the main organizations on campus that fosters the unity of the African American community. One of the participants even said CBSU is the "elitist" black organization that is on campus. As of now, it seems like even though CBSU needs some major structural changes, participants are still insist on having CBSU remain on the UIUC campus.

In relation to my third question, which asks about the socio-cultural aspect of CBSU, my data is split on this question. Some participants maintain that the "pubing" of events are necessary to CBSU. This way the African American student population is aware of what is going on in their community. On the other hand, others have stated that the socio-cultural part of CBSU has actually strayed too far from the initial ground that CBSU was founded on.

Although I still have a substantial amount of interviews and data collection to go, I am elated with the rich amount of information that I have gathered so far!

***Files:***

[I am trying to post.doc](#) (Fri 01/19/2007 14:30)

[CBSU.doc](#) (Fri 01/19/2007 23:37)

[CBSU.doc](#) (Fri 01/19/2007 23:41)

## **REFLECT**

### **Link**

#### **Connect with other resources and materials.**

Tanisha Clausell's Inquiry of the NAACP and an "Anonymous" Student's ethnography of the Indian Student Association (ISA) will aid me in answering my own research questions. Both of these students conducted an historical analysis of the associations that they were studying, wanted to know if these organizations were beneficial to the students who were members of these organizations and they both "sat in " at the meetings of the



organizations that they wished to study. Thus, their methodologies and the questions that they posed are very similar in nature to , my own study.

#### Readings:

Ibram, Rogers.(2006)Celebrating 40 Years of Activism. Diverse Issues in Higher Education. Vol.23

Ibram's article is very helpful to me in conducting my own research project. First of all, it gives me an historical analysis of the first Black Student Union (BSU). This is very significant because I found out that the founder of the first ever BSU, James Garrett created the BSU out of the Negro Student Association; which was a socio-cultural organization. Garrett wanted an organization on his college campus, San Francisco State that would show that blacks students were a union and were ready to demand political actions on their campus. \*(At U of I , is CBSU still perceived to be a political organization or is it one that is socio-cultural...fashion shows, Black History Month events, panels, and etc.) Garrett also believes that today's BSU have lost their activist stance and have reverted to its initial function of being a socio-cultural organization. In spite of the problem's that Joy Williamson sees facing BSU' she says that she believes they should not be absent from college campuses because racism still exists.

McClelland, Michelle L.(2001) The Need Still Exists for Black Student Unions. Black Issues in Higher Education. Vol.17

McClelland believes that BSUs have stopped paying attention to problems dealing with the racial climate that minority students have to contend with at college campuses and instead have become a social organization that hosts events such as parties. But she does point out that BSUs do have unique functions on college campuses. They serve as a social network for faculty, staff and students of color on predominately White campuses. She also believes that they aid in giving minority students persistence to graduate. All in all, McClelland believes that BSUs are still integral to the college process for minority students.

Stefan, Bradley.(2003) Gym Crow Must Go! Black Student Activism at Columbia University. Journal of African American History. Vol.88.

This article gives me a glance into the effect that the role of black student activists Columbia University during the Black Power Movement. These students were organizers and determined to accomplish their list of demands. This article can help me to draw a comparison between the duties of black student activist in the 60's and the role of black student activist in the 2006.

Williamson, Joy A. (2003) Black Power on Campus: The University of Illinois.

Williamson, Joy A. We hope for nothing, We demand everything: Black students at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

These two references are giving me background information on the Racial Climate of UIUC, BSA and what kinds of measures black activists took to accomplish their goals.

Tanesha Clausell's Inquiry of the NAACP and an "Anonymous" Student's ethnography of the Indian Student Association (ISA) will aid me in answering my own research questions. Both of these students conducted an historical analysis of the associations that they wanted to learn more about, wanted to know if these organizations were beneficial to the students who were members of these organizations and they both "sat in " at the meetings of the organizations that they wished to study. Thus, their methodologies and the questions that they posed are very similar in nature to my own study.