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“We’ve Just Got to Get Together”: African American Students Unite in the 1970s
by Lynn Niedermeier

As the 1970s dawned, African American students at Western Kentucky University had reasons to be optimistic. Integrated since 1956, Western led Kentucky’s other traditionally white colleges in the number of African Americans enrolled.¹ Two fraternities and two sororities had organized to serve African American members. Russell Vertner, a senior from Indianapolis, was chairman of the student government association’s Judicial Council, and Veronica Cross, a Louisville senior, had been elected to Western’s formerly all-white cheerleading squad. Black athletes such as Romeo Crennel and Lawrence Brame (football) and Jim McDaniels and Clarence Glover (basketball) were bringing acclaim to Western’s sports programs. In a related development, the tradition of playing the Southern anthem “Dixie” at basketball games, after persisting stubbornly through the 1960s, had finally faded away.²

African Americans on campus, however, also had cause for unease. The 439 students registered for 1969-70 still comprised less than five percent of total enrollment. Only two of 577 faculty members were African American, and the curriculum attached little importance to the study of black literature, history or culture. Experiencing tokenism and informal segregation both on and off campus—discrimination in housing and subtle barriers to membership in clubs and organizations—but also denial of their own space in which to “meet, talk and dance,” black students complained of frustration, resentment or apathy.³ Although attempts during the previous semester to form a black student union had failed, Don Offutt, a Bowling Green senior, summed up the prevailing mood. “Yeah,” he declared, “we’ve just got to get together.”⁴

That hope was realized when, in April 1970, United Black Students presented Dean Charles Keown with its draft constitution. Backed by a petition bearing almost 200 signatures, the new organization sought to promote the interests of African Americans “from cultural, educational and social standpoints, thus helping them to feel to the fullest extent the need for black involvement” on Western’s campus. Under the provisional leadership of sophomore Carlos Webster and junior Phyllis Fenwick, United Black Students also announced its intention to investigate allegations of discrimination on campus.⁵ By the end of the month, both the administration and student government association had formally recognized the group.⁶

United Black Students soon took steps to help its members, in the words of publicity director Jim McDaniels, “feel like we are a part of the University.”⁷ The organization nominated Kayla Gilmore, a junior from Earlington, for Homecoming Queen, and on February 28, 1971 another junior, Carolyn Brown, was selected as the first Miss Black Western. Only days later, Brown was elected to the 1971-72 cheerleading squad, in stark contrast to the previous year when she had hesitated even to try out, believing that “because I’m black I don’t have a chance.”⁸

African American students achieved more visibility throughout April 1971. Under the sponsorship of United Black Students, Western’s first Black Awareness Week featured appearances by Martin Luther King, Sr. (father of the civil rights leader) and Frederick Bond (professional artist and cousin of Julian Bond), exhibits of books, art and photographs, black Greek activities and a Black Afro Ball, where Carolyn Brown was re-crowned Miss Black

Western. Especially popular was a black fashion and talent show which drew some 350 students. Black Awareness Week coincided with another milestone when, on April 6, voters turned out in record numbers to elect an African American student, Louisville sophomore Reginald Glass, to the vice presidency of the student government association.⁹

Alongside its social and cultural objectives, United Black Students also sought a more comprehensive program of black studies. Cautiously following developments in other schools across the nation, Western had, in fact, spent more than four years considering such a program. On April 21, 1971, the Board of Regents finally approved an interdisciplinary minor in Afro-American Studies, coordinated through the recently established Center for Intercultural Studies. Offering courses in history, literature, geography, sociology, folklore, language and government, the program quickly attracted both black and white students.¹⁰

If their new sense of unity brought immediate gains for African American students in many areas of campus life, it also left them keenly aware of obstacles still to be overcome. Their protests could be heard when school reopened in fall 1971. Why, asked one, had no blacks been pictured in the special freshman edition of the *College Heights Herald*, except in the sports section? Why, asked another, had no black women been accepted into the ROTC's Pershing Rifles auxiliary, the Rebelettes? Why, demanded yet another, did his arrival to inspect a vacant off-campus apartment prompt the landlord's claim, "Sorry, I just rented it"? Why did the creation of United Black Students itself incite charges of "reverse racism" and "exorbitant" black demands for more representation?¹¹

Positive developments nevertheless continued—the founding of the gospel ensemble, the Amazing Tones of Joy, in 1971; the first African American homecoming queen in 1972; and an African American student regent in 1974—marking the 1970s as a decade of promise. Upon his retirement in 1977, Dr. John E. Jones, head of the Afro-American Studies program and Western's first black graduate student in 1956, found that black-white relations on campus had become a "two-lane highway,"¹² a characterization still cautious in its assessment of tolerance but optimistic in its perception of a shared destination.

¹ *Louisville Defender*, 12 February 1970.

² *College Heights Herald*, 19 December 1968; *Louisville Courier-Journal*, 5 April 1970.

³ *Courier-Journal*, 5 April 1970; Lowell H. Harrison, *Western Kentucky University* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1987), 190.

⁴ *Expatriate*, 29 April 1970; *Courier-Journal*, 5 April 1970.

⁵ *Expatriate*, 29 April 1970; *College Heights Herald*, 1 May 1970.

⁶ Charles Keown, Memorandum of Information, 4 May 1970, Western Kentucky University Archives.

⁷ *College Heights Herald*, 2 October 1970.

⁸ *Courier-Journal*, 5 April 1970.

⁹ *College Heights Herald*, 9 March, 9 April 1971.

¹⁰ *College Heights Herald*, 8 April 1977.

¹¹ *College Heights Herald*, 3, 24 September 1971; *Spread Eagle*, November 1971.

¹² *Spread Eagle*, November 1971.