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Research Paper

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The Black Student Union and “Whit Soul” at Whitworth University

Published in 2007 for the *Spokesman-Review*, Shawn Vestal’s newspaper article titled “Students Dig Up Group’s Rich Past” displays a handful of students who uncovered records of Whitworth University’s Black Student Union and other traces of campus activism. Established in 1969, Whitworth’s Black Student Union (BSU) reflected the change in the Civil Rights Movement as student activism started to reach its peak.¹ Although the BSU had varied success at marches and group events, it was given a platform through a newspaper column titled “Whit Soul”. Written for the *Whitworthian* during the 70’s, the Black Student Union’s column, “Whit Soul”, played a positive role in the BSU’s attempt to make campus life at Whitworth better for African Americans. Not only was it effective in allowing African Americans to share their insights and emotions about Black life at Whitworth, but it also fostered the same type of discussion about diversity that Whitworth prides itself on today.

Dating back to 1966, most accounts recognize that after encouragement and discussion on Black Nationalism, the Negro Student Association at San Francisco State College adopted a new identity as the first ever Black Student Union and started to engage in projects to reduce racism on campuses. Soon after the establishment of this group, BSUs started to emerge in other states and the University of Washington (UW) officially developed their own BSU in 1967. Essentially, the founding of the BSU at UW can be attributed to a group of students who were

¹ Shawn Vestal, “Students Dig Up Group’s Rich Past.”, *Spokesman Review*, 2007.

inspired by a Black Youth Conference that they attended in California. When the students returned from the conference, they decided that it was time to start their university's own group, as they saw the need for campus activism.² In general, the central goal of Black Student Unions was to provide Black students with support, bring social awareness about racism, and to stimulate service projects within their communities. As well, some chapters were militant, as they wanted to be prepared for self-defense and take action when needed.³ Seeking to achieve this mission, other universities within the state, such as Whitworth University in 1969, adopted these principles and sought to improve campus life for African Americans.⁴

As the number of Black Student Unions around the nation started to increase, so did the rate of student activism in higher education. For instance, on May 12, 1969, fifty seminary students seized the administration building at Union Theological Seminary in New York. After 24 hours, officials decided to give \$1 million to the Black seminary program and \$500,000 to the Harlem area. Students often prevent school administrators from leaving buildings or made massive public gestures until their demands were met. At Stanford, seventy Black students disrupted a racism convocation after King's death by going up on stage and reading a list of demands.⁵ In addition, the movement spread throughout the South on college campuses, which broke the tradition and legacy of segregation.⁶

²Marc Robinson, "The Black Power Movement and the Black Student Union(BSU) in Washington State, 1967-1970", *Washington State University*, 2012.

³Ibram H. Rogers, *The Black Campus Movement: Black Students and the Racial Reconstruction of Higher Education, 1965-1972*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 92-6.

⁴Vestal, "Students Dig Up Group's Rich Past."

⁵Rogers, *The Black Campus Movement*, 118-122.

⁶ Benjamin Houston, Robert Cohen, and David Snyder, "Rebellion in Black and White: Southern Student Activism in the 1960s." , *The Journal of American History* 101, no.1 (2014): 334-335.

Not only was activism seen at universities in the South, but students also participated in it at Whitworth University. For instance, after five Black students from Washington State University were arrested in 1969 and charged with second-degree assault, 42 students surrounded the students to prevent them from being taken to jail and were later arrested. Of the 42 that were arrested, six were Whitworth students.⁷ In 1972, Whitworth's BSU drafted up a list of proposals that covered topics such as employment and more Black inclusion that they discussed with Edward Lindaman, the university's president at the time. Although both parties had to make compromises, they eventually came up with an official list of proposals to submit to the school administration for approval.⁸ In addition to writing letters to school officials, the BSU began to find the student newspaper, the *Whitworthian*, as an effective platform in expanding conversation about racism on campus and in the nation.

First debuted in September 1969, "Whit Soul" was presented as a new column to the *Whitworthian* that would be written by a team of Black Student Union members and "give insight and understanding to the campus community and other *Whitworthian* readers."⁹ One of the main purposes of the column was to help expose racism and attack the problems associated with it from various directions. As mentioned by the first article itself, "Through getting to the funky truth of certain issues, we hope to challenge this community to dig things from a different and probably new perspective."¹⁰ Various topics discussed by the articles included items such as eliminating the use of labels like "Negro" given to African Americans by white people or the patience that Black students have had while having to become initiators for change. One article

⁷ Robinson, Marc.

⁸ Whitworth University, "The Whitworthian 1972-1973" *The Whitworthian Student Newspaper*, 1973.

⁹ Whitworth University, "The Whitworthian 1969-1970" *The Whitworthian Student Newspaper*, 1970.

¹⁰ Whitworth University, 1970.

detailed multiple forms of activism that the BSU implemented on campus which included “dorm forums, faculty forums, a Malcolm X convocation, a fashion show...and finally produced demands which led to a demonstration and ended in a rally.”¹¹ Similarly, other universities also held events like the Malcolm X convocation as Malcolm “purposefully sought to spread his ideas among African American students by speaking at numerous colleges and universities across the nation and other venues with large student audiences.”¹² His appearances inspired much of the youth’s activism, which can be traced throughout the nation, even to the small column, “Whit Soul”.

Historically speaking, “Whit Soul” was a part of broader trend as Black newspapers all over the U.S. started to develop as a new platform for activism. As a whole, Black print was focused on telling readers the complete unbiased stories of African Americans that were often missing in regular newspapers. First published in 1905, the *Chicago Defender* was established by Robert Abbot and acted as an outlet for the unheard to be able to express their thoughts about racial issues. Although it wasn’t the only Black print at the time, it allowed historic leaders, such as Martin Luther King and Ida B. Wells, to share their insights that weren’t accepted in mainstream white media. Its impact reached as far as motivating African Americans to move North, where racial conditions were better, and in essence helped initiate the Great Migration.¹³ Another newspaper that has played a significant role within the African American world is the *New Pittsburgh Courier* that was founded in 1910. The *Courier* had the largest circulation of all Black papers and mainly stood for fighting against jim-crowism. Robert L. Vann, the founder,

¹¹Whitworth University, 1970.

¹² Ibram Rogers, “‘People All Over The World Are Supporting You’”: Malcolm X, Ideological Formations, And Black Student Activism, 1960-1972.”, *The Journal of American History* 96, no.1 (2011): 14-38.

¹³ Ethan Michaeli, *The Defender : How the Legendary Black Newspaper Changed America : From the Age of the Pullman Porters to the Age of Obama*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016), 20.

also pushed the paper to be distributed throughout the South where Black citizens were prohibited from reading it.¹⁴ Following the lead of other Black journalists, Whitworth's Black Student Union found that using "Whit Soul" as a tool to empower their voices and share their insight with others was a successful way of extending their own reach.

However, with the column came many letters to the editor expressing their support for or against what was written. This made "Whit Soul" controversial as debate started to arise. For instance, in one letter, Lee Mattson brought up the point that they disagreed with the Whit Soul article in the October 3rd Issue of the *Whitworthian*. Mattson did not think that white people used the term "negro" to "imply inferiority, laziness or ignorance" as mentioned in the Whit Soul column.¹⁵ In another, Rob Gleeson referred to the articles as "an emotional and self-righteous condemnation of Whitworth" as he believed that all white people were being classified as "white missionaries, ministers, liberals, intellectuals, dropouts, bigots, and pigs." He didn't see the logic behind this. Some letters started to become out of hand as one of the BSU writers, Frenchy Lamont, responded to a letter that she felt was unfair. Her reply was bold as she urged the author of the letter to speak with her in person. At one point in her rebuttal, she went as far as calling the writer a liar and ignorant.¹⁶

Overall, although awkward, these disagreements opened up conversations about topics that were once not spoken about. Whether the letters to the editor were negative or positive, they still showed that individuals were actively participating in reading the column, which is better than having no audience. Ultimately, "Whit Soul" and the concept of being able to have difficult

¹⁴ Roland Wolseley, *The Black Press, U.S.A.* (Iowa: The Iowa State University Press, 1971).

¹⁵ Whitworth University, 1970.

¹⁶ Whitworth University, 1970.

discussion were essential in contributing to the Black Student Union's efforts of transforming Whitworth into a more inclusive environment.

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