

1 of 4 DOCUMENTS

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UGA students push school commitment to diversity

BYLINE: Rebecca McCarthy, Staff

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Athens --- A day after the University of Georgia celebrated its 40th anniversary of desegregation, a group of African-American students gathered on Wednesday to publicize their concerns that the university hasn't made a satisfactory commitment to diversity.

"Yesterday's celebrations were about the past," said Renita Ward, one of several students who organized the Wednesday event. "Today, we're focusing on today. We want the university to be more accountable to students and the community."

Held in the African-American Cultural Center, the event drew about 100 people, and included faculty and staff, graduate students and undergraduates. The organizing students said they wanted more concrete initiatives to increase the number of African-Americans on campus, adding that a student body that's 6 percent black and a faculty and staff that's 4 percent black are "unacceptable."

The students distributed a list of demands --- one they hope to share with UGA President Michael Adams in a private meeting later this month.

The students want the new associate provost for Institutional Equity to be a vice president's position so that the person reports directly to Adams and not to Provost Karen Holbrook. They want the Office of Minority Services and Programs and the cultural center to be upgraded, with more money and autonomy, and the budget increased for the African-American Studies program and the African-American Institute.

They also want an office devoted solely to recruiting and retaining black students; better oversight of student judicial affairs as they pertain to diversity and equity; and a plan for realizing all of these initiatives.

Many of those at the meeting criticized the administration for not renewing the contract of Sherwood Thompson, director of the Office of Minority Services and Programs, and for not talking with any established black groups before making that decision.

Richard Mullendore, vice president for Student Affairs, said he decided to restructure the program after talking with his staff, without input from African-American groups. But he has no intention of downsizing either the staff or the budget for the program, he said.

"Senior faculty are incensed" that no one asked for their opinions, said R. Baxter Miller, director of the program of African-American Studies. "If changes need to be made, we need to know about them before they're made so we can be involved."

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