

# DIVERSITY AT U-M:



# WHAT'S NEXT?

Student activism, declining enrollment of under-represented minorities, and a U.S. Supreme Court decision have contributed to a new discussion on race at U-M.

By Steve Friess

**A**few hours after the massive commencement ceremony at Michigan Stadium in May, about 140 black graduates donned their caps and gowns once more for a separate, more intimate proceeding in the Power Center. Outgoing University President Mary Sue Coleman was on stage, but this had little else in common with the earlier event. Coleman was there not to speak but to listen, not to preside but to pay tribute to the students and their families. This was the conclusion of her presidency as well as an academic year that many believe could portend major implications for the racial climate at the University.

"We were *the* driving force of one of the most groundbreaking moments in student-led activism," said Grace Sims, '14, in a six-minute address to her fellow graduates at the 17th Annual Black Celebratory. "I'm sure no one believed that sharing our experiences through Twitter could impact or influence so many around the world."

Sims referred to perhaps the most modern, highly visible part of the past year's efforts by activists demanding change on campus: a social media campaign known as #BBUM. That hashtag—short for Being Black at the University of Michigan—was used on Twitter along with statements about their experiences here. The flood of 140-character tales of feeling isolated, slighted, and both intentionally and unintentionally insulted drew media attention after Black Student Union leaders began it on Nov. 19. It even spawned versions by minority students at many other campuses around the country.

The BSU followed up in January on Martin Luther King, Jr. Day with some more old-style activism, including a demonstration decrying the ongoing drop in black enrollment—down to 4.6 percent of students in 2013, from a high of 9.2 percent in 1996 and 1997\*—and a list of seven demands on the University to improve the experience of those minorities who do attend. Next came weekly meetings with administrators and an announcement in April of a list of moves U-M leaders had agreed to make in coming years.

"The movement created by members of this class using the tagline 'Being Black at U-M' will undoubtedly be remembered for years to come," said Black Celebratory keynoter Evette Hollins, '09, a government relations manager at AT&T. "We can all agree that being black at U-M means dealing with the challenges that come with lifting as we climb."

Left unsaid was the U.S. Supreme Court ruling in a landmark 6-2 decision just weeks earlier on April 22. The Court held that a state has the right to



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prohibit the use of race or ethnicity in admissions and financial aid decisions at its public universities, as Michigan voters did via Proposal 2 in 2006. After years of litigation and campaigns to defend U-M's ability to diversify its student body using a tool that made it significantly easier to do so, the fight was over.

If U-M is going to reverse its decline in underrepresented minorities—primarily blacks, Hispanics, and Native Americans, who are present in higher percentages in the Michigan and U.S. populations than in the U-M student body—administrators will have to find other tools.

THE APRIL AGREEMENT WITH THE BSU, delivered via a joint press release, offers some broad outlines. In it, the administration promised to spend an additional \$300,000 to renovate the Trotter Multicultural Center and to explore moving it onto Central Campus from its current location on Washtenaw Avenue; increase the funds to BSU, which will partner with other groups on campus; develop a pilot plan to improve transportation options for students who live outside Ann Arbor; and provide more funding for students who encounter emergency financial problems. There was also a vow to work with the BSU to increase enrollment of under-represented minorities. Then-BSU secretary Geralyn Gaines stated in the release that these were "only the beginning."

It is, by all accounts, the efforts to improve recruitment of minority students that is the most vexing. Still, Provost Martha Pollack and Regent Mark Bernstein, '93, MBA'96, JD'96, offered outlines of several approaches in separate interviews this summer. Among those approaches are more aggressive outreach to high schools in lower-income areas as well as an effort by admissions officers to admit less affluent students and students who would be the first in their families to go to college.

Tyrell Collier takes a selfie with then-President Mary Sue Coleman at the 17th Annual Black Celebratory ceremony during the 2014 Spring Commencement.

Paige Blessman (background, left) is one of many subjects in "The #BBUM Exhibit," a special photography project by Tyrell Collier depicting black students around campus.

\*Note that the comparison of these percentages is complicated by the fact that students now have the option of declaring two or more races, which wasn't true in 1996 and 1997.

Another idea involves giving favorable weight to extracurricular activities that involve volunteer work in the inner cities.

"We have and will continue to look for diversity in ways that are legal, that are consistent with the law," Pollack says. "So, for example, we work very hard at trying to have more socioeconomic diversity. That isn't a sufficient stand-in for racial diversity, we believe, or ethnic diversity, but it is also an important area."

Sims adds that U-M should broaden its recruiting efforts. "When they send out recruiters to schools to give these presentations to students, they need to go to the more urban areas, to the schools that have one student who comes to this university," she says. "I came from one of the largest high schools in Detroit, Cass Tech. It seemed like Michigan recruiters were there every month. What about other urban schools around Detroit?"

Complicating the University's efforts is the fact that Proposal 2 also prevents the use of race or ethnicity in providing financial aid. So even as Pollack noted that \$1 billion of the \$4 billion being raised in the current U-M capital campaign will be funneled to programs that make college more affordable, it remains difficult to compete for the brightest minority applicants. They are also being wooed by major private universities that have no restrictions on their use of affirmative action tactics.

"What other universities are able to do is target their limited resources in a way we're not able to do, offering full-ride scholarships to certain groups," says Alec Gallimore, associate dean in the College

of Engineering, where 9 percent of the undergraduate class is under-represented minorities. By contrast, Gallimore notes, that figure is at 13 percent for U-M's engineering doctoral program, which provides stipends to all of its PhD students to attend and conduct research.

Bernstein adds, "A qualified African-American student can get into many other schools that can still use affirmative action and can write a check based on race. We cannot compete with that."

In fact, the Alumni Association's LEAD Scholars Program is the only program on the U-M campus that seeks to promote racial and gender equity through consideration of race and gender. (See page 24.)

RACE HAS BEEN A HOT-BUTTON ISSUE AT U-M for generations. The Black Action Movement, or BAM, was a student protest movement in 1970. BAM's demands—a higher percentage of minority students, additional services to help those who do come thrive, and better campus-wide education to improve race relations—were strikingly similar to those of this year's group of activists. There would be two more BAMs, in 1975 and 1987, the last of which yielded a six-point diversity plan that included a bias incident reporting system and direct annual funding for the Black Student Union to distribute to minority groups on campus.

Under President James Duderstadt, who was provost and vice president during BAM III in 1987, U-M became an aggressive proponent of affirmative action—with tangible results. But using race and ethnicity as a factor in admissions and financial aid

Author and award-winning journalist Michele Norris discusses the Race Card Project with students on the Diag in 2013. Norris came to U-M to formally launch the project, which encourages people to submit their own six-word descriptions of race.



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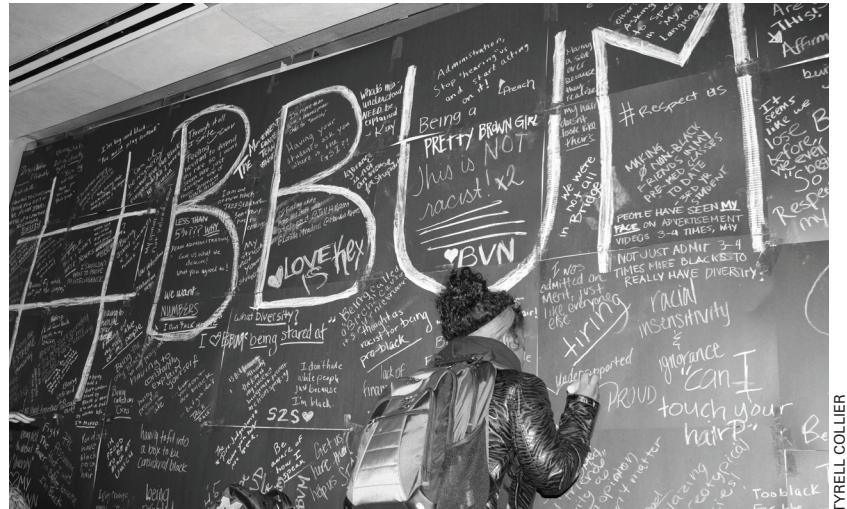
also prompted a backlash that culminated with this year's U.S. Supreme Court ruling.

In 2003, the Court ruled in a pair of lawsuits brought by white applicants to U-M to allow the use of race as a consideration in admissions but to disallow a quota system. That led to Proposal 2, which passed 58-42 percent in the 2006 election and amended the Michigan Constitution to prohibit any preferential treatment to applicants of public universities based on race or ethnicity. It was the effort to reverse that vote that the high court, in Schuette v. Coalition to Defend Affirmative Action, nixed on April 22.

These decisions have frustrated U-M's diversity efforts, Pollack says. According to the 2010 Census, blacks were 14.2 percent of Michigan residents and 12.6 percent of the U.S. population. Yet in 2007, the black student population fell below 7 percent for the first time since 1990 and continued to fall from there. (See page 64 for more information about the history of black enrollment at U-M.) "The numbers haven't budged because it's very, very difficult to work within the constraints of Prop 2," Pollack says. "It's like having your hands tied behind your back. That isn't an excuse; that just means we need to work harder."

RACIAL ISSUES WERE ON MANY U-M MINDS before the events of fall 2013. "Understanding Race" was the theme of the 2012-13 winter semester. For months, the campus was awash in speakers, symposia, special classes, and exhibits intended to promote discussion of the issue. NPR journalist Michele Norris, who is black, visited in March to encourage students to participate in her Race Card Project, in which people write six-word statements on race that appear on her website. More than 20,000 cards were distributed, according to Martha S. Jones, an associate professor of history and Afroamerican and African Studies and a visiting professor of law who serves as co-director of the Law School's Program in Race, Law & History. "We had worked really hard to promote the climate in which race should be talked about, could be talked about," Jones says. "I would not want to take credit for what the students did in the fall, but we were trying to be ready for them."

That may have helped set the table, says senior Arnold Reed, BSU's incoming speaker. But it was the July 2013 acquittal of Florida neighborhood watch volunteer George Zimmerman in the 2012 shooting



To help kick off the #BBUM movement in November, the BSU took over Mason Hall's posting wall, inviting students to share their experiences.

death of unarmed teenager Trayvon Martin that was transformative. The BSU organized a candlelight vigil at the Michigan Union that, despite occurring in the dead of summer, drew hundreds of mourners. "After that, it was nonstop," recalls BSU adviser Elizabeth James, '82, MA'84. "The kids started talking; they started thinking. I do deeply believe that was the point where all of this started to come together."

The BSU developed a plan for the #BBUM hashtag campaign—testimonies from students describing the experience, both positive and negative, of being black at U-M. The plan was for the stories to lay the groundwork for a Martin Luther King, Jr. Day protest and a list of demands.

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Yet in late October, another controversy erupted when the mostly white Theta Xi fraternity advertised a Nov. 7 "Hood Ratchet" party with racially offensive language. The administration canceled the party, and in December the fraternity was sanctioned. But Reed and Sims say the heightened awareness turned a quiet #BBUM launch into an organic online phenomenon. Comments included stories of being the only black person in class and routine encounters with insensitive remarks and ongoing racial profiling.

The attention has prepared Reed, as he returns to campus, to continue to work with the administration, led by incoming President Mark Schlissel. The new president has told anyone who has asked—including representatives of the BSU and other minority student groups in small private meetings—that improving the racial climate and racial composition of the student

The University has made recent changes in the Trotter Multicultural Center, including identifying funding for renovations to the existing center, raising money for a new center, and naming a director to focus on improving programming.

Members of the Black Student Union's 2013-14 executive board:  
*Front row, left to right:*  
Geralyn Gaines, Darrart Ali, Tyrell Collier, Robert Greenfield, Stephon Dorsey  
*Back row:* Andy Alemu, Faith Darnell, Bria Graham, Arnold Reed, Erick Gavin, Caprinara Kendall  
*Not pictured:* Ozi Uduma



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TYRELL COLLIER

body is a top priority. And in a July 14 interview with the University Record, he expressed his admiration for the student demonstrations.

"When that group of students came to the regents' meeting, and sat in the front row with duct tape covering their mouths, and the duct tape said GO BLUE—that really said a tremendous amount to me," Schlissel told the paper. "It said that even students who have issues that they're not happy with, and students who fear their voices aren't being heard, both show their cleverness—by using duct tape—but also their love for the place. I never got a sense that any of the discontent was destructive."

Pollack says that students in every residence hall will, starting this fall, be required to attend Change It Up! workshops. The not-for-credit seminars focus on

how to live in a more diverse environment. "Not just how to put up with diversity and perspective, but actually, to take advantage of that and embrace it."

All of that is welcome, Reed says, but it is just a beginning. During the summer, he "thought about this every single night," determined not to allow the activist momentum to dissipate.

"People are expecting a lot out of us. I'm excited to see what we can do."

For her part, James looks ahead both with optimism and fear of dashed hopes. She has attended every one of the Black Celebratory ceremonies and has seen other moments of promising change arise and then vanish. As she sat on the dais listening to Hollins and Sims speak in May, all she could think of was how small a crowd she saw as compared with the late 1990s. Then, the number of black graduates was several times larger and the school seemed well on its way to meeting its diversity aims.

"For me it's very difficult because I can physically see what's happened," she says. "The students used to fill up the main section of the Power Center. Now they're in just the first four rows. I would expect there would be more by now, not less." **M**

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