About the Commission

The Commission for Blacks (CFB) is a body appointed by the Chancellor to advise on planning, implementation, and evaluation of University programs, policies, and services as they relate to students, faculty, and staff who identify in the Black racial/ethnic group of the Knoxville campus. The group also makes suggestions for new and existing academic and extracurricular programs related to blacks; encourages research to identify the problems and progress of blacks on campus; and encourages black faculty, staff, and student involvement in all aspects of campus life.
This year the Commission for Blacks worked diligently on creating a strategic plan; advising the Chancellor; celebrating faculty and staff; and coordinating an ‘All Commissions’ event.

During the fall, sub-committees worked on identifying other SEC schools that had chief diversity officers; exploring retention of African-Americans at UT; reviewing climate survey data; and other initiatives. We collaborated with the Office of Multicultural Student Life, NACCP, faculty senate, and other areas to provide opportunities to demonstrate belonging and inclusion, including participating in United at the Rock.

We sponsored an end-of-semester 'Meet & Mingle’ to show appreciation to all exempt and non-exempt Black faculty and staff and to assist in creating an environment for faculty, staff, and administrators to engage in dialogue. We also provided leadership for an ‘All Commissions Luncheon.’ It was designed to provide a formal platform to interact and network; share and celebrate the work that has been done to date; and discuss ways that we can collaborate and support each of the commissions.

We are excited about the work that has been done and will continue to work towards advancing diversity and inclusion efforts at UT.
Tyvi Small was named Interim Vice Chancellor for Diversity and Engagement in December 2018. Before that appointment, he served as Executive Director of Talent Management, Diversity, and Community Relations in UT’s Haslam College of Business, where he spent the past 11 years of his career.

During his first semester as Interim Vice Chancellor for Diversity and Engagement, Tyvi has tirelessly met with students, faculty, and staff to assess the campus climate. In this role, Tyvi is dedicated to listening and taking a step back to truly understand the needs surrounding mattering and belonging at UT. It is Tyvi’s goal to focus on infrastructure to incite change and execute the diversity priority of Vol Vision.

The Commission for Blacks, welcome and congratulate Tyvi Small as the Interim Vice Chancellor for Diversity and Engagement!
As my time here at The University of Tennessee comes to an end and I reflect on my past four years, so much has changed. There have been new dorms built, roads reconstructed, an entire new food hall, the revitalization of the engineering department, etc. etc. UT has really gone above and beyond to improve the appearance of the campus. Maybe that was due in part to UT being ranked as one of the “Ugliest campuses” multiple times since 2011.

This negative publicity that stemmed from these subjective lists caused upper administration to invest heavily into construction and landscaping that still continues as I write this op-ed. Now that the strip has finished its construction and most of the main traffic areas have been completed, the campus has most definitely improved aesthetically. However, I still believe that UT should be ranked among the nation’s ugliest campuses due to the disregard and dismissiveness of minority students, our experiences, and letting the public influence the decisions upper administration makes.

Being a PWI in the conservative south, and with the history that accompanies it, UT essentially doesn’t provide an environment that is conducive for Blacks and minorities. I mean, have you seen the yearbook archives? Our experience in America has perpetuated and fostered the current environment of hostility, microaggressions, and subtle racism that is present day America and UT. These folks are now the leaders of companies, or in positions of power in the workforce, and represent the University of Tennessee. Their children may even attend the school now, have joined the same organizations, and have the same beliefs which is apparent in the Blackface scandal that affected everyone on this campus.

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In 2019, we are still facing the exact same issues that existed 50 or 60 years ago. I would act surprised; however, when looking at the political and social climate of America as a whole, I really can’t be, especially with a leader such as 45 evoking hate and giving validity to white supremacist values and ideals.

In my very first Africana Studies class taught by Dr. Joshua Inwood - a thought-provoking, genuine, white professor and scholar that inspired me down this quest to study more about the Black experience - spoke of lynching in America and how they typically occurred when social changes seemed prosperous for Blacks. Lynching was implemented to remind them who was really in control—the white majority. This was the case during Barack Obama’s presidency when Trayvon Martin was slain, and his killer was set free, just reminding us that our lives as Blacks have no value at the end of the day. This led to a splurge of police killings, time and time again, showing Black bodies being murdered and broadcasted all over the world. Yet with impunity, white police officers have never been held accountable for their actions. Once tensions have settled, these same officers are back on the force, to protect and serve... whites from Blacks.

I mention this because once this Blackface incident happened, that was one of the first trends that I noticed. We praised Ovi for being the first minority SGA President, and even his cabinet consisted entirely of students of color. People celebrated and cheered as we believed this was a symbol of change, but quite the opposite instead. And right as my friend and mentor Mr. Tyvi Small was appointed as Interim Vice Chancellor for Diversity and Engagement, this incident occurs and is one of the first things that he has to handle.

Though trivial, this provided another example of a metaphorical lynching. These students are devaluing the Black experience in America, our intelligence and capabilities, showing us that though you may think you’re achieving, it really doesn’t matter because our Blackness disqualifies us from humanity. We as Blacks live on UT’s campus, attend classes, and walk around with a stereotype and belief that we don’t belong, are seen as less intelligent, or only here because of our value to whites, and we feel it. This is evident in group projects when our ideas aren’t listened to or in organizations where we take leadership positions and we receive little to no support to get things accomplished for the greater good.

Now, to address the specifics of the Black community, LOL. With only 6.7% of about 28,000 that’s only 1,876 Black students walking around campus; though Blacks from the age of 18-24 make up about 21.5% of the state’s population. Therefore, in comparison to our state population, Blacks are extremely marginally represented on campus, as faculty, staff, and students. Yet, in spite of our marginalization, there has been little to no unity among the Black population even in the midst of these events. There have been no systemic changes, there is no place where Blacks can just congregate and have a space where our blackness is validated.
Hopelessness ensues. We see the same faces, yet barely know each other. Some folks don’t even hit you with the obligatory head nod. But maybe that’s just my experience.

As one of my peers tweeted following an underwhelming Orange and White experience to say the least, “UTK more cliqued up than high school. It ain’t even enough Black people to be on what y’all be on” and they are completely correct. UT has basically been a racist boarding school. The lack of support within Black communities, the apparent elitism, and the lack of inclusiveness within the Black community if you don’t fit the “stereotypical image” of being Black, you seemingly won’t be accepted; which is essential when you’re in classes where there are only 3 or 4 other Blacks...if that. But what does it mean to be Black? What is the standard of Blackness, and who determines that? And if I didn’t minor in Africana-Studies, I wouldn’t have had a Black Professor; I would’ve thought that all the Black adults only work service level jobs, taking orders and cleaning up.

Maybe that’s just Blacks everywhere. Since we aren’t validated by society, we leave it up to ourselves to make up for it in these other ways, dividing an already small populace to feel better about ourselves because they have this “status” for various reasons. Or maybe we are a product of our environment and because we attend UT and the lack of genuine support for inclusion translates.

All in all, if I could share my experiences and observations to my Senior in high school self, I don’t know if I would’ve attended the University of Tennessee; probably not. Nonetheless, everything happened for a reason, and since I did, I tried to make the absolute best of it. I’ve met some incredible people and formed lifelong relationships. I’ve had experiences that couldn’t have been replicated anywhere else, I even learned how to value my Blackness in an environment that was doing the opposite. I’ve achieved and stepped out of my comfort zone and have grown as a student, a leader, and as a Black man in this whitewashed world.

I feel as though I am so critical of my experience because I know what UT could have been and how UT was. My God-brother graduated in 2010 and was here when “Black UT” was thriving; every time he told stories or showed videos, I had this ‘magical’ image of what UT and college was, and I couldn’t wait to get here. It was only once I got here for good, I saw what I was getting into. But one thing that I have now is hope. The strides that Commission for Blacks, Black Student Union, Tyvi, and others are making to create change with upper administration, the way Greek life is continually getting stronger, the new hires to the admissions office, the beautiful campus and resources that UT has, and the free college that will occur for those who make $50,000 or less. Though skeptical, it allows me to believe that things could actually change here at Rocky Top, and we will be proud to say that it is home sweet home to me.

Now, if we can get more funds allocated to establish a diversity office instead of some statues of this dog across campus, that’d be great.
Recap of CFB Events!

All Commissions Luncheon

Welcome Back Social

Paint the Rock
Commissioner Spotlight

Bertram Welton Pride II is a graduating Senior born and raised in Nashville, TN. Here at the University of Tennessee, Welton is majoring in Marketing with a Collateral in Entrepreneurship and minoring in Africana Studies.

On campus, he is heavily involved with multiple organizations, including the Commission for Blacks and Minority Enhancement for the University of Tennessee (ME4UT). In addition to his involvement, Welton also works with the College of Education as an Art Education Marketing and Promotions Assistant, a Diversity Advancement Program Liaison, Haslam College of Business Ambassador, and the former Vice President of Marketing for Alpha Kappa Psi, Professional Business Fraternity.

Post-graduation, Welton has secured a full-time offer with Louisiana-Pacific in Nashville, TN working with their sales impact program, and eventual marketing and branding strategy.

Dr. Jioni A. Lewis is an Assistant Professor in the department of Psychology at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

Dr. Lewis’s research is broadly focused on the influence of discrimination on mental and physical health outcomes. Specifically, she explores intersecting forms of oppression, racism, sexism, intersectionality, racial and gender identity, stress and coping, and Black women’s health.

Dr. Lewis’ research with Dr. Michelle Christian (UTK Sociology) explored racial experiences with microaggressions at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. The research that Dr. Lewis provided supplemented findings in the My Campus Experiences Survey specifically regarding data for mattering and belong as well as faculty and staff of color outreach.
Kandice Duncan has made it her mission to help underrepresented students settle in on campus and find success. As the chair of the Multicultural Mentoring Program and a student assistant in the Office of Multicultural Student Life, Duncan has mentored first-year students in their transition to college and provided both professional and academic support to students. “She is what every mentor strives to be,” a staff member wrote. “She is compassionate, studious, driven, and empathetic.” Duncan has also taken her passion for helping underrepresented populations into the larger community by volunteering as a Building Blocks mentor for youth and a Girl Talk mentor for young women. Through both organizations, she is helping to empower youth to become the best versions of themselves and advance both socially and through education. A senior majoring in kinesiology with a minor in public health, Duncan plans to pursue a master’s degree in health administration.

Since arriving at UT in 1982, Dr. Carolyn Hodges, a professor of German, has time and again proven her commitment and dedication to UT. After serving as vice provost and dean of the Graduate School, Hodges became chair of the Africana Studies program in 2016. The program now has more than 100 majors and minors, and the graduate certificate program is attracting talented PhD candidates. She helped get approval to hire additional tenure-line joint faculty and lecturers, infusing new life into the department and adding diverse personnel to the university’s ranks. Hodges has supported faculty members’ outreach endeavors and approved experiential learning as a component of faculty-led summer study abroad programs to Senegal and South Africa. Hodges’s own academic interests are in Afro-German literature and legacy, and under her guidance the Africana Studies program has expanded its perception of Africa and its diaspora by becoming more globally inclusive.

As director of the Office of Multicultural Student Life, Tanisha Jenkins has advanced Rocky Top’s understanding of and appreciation for multiculturalism, equity, and inclusion. She uses her position to foster collaborations between student organizations that might not otherwise connect. For instance, when white supremacists arranged to speak on campus, causing concern and even terror for many students, Jenkins worked with leaders of the Student Political Alliance, the NAACP, the Multicultural Mentoring Program, and the Student Government Association to produce an alternate event, United in Love, where students could feel safe and supported. Jenkins, who is also a doctoral candidate in educational leadership and policy studies, has been active on the Student Life Diversity Committee and the Chancellor’s Council for Diversity and Interculturalism. She was recognized in 2018 among Knoxville’s Top 40 Under 40 Influencers and Innovators.
It's been a pleasure serving you. Thanks for an amazing year!