

THE DAILY COUGAR



A group of racially diverse students marched to President Hoffman's office on March 7, 1969. Their banner reads "Fight Racism - Support the Black Demands."

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Afro-Americans for Black Liberation and the Fight for Civil Rights at the University of Houston

By Robinson Block

The University of Houston (UH) is celebrated today as one of the most diverse research institutions in the nation. It also has one of the oldest African American Studies programs in the country. Located at the edge of the predominantly African American Third Ward, the university's student body today is thirteen percent African American and more than fifty percent students of color. The transition that UH has made from its foundation as an exclusively white university, to becoming a diverse school with ethnic studies programs, owes a great deal of credit to the trailblazing work of the Afro-Americans for Black Liberation student organization. Known as AABL (pronounced "able"), this group of students created and organized around a list of grievances in the spring of 1969 that led to rapid and profound changes for students of color at UH.¹

Initially, black students had a hard time at UH where they

remained a small minority throughout the 1960s. Although classes had become integrated, most student groups remained segregated, and few restaurants would seat black students. Quality student housing near campus was also very difficult to find. By the late sixties, black students began staging sit-ins against segregation at Woolworth's lunch counters in Houston.

Several national social movements of the late 1960s influenced the events at UH. The civil rights movement had mobilized youth from the North and South to oppose Jim Crow, and the Black Power movement was growing. These movements had taken root in Houston as well, and conflicts inevitably followed. Students at TSU supported Friends of SNCC. In 1967, the Houston Police Department raided the campus, culminating in the arrest of the "TSU Five," only after a fire in which a police officer was killed, most likely by a fellow police officer's

bullet. In 1968, black student activist Lee Otis Johnson was railroaded into prison, sentenced to thirty years for handing a marijuana cigarette to an undercover police officer.

Other social movements gained ground at UH, lending their support to AABL, including a chapter of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), which was extremely radical in 1969. The Mexican American Youth Organization and the League of Mexican American Students supported AABL's goals, specifically the creation of ethnic studies programs. Some voiced fears, however, that if African American students won black faculty or an African American studies program, Mexican American students might lose hope for similar advancement.²

AABL was founded initially as the Committee on Better Race Relations (COBRR) in spring 1967. Following a visit by Stokely Carmichael in 1968, COBRR changed its name to Afro-Americans for Black Liberation to reflect a changing consciousness, an acceptance of Black Power politics, and participation in the national and international struggle of African and other oppressed peoples for human rights, economic rights, and self-determination.³ AABL bridged the gap between the civil rights movement and black liberation and, in fact, maintained strong ties to established civil rights organizations in Houston and Texas.

AABL was active as a social as well as a political organization. AABL fielded an intramural football team, created and raised money for a scholarship for black students in honor of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and tutored youth in Houston's Third Ward. The unlikely election victory of AABL leader Lynn Eusan as the first African American homecoming queen at UH in 1968 put the group on the map. Eusan and other contemporary accounts concluded that many whites voted for her in order to counter the ascendancy and exclusivity of the white Greek system, and that their success was the start of AABL activities in other areas of student life.⁴ Eusan made national news, was featured in *Ebony* magazine and several newspapers, and earned AABL a good deal of respect from the black community in Houston.

The endeavor that caused the biggest stir and has left AABL's greatest legacy came out of the creation of a list of demands they devised and, flanked by seventy-five student supporters, presented to UH President Philip Hoffman on February 7, 1969.

Ester King, a student at Texas Southern University, worked closely with the leadership of AABL. He explains their twofold strategy: "Certainly you wanted to get to a point where you could get those demands met, which was gonna take some negotiation . . . but the primary reason for all that was to heighten awareness to create tension on the campuses to get attention of other students."⁵

AABL saw the university as reluctant to take action to eliminate racism or modify policies that had negative social impacts on black students. "Through our eyepiece, we see the university imitating the racist society at large, Black students are the victims of 'refined racism.' Plainly stated, we feel that the University of Houston is a White Anglo-Saxon Protestant institution. . . . We as Black people struggling for survival in a racist country must exercise control over political, economic, social, spiritual, and physical aspects of our lives."⁶

AABL demanded that the university create a Department of Afro-American Studies, hire more black university faculty and staff, recruit and admit more black students, and provide expanded financial aid and adequate housing for black students, improve conditions for black athletes, tackle racist practices in grading and instruction, establish a Black Student Union, award credit for black students doing community work, and raise the wage scale of the school's service workers.⁷

President Hoffman took these demands seriously. His files show that the day after receiving AABL's demands, the vice president of staff services responded with a written appraisal of the costs involved in raising the wages of service workers on campus. Staff services supported some raises but calculated that it would cost more than \$100,000 to raise the wages of all employees to \$2.00 per hour.

President Hoffman facilitated a good deal of research about AABL's demands, and issued a point-by-point reply on February 14, 1969.⁸ He read the document in its entirety at a meeting of AABL and then left the meeting without taking any questions. The statement struck a very conciliatory tone. Hoffman answered "no" to only a couple of the demands: the creation of a university funded Black Student Union, under the justification that the only government funded student organization was the existing Student Association; and a minimum admission percentage for black students or a designation of



Lynn Eusan was elected the first African American homecoming queen at the historically white University of Houston on November 23, 1968. The Cougars celebrated by defeating Tulsa 100-6.

financial aid resources exclusively for black students, based on a rejection of any type of quota system.

At the same time, Hoffman did not answer “yes” to any of the demands. Hoffman offered to create a task force of students, faculty, and administrators to review several grievances, including the creation of an Afro-American Studies Department, and the predicament of black athletes. He proposed that many of the demands put forth in the AABL list could be dealt with by existing or newly created institutions and bureaucracies. For example, the newly formed University Student Assistance Committee could handle faculty grading practices. Also, Hoffman agreed to ask the University Council and Academic Deans to secure more minority faculty.

Hoffman also announced plans to take action on some of the points, including filing a complaint with the Federal Housing Authority over the racist practices of landlords of properties near the university, the creation of a recruitment committee, publication of promotional materials to distribute to high schools that discuss financial aid, and possibly modifying admission criteria with the goal of accepting more black students to UH. The president of UH also supported the creation of a program to give credit to students who do work in the black “ghetto” community.

President Hoffman found himself in the delicate position of trying to resolve the demands of black students on his campus with the concerns of many faculty and alumni who remained hostile to AABL and other Black Power movements of the times. Hoffman’s archive contains correspondence from

numerous people, some alumni, some seemingly completely unconnected to Houston in any way, who encouraged him not to surrender to the demands of “communist” and “negro” students. In particular, letters expressing concern from executive officers at the Continental Carbon Company, a continuing donor of funds to the university, must have given Hoffman pause.⁹

The student government system at UH had to address AABL’s political demands and mobilizations, particularly as student elections happened at the same time. Independent John Sayer, campaigning for president, supported AABL and attended their demonstrations. His opponent, Bob Ulmer of the Representative Government Party, advocated “law and order,” and Ulmer’s election signs contained slogans such as “VOTE for RESPONSIBILITY and against DISRUPTION” with images of confrontations between police and students at other universities. Sayer, who ended up losing the election, wrote a letter to the editor of the *Daily Cougar* on March 20, 1969, explaining his position: “You who criticize so loudly should remember that the black people on this campus have been asking quietly through the regular channels for a long time, but they never got attention until they made a ‘demand.’”¹⁰

Other white students and white organizations supported AABL’s demands. In a period of four hours, a group called Students for the Eradication of Racial Injustice gathered 350 signatures of white students, and then delivered the petition to the Board of Regents, city officials, and local media.¹¹

The campaign gained a new urgency and visibility as tensions at UH exploded on March 17, 1969. When Gene Locke arrived on campus that morning, three white students attacked him. By one o’clock, students rallied to protest the attack and marched to the UH Safety and Security Office to demand immediate action. According to the university’s press release: “At approximately 1:40 p.m. some of the students, both white and black (estimates vary from twenty-five to forty) left the Safety and Security Office and went to the Cougar Den where a disruption took place. The students overturned tables and chairs, broke dishes, destroyed food, and broke out four glass windows. Upon dispersing from the Den at the urging of Gene Locke and Dwight Allen, a smaller number (ten to twelve) broke into the bookstore and damaged property. No one was seriously injured in the incidents and the extent of property damaged was estimated at \$2,000.”¹²

In the weeks following, the police failed to find the men who assaulted Locke. The students involved in the resulting unrest expected to face charges at the University Student Court, as prescribed by the Student Life Policy. Instead, on April 7, 1969, arrest warrants were issued for twelve UH students and three non-students at the request of the Harris County District Attorney, charging them with crimes relating to the property damage in the University Center. The students—including Gene Locke, Dwight Allen, Deloyd Parker, TSU student Ester King, and Doug Bernhardt, a white UH student and member of SDS—became known as the UH Fourteen. (The numerical discrepancy between those initially arrested and those facing charges is never made clear.)

AABL and their allies regarded the cooperation between UH administrators and the district attorney’s office as a violation of trust between the university and the student activists. Dwight Allen spoke to the *Daily Cougar* about the charges, “Dean Yardley told Gene Locke and myself that the matter would be



A police officer stands in the UH bookstore after the March 17, 1969 disturbance.

within the confines of the university, and Dr. Hoffman sat right across the table from Yardley and agreed.”¹³

President Hoffman must have felt considerable pressure to circumvent the Student Court. The March 17, 1969, events had been reported in the *Houston Post*, which drew much attention from conservative alumni and citizens, many of whom wrote to Hoffman to encourage him to take harsh disciplinary action against the students. The conservative student organization Young American Independents boasted of delivering a petition of over 2,000 signatures the day after the “mini-riot,” in “support of non-disruption on campus” and demanding “to prosecute those rioters or disrupters to the full extent of the law and to cooperate fully with all police authorities.”¹⁴

Although it was common practice across the country for the justice system to obstruct the activities of social movements by entangling its leaders in the court system, AABL used the charges against the UH Fourteen as a platform to campaign both for their acquittal and to continue building momentum for their demands on the university. AABL and its allies on campus formed a “Majority Coalition,” which hosted rallies and facilitated other events. Previously hostile Student Government president Bob Ulmer spoke at a rally April 23, 1969, to condemn the lack of transparency



Student Leader Gene Locke prepares for a May 18, 1969 rally.

in administration-student relations. In the community, AABL earned significant public support from the civil rights movement. On May 18, AABL held a rally in Emancipation Park in support of the UH Fourteen with speakers from the NAACP, Hope Development, and several black churches.¹⁵

Harris County D.A., Carol Vance, took the prosecutions of black activists very seriously: he personally prosecuted Charles Freeman of the TSU Five (charges were dismissed following a hung jury) and went on to prosecute Gene Locke and Dwight Allen (also failing to convict them). Eventually the D.A. accepted plea bargains and dropped charges against the other defendants.¹⁶

Through editorial and news coverage, the *Daily Cougar* proved to be one of the most insightful places to see multiple perspectives on the struggle over AABL’s demands. The student paper published letters to the editor from white students both supporting and critical of AABL. Overall, the editorial content of the *Cougar* remained supportive. For example, columnist Tim Fleck, an Anglo who wrote “The Grapevine” column, concluded that AABL’s demands “represent a sane, logical step towards an escape from the vicious race cycle so easily observable within our own little pearl of a city.”¹⁷ The *Cougar* also gave Dwight Allen a weekly column called “The Black Perspective,” which Allen used to explain AABL positions and discuss other issues on campus.

The *Daily Cougar*’s news coverage frequently covered AABL press conferences and protests—generally in a neutral or positive light. At the same time, some provocative editorial choices were made, including The *Cougar*’s February 18, 1969, report focused on Dwight Allen’s statement at a student rally: “You white students had better wake up. If we can’t have our black studies, you can’t have your white studies.”



A group of protestors gather outside the courthouse downtown in opposition to the arrest of the TSU Five.

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.



Dwight Allen addresses a crowd in front of the University Center on February 17, 1969.

The brisk pace of events at UH in spring 1969 may be seen as a result of the university's eagerness to defuse any possibility for campus unrest. In comparison to other public universities in the South, the university's willingness to enter negotiations and make changes can now be viewed as quite progressive. President Hoffman seems to have had sympathetic attitudes on racial justice, but he made it clear that he regarded preservation of "law and order" as a vital responsibility of his office. No doubt university administrators hoped to avoid a scenario like the 1967 police raid on TSU. Nevertheless, AABL leaders considered the institutional and bureaucratic responses too slow. They worried that the university might adopt the tactics used by other universities to stall until the end of a semester or the summer, when students would leave campus and then would have to struggle to resume their momentum the following academic year.

AABL continued to hold small "rap sessions" and informational events for students of all races almost daily throughout March, as well as press conferences and appearances on radio programs. On March 6, 1969, one of the task forces created in response to the AABL demands recommended the creation of an Afro-American Studies Program by the start of the summer term. On March 7, AABL and allies held a rally of 600 students, followed by a march of around 200 to the Cullen Building. By March 27, just ten days after the "mini-riot" and less than two months after AABL first delivered their demands, Douglas MacLean, vice president of staff services, released a sixteen-page report on the status of negotiations between the university and AABL. This document addressed each of AABL's ten demands, presented commentary on AABL reasons, and spelled out the university's initial response as well as actions taken.¹⁸

The creation of the African American Studies Program became the most visible and transformative response to the AABL agitations. A task force to consider the program included students like Gene Locke and two other AABL members, faculty, and Chester Bratton, the assistant dean of students, and one of the first African American administrators at UH, who enjoyed


a good working relationship with AABL. They called for the creation of a degree-granting department. A second task force with more faculty and fewer students announced in April a few of the course offerings: Afro-American history, Afro-American literature, as well as Afro-American culture.¹⁹

In May, President Hoffman announced the appointment of white history professor Robert Haynes as acting director of the new Afro-American Studies Program. Over the summer, Haynes stated the objectives of the program: to instill the concept of black awareness and identity as well as a community orientation. The program grew so rapidly that Haynes was later quoted as saying "that pamphlets listing the courses to be offered are almost outdated by the time they come from the printer."²⁰

Although it has never gained the status of a degree-granting department, the African American Studies Program still operates on the UH campus, as does the Center for Mexican American Studies, which was established in 1972. These programs represent important examples of the university's response to student demands for educational programs to meet their needs. AABL's leadership regarded this as the most significant victory of their campaign.

During the next school year, much of the leadership of AABL moved off of the UH campus and allowed for a new generation of black student leadership to emerge. Dwight Allen told the *Daily Cougar*, "We concluded that the black community is of primary importance and that UH should serve as a base for recruiting black students to return to their communities."²¹ They went on to build political support and raise funds for the UH Fourteen, and established service programs in the black community, primarily in Third Ward, including athletics programs for youth and black history classes. Later, AABL went on to support national liberation struggles in southern Africa, to promote the SHAPE community center, to support HOPE Development, and to campaign on behalf of blacks running for political office.

AABL's struggles at UH and in the Houston community have fundamentally transformed UH as an institution and the City of Houston as a whole. AABL alumni have gone on to participate in a variety of social movements and institutions. Gene Locke ran for mayor of Houston in 2009, and lost by a small margin to Annise Parker in a run-off election. His fellow AABL alumni continue to do progressive political work on a grassroots level: Deloyd Parker is the director of the SHAPE Community Center, which has operated for more than forty-five years and continues to offer service programs to the community of Third Ward, and Ester King continues as an activist for progressive causes.

AABL's work helped UH to evolve from a white institution to one that embraces diversity, and now celebrates itself as one of the most diverse research universities in the country. Today, students at the university continue to want their voices heard and to make changes to curriculum, to administrative policy, and to conditions for workers and students. Afro-Americans for Black Liberation built a strong foundation for later generations who would desire to further transform the University of Houston. 

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