

Ultimatum on King Day

U. of Michigan administrators pledge to do more for African-American students, who took to Twitter last semester with grievances. Black Student Union responds by giving institution 7 days to meet demands or face "physical" activism.

By [Scott Jaschik](#) // January 21, 2014

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Last semester's [#BBUM Twitter protest \(https://twitter.com/search?q=%23BBUM&src=typd\)](#) attracted nationwide attention, as students used the hashtag to describe their frustrations with "being black at the University of Michigan." Students described hostile or ignorant comments as everyday events in their lives, along with the reality that their numbers are small (not even 5 percent of the university's enrollment, though the state has a black population of more than 14 percent).

The Twitter protest spread to other universities in the state, and Michigan officials said that they were "listening" and concerned. Last week, Provost Martha E. Pollack cited the #BBUM movement as a catalyst for [a series of new efforts \(http://record.umich.edu/articles/provost-affirms-u-m-commitment-diversity-and-inclusion\)](#) to expand black enrollment and to address other grievances raised by black students, such as concerns over the physical state and location of a multicultural center that is distant from central campus and in need of repairs.

But on Monday, the Martin Luther King holiday, the Black Student Union at Michigan announced that those efforts were not sufficient. It said that it was giving the university seven days to comply with seven demands or it it would consider "physical" forms of activism. (The transcript released by the students used the phrase "physical activism," but local news outlets reported -- and YouTube video appears to confirm -- that the phrase "physical action" was used, though not defined, at the rally.)

Via email, Robert Greenfield, treasurer of the Black Student Union, said that physical did not mean violent, and that any protests would be "peaceful." But he said that they would be "visible" and go beyond the speeches of Monday's event in an "innovative" way. Via email he said: "Legality and inconvenience have a large gap in between and are strictly defined. We do not want to threaten anyone's safety."

While Pollack and others have pledged to do more to attract black students to the university, they have not embraced a number of the students' demands. Among them "race/ethnicity requirements" in all colleges and units of the university, "emergency scholarships for black students in need of financial support to eliminate the mental anxiety of not being able to focus on and afford the university's academic life," and an increase in black

Michigan operates under a voter-approved provision in the state constitution that bars the university from considering race and ethnicity in admissions or most other decisions. Michigan officials have repeatedly said that they must act only "to the fullest extent permitted by law" (in words Pollack used last week).

But the statement issued by the Black Student Union said that statements to date don't go far enough. "We ask the university to understand that we are prepared to do what is necessary at any given moment if these demands are not met," the statement said.

Greenfield, asked if there were legal limits to what the university could do to attract more black students, said that "the movement has identified trends that indicate that the minority communities here at the university are decreasing (all except Asian)."

A university spokeswoman declined to comment on the students' demands.



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