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Charting Our Path: Celebrating 50 Years of Black Studies

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CHARTING OUR PATH

CELEBRATING 50 YEARS OF BLACK STUDIES



Courtesy of the Omaha World-Herald, November 12, 1969, Student Unrest Collection, UNO Libraries' Archives and Special Collections, University of Nebraska at Omaha.

“Charting Our Path: Celebrating 50 Years of Black Studies” celebrates the 50th anniversary of the University of Nebraska at Omaha’s Department of Black Studies. Created through student activism and community involvement, and encountering periods of challenges, UNO’s Department of Black Studies remains one of the oldest Black Studies departments in the country. This traveling exhibit highlights important moments in the department’s history including its origins in the 1960s, institutional conflict, and triumphs of a thriving department.

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repositories such as archives, libraries, and museums are not neutral spaces and should not be considered unbiased authorities of historical data.

“Charting Our Path: Celebrating 50 Years of Black Studies” is part of a cooperative project of the UNO Libraries and the Department of Black Studies. Support has been provided by UNO’s Strategic Investment in Social Justice, Inequality, Race, and Class initiative, UNO Libraries, and the Department of Black Studies. This exhibit is funded in part by Humanities Nebraska and the Nebraska Cultural Endowment.

This traveling exhibit was curated by Claire Du Laney, UNO Libraries’ Outreach Archivist, and researched in part by Paul Jensen, UNO Libraries’ student worker.



CHARTING OUR PATH

CELEBRATING 50 YEARS OF BLACK STUDIES

On November 10, 1969, students known as “The Omaha 54” held a peaceful protest in the office of UNO President Kirk Naylor. The students were arrested and charged with unlawful assembly.

Omaha’s Black community supported the students, bailed them out of jail, and engaged in the ongoing fight for Black Studies courses at UNO.

The Department of Black Studies at the University of Nebraska at Omaha is a direct legacy of this activism and sacrifice. It remains one of the oldest Black Studies departments in the country.

THE OMAHA 54

| | |
|------------------|----------------------|
| Palmer Anderson | Richard Lee |
| Wilbur Bailey | Vincent Mallory |
| William Batts | Michael Maroney |
| Michael Blackson | James Massey |
| Michael Brown | Labeta McCloud |
| Barbara Brown | Harry McGuire |
| Geri Brown | Simon Mosley |
| Preston Bush | Catherine Pope |
| Wanda Burton | Johnnie Poule, Jr. |
| Johnny Butler | Douglas Powell |
| Marvin Dailey | Carl Robinson |
| Ron Estes | Terry Rose |
| Jesse Everett | Jennifer Scott |
| Howard Farrell | Carl Sullivan |
| Haidee Foust | William Teabout |
| Warren Green | Howard Tucker |
| Aaron Hall | Paul Tucker |
| Clarence Hall | Rodger Ulmar |
| Maryl Harris | William Walker |
| Karen Hayes | Vicky Webb |
| Thomas Hendrick | Marla West |
| Robert Honore | Grant West |
| Terese Hudgins | Constance White |
| Ronald Jackson | Gary Williams |
| Carey Johnson | LaVell Williams, Sr. |
| Joseph Johnson | Thomas Wright |
| Jesse Kendle | Daniel Yancy |

CHARTING OUR PATH

CELEBRATING 50 YEARS OF BLACK STUDIES

President Naylor gives statement to UNO students



Courtesy of the Omaha World-Herald, November 13, 1969, Student Unrest Collection, UNO Libraries' Archives and Special Collections, University of Nebraska at Omaha.

Black Studies was rooted in activism as students voiced concerns about the unfair treatment of Black students, faculty, and staff, and the dearth of courses that focused on Black history and culture. These concerns were largely ignored. On November 10, 1969, some of UNO's Black students, including members of the student group Black Liberators for Action on Campus (BLAC), peacefully protested in the office of President Kirk Naylor. The students, known as the Omaha

54, were arrested. They were bailed out by Black community members and organizations, including the NAACP, the Urban League, Wesley House, Ernie Chambers, and others.

This sit-in was part of a larger national demonstration of campus unrest, encompassing activism from San Francisco State University to Cornell University. It sparked conversations and heated debates about what Black Studies should, and could, encompass on college campuses.

CHARTING OUR PATH

CELEBRATING 50 YEARS OF BLACK STUDIES

BLACK STUDENTS DEMAND FOR ACTION

TO: DOCTOR NAYLOR, PRESIDENT, UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA AT OMAHA
FROM: THE MEMBERSHIP OF BLACK STUDENTS FOR ACTION ON CAMPUS

WHEREAS, BLACK STUDENTS AT UNO ARE APPALLED BY THE CONTEMPTIBLE ATTITUDE EXHIBITED BY KEY ADMINISTRATIVE PERSONNEL WITH THEIR PATRONIZING SMILES AND NEGATIVE ATTITUDES TOWARD JUSTIFIED BLACK STUDENT REQUESTS; AND.....

WHEREAS, BLACK STUDENTS HAVE EXPERIENCED THIS CONSIDERABLE ANGUISH IN THEIR THWARTED ATTEMPTS TO FUNCTION WITHIN THE CONFINES OF ESTABLISHED POLICY AND RULES IN DEALINGS WITH ADMINISTRATIVE PERSONNEL; AND. . .

WHEREAS, BLACK STUDENTS ARE PRUSTRATED TO THE POINT OF OUTRAGE BY THE GROSS INCOMPETENCE AND MERCENARY INSENSITIVITY DEMONSTRATED BY THE DIRECTOR OF STUDENT ACTIVITIES AND HIS STAFF WHEN THEY MOST RECENTLY FUMBLERD THE HANDLING OF BLACK'S SOCIAL FUNCTION, THUS CULMINATING A RISING TIDE OF BLACK STUDENTS RESENTMENT IN A UNIFIED DEMAND FOR ACTION; THEREFORE, BE IT. . .

HEREBY, RESOLVED THAT BLACK STUDENTS JOIN TOGETHER IN ARTICULATING THEIR COMMON DISSATISFACTIONS WITH THE ATTITUDES AND ACTIONS OF THE ADMINISTRATION; AND BE IT. . .

HEREBY, FURTHER RESOLVED THAT THESE COMMON GRIEVANCES BE ENUMERATED IN PART AS A LIST OF MINIMUM DEMANDS AND PRESENTED TO THE PRESIDENT OF THIS UNIVERSITY FOR HIS IMMEDIATE ACTION; AND BE IT. . .

HEREBY, FURTHER RESOLVED THAT A REFUSAL ON THE PART OF THE PRESIDENT TO ACT WILL BE MET WITH:

1. A BLACK STUDENT BOYCOTT OF ALL UNIVERSITY FUNCTIONS.
2. A DEMAND FOR THE WITH-HOLDING OF ALL FEDERAL AND STATE FUNDS UNTIL AFTER AN INVESTIGATION OF DISCRIMINATORY PRACTICES IN HIRING AND A CLOSE REVIEW OF THE FUND PROGRAMMING SO CALLED BLACK STUDIES PROGRAM.
3. A REQUEST THAT THE MILITARY REVIEW ITS APPROVAL OF THIS SCHOOL FOR THE BOOTSTRAP PROGRAM IN ABSENCE OF PROPER PROGRAMMING.

ON NOVEMBER THE 5TH, 1969, THE MEMBERSHIP DOES UNANANOUSLY SO RESOLVE.

Robert N. Honore
ROBERT N. HONORE,
PRESIDENT

Harry M. Moore
HARRY MOORE,
VICE PRESIDENT

MARLA WEST,
SECRETARY

Jessie S. Huggins
JESSIE S. HUGGINS,
CORRESPONDANT

JENNIFER SCOTT, TREASURER



"Black Students Demand for Action." November 5, 1969, Student Unrest Collection, UNO Libraries' Archives and Special Collections, University of Nebraska at Omaha.

Courtesy of the Omaha World-Herald, November 12, 1969, Student Unrest Collection, UNO Libraries' Archives and Special Collections, University of Nebraska at Omaha.

UN-O 54
Found Guilty
(UNO) BLAC

Municipal Court Judge Walter Cropper, in a non-jury court, found all of the Black students who sat-in at the office of UN-O president Kirk Naylor last November 10th, guilty.

Cropper, who had intended to fine all the students, compromised by fining Robert Honore, group spokesman, \$50; while Carl Sullivan, a participant in the sit-in was fined \$15. Martin Cannon, Defense attorney, argued that if all students were fined, each would have to enter an appeal which would have cost over \$5,000.

The compromise will make appeal less costly while providing for a test of the 1969 Legislature's anti-riot law under which the group was charged. Cropper agreed to six months probation for the other 51 students. He noted that successful completion of probation terms would allow the court to remove their convictions from the record.

The appeal by Honore and Sullivan to the next higher court would also remove the conviction as well as the fine and probation if they are successful in presenting their case before a jury trial on appeal.

Omaha Star
June 4, 1970

Courtesy of the Omaha Star, "UN-O 54 Found Guilty." June 4, 1970, Student Unrest Collection, UNO Libraries' Archives and Special Collections, University of Nebraska at Omaha.

Nov 21, 1969
600 S 76th
Omaha

Dear Dr. Naylor,
I wish to thank you for the privilege of attending the football game.
My husband and I had a most pleasant afternoon on campus.
We would like to commend you for your stand and the recent courtesies at the University, and for the manner in which it was done.
Thank you again,
Ms. Carol Cook

Lincoln, Nebraska,
11/29/69.

Heartyly approve your action and hope you will remain firm.

We want the University conducted by its administrators and not by a group of negroes.

Swift and permanent expulsion should be the answer to such tactics.
Nebraska Tappan

University of Nebraska at Omaha
NOV 23 1969

November 24, 1969

Dear Sirs:
Congratulations. Omahans at large support you in your stand against lawlessness and for setting an example of high standards and peaceful assembly at U.N.O.
These student actions will not stop until college presidents demand civility.

Judith Lang
2121 So. 34th St
Omaha, Nebr. 68105

5120 Hamilton St.,
Omaha, Nebraska,
November 18, 1969.

My dear Dr. Naylor:

This is a long over-due note to tell you that I commend you for your stand during and after the recent "confrontation" at Omaha U. - am glad that both the university regents, and your own faculty are also seconding your efforts.

Granted that the students should have some voice in college procedure, it is ridiculous for them to have the final say in all matters. If they know that much, they do not need college at all. It is the arrogance of many of the young that is so hard to take, and the fact that, instead of making requests, they make demands.

Again, thank you for saying and doing what many of us in the "silent majority" feel is right. I think there are signs that the silence is being broken.

Please remember me to Mrs. Naylor, whom I know thru AAUW and other groups. And do forgive my poor typing.

Sincerely yours,
Hope D. (Mrs. M.J.) Hewitt

NOV 20 1969

"UNO 54" BLAC (Black Liberators for Action on Campus) Sit-In Related Documents, 1969-1970, scrapbook, Kirk Naylor Papers, UNO Libraries' Archives and Special Collections, University of Nebraska at Omaha.

Images reproduced here are from the UNO Libraries' Archives and Special Collections. The petition from BLAC made clear the demands presented to Naylor.

Newspaper photos and headlines chronicles the sit-in, arrests, and trial while the scrapbook shows materials gathered by Naylor and his office about the events.



KIRK NAYLOR PAPERS



STUDENT UNREST COLLECTION

I experienced some difficulty trying to scan these codes. A cellphone camera doesn't allow the user to select a specific code if it can see multiple at the same time.

I'd recommend either showing only one code on this banner, or putting them on opposite edges of the banner to make scanning them easier. Also suggest to label all QR codes with their destinations.

CHARTING OUR PATH

CELEBRATING 50 YEARS OF BLACK STUDIES



Dean William Gaines, Black Studies Chair Melvin Wade, and Dean John Blackwell. Tomahawk, Winter 1970-1971, UNO Yearbook Collection, UNO Libraries' Archives and Special Collections, University of Nebraska at Omaha.

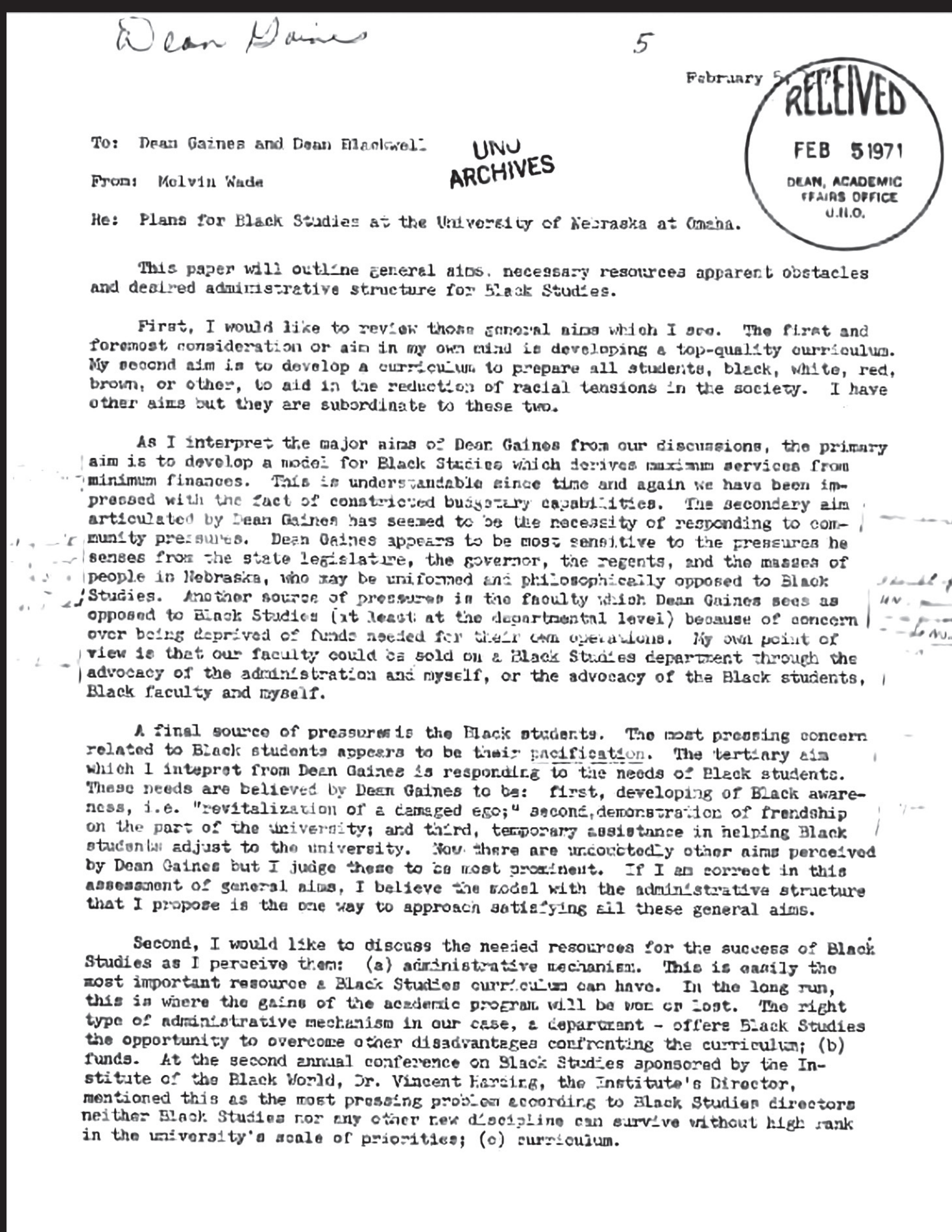
Milton White, Chair of the Black Studies department, The Gateway, Vol. 71, No. 24, November 19, 1971, UNO Libraries' Archives and Special Collections, University of Nebraska at Omaha.

The first years of Black Studies were overshadowed by curriculum debates, budget tension, and conflict over administrative support. During the first two years, communication broke down between the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, the Dean of Academic Affairs, and the Black Studies department chairs. Allegations were made that other college units refused to cross-list Black Studies classes and that space and personnel were intentionally denied to the department.

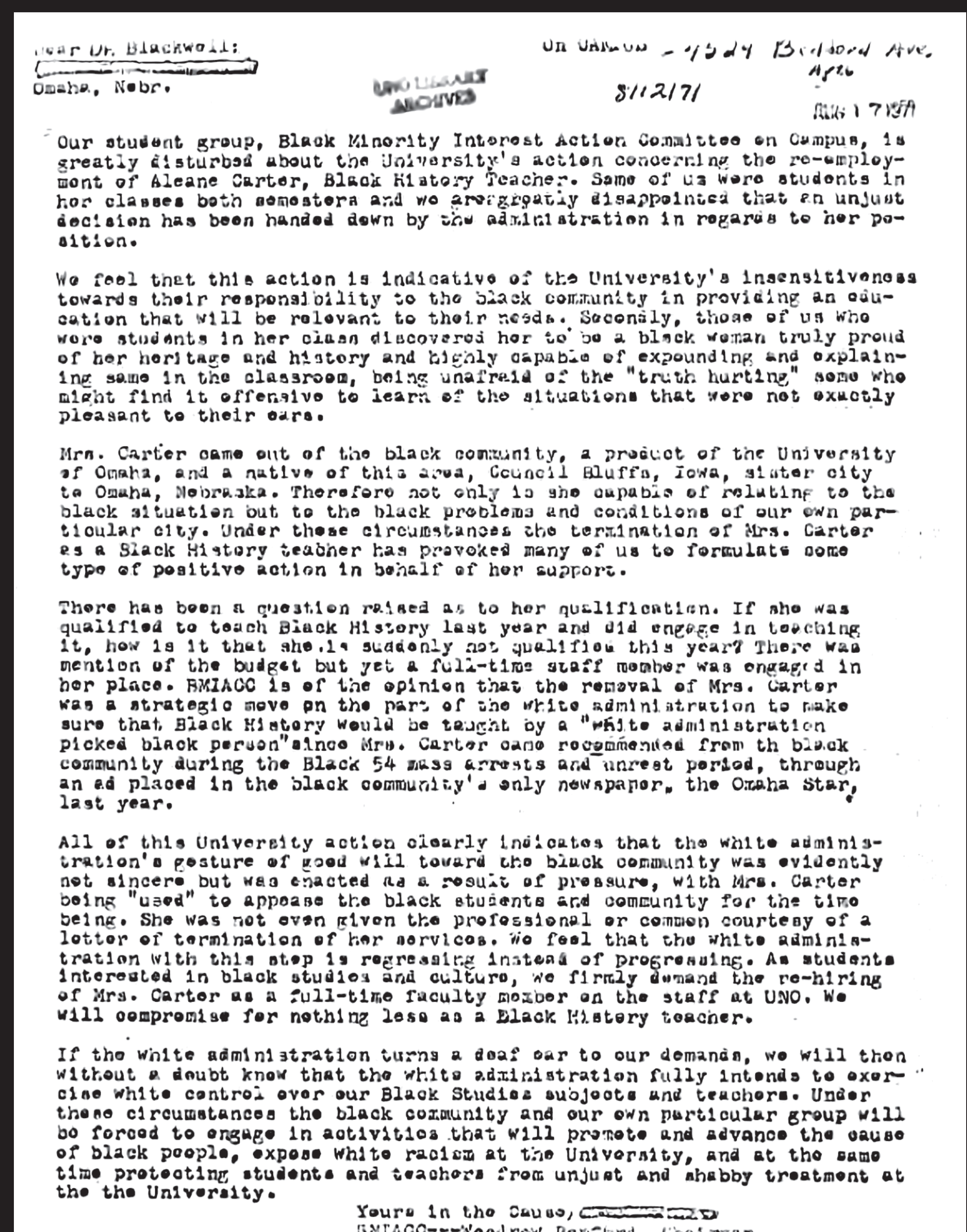
Things reached a crisis point in 1972 when Black Studies chair Milton White accused Dean William Gaines of Academic Affairs of racist and paternalistic practices. An investigation was called for, and a one-man fact-finding mission was authorized. The People's Regent, a community and student activist group, became involved when the calls for a committee, instead of a single person, to investigate White's allegations went unheeded. Gaines was acquitted and White left UNO shortly after.

CHARTING OUR PATH

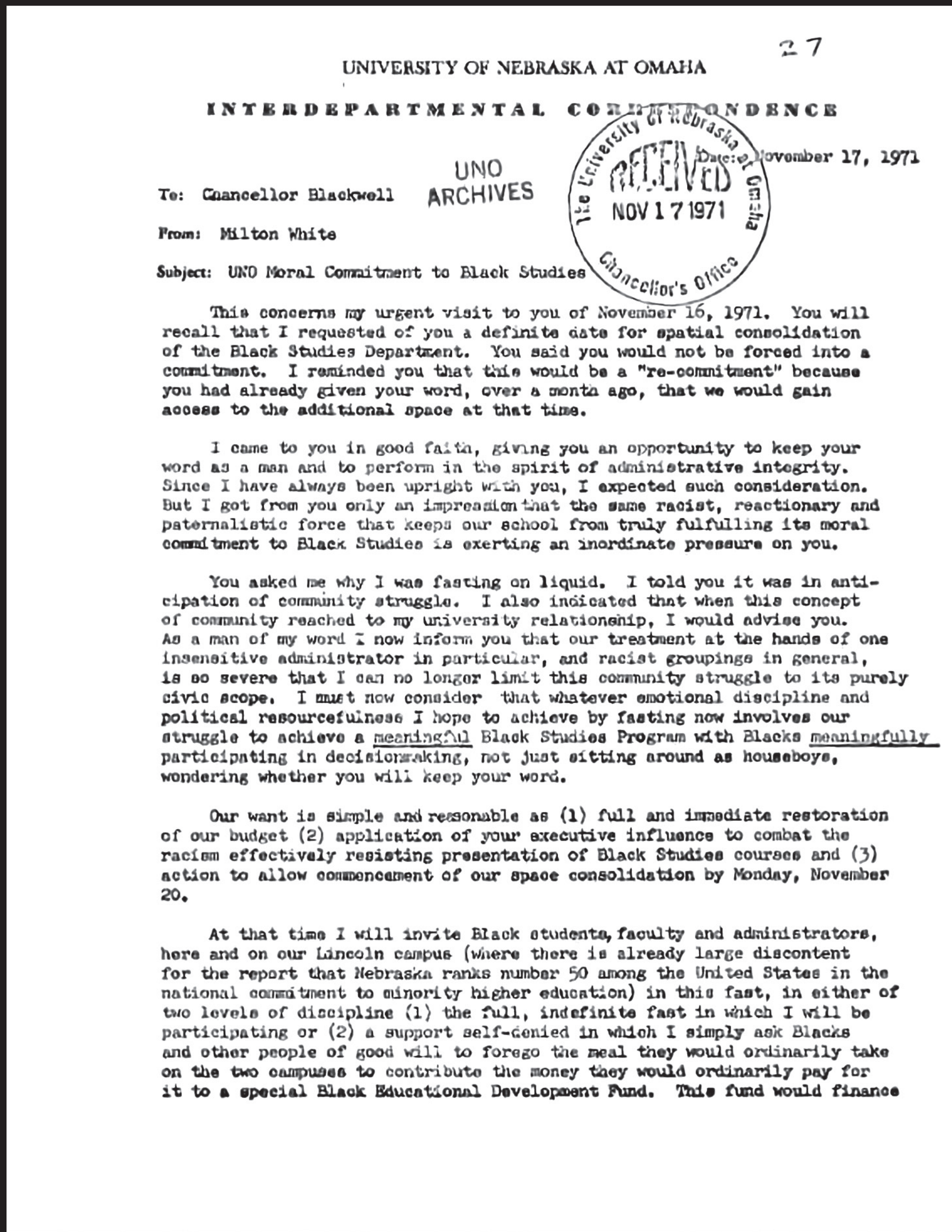
CELEBRATING 50 YEARS OF BLACK STUDIES



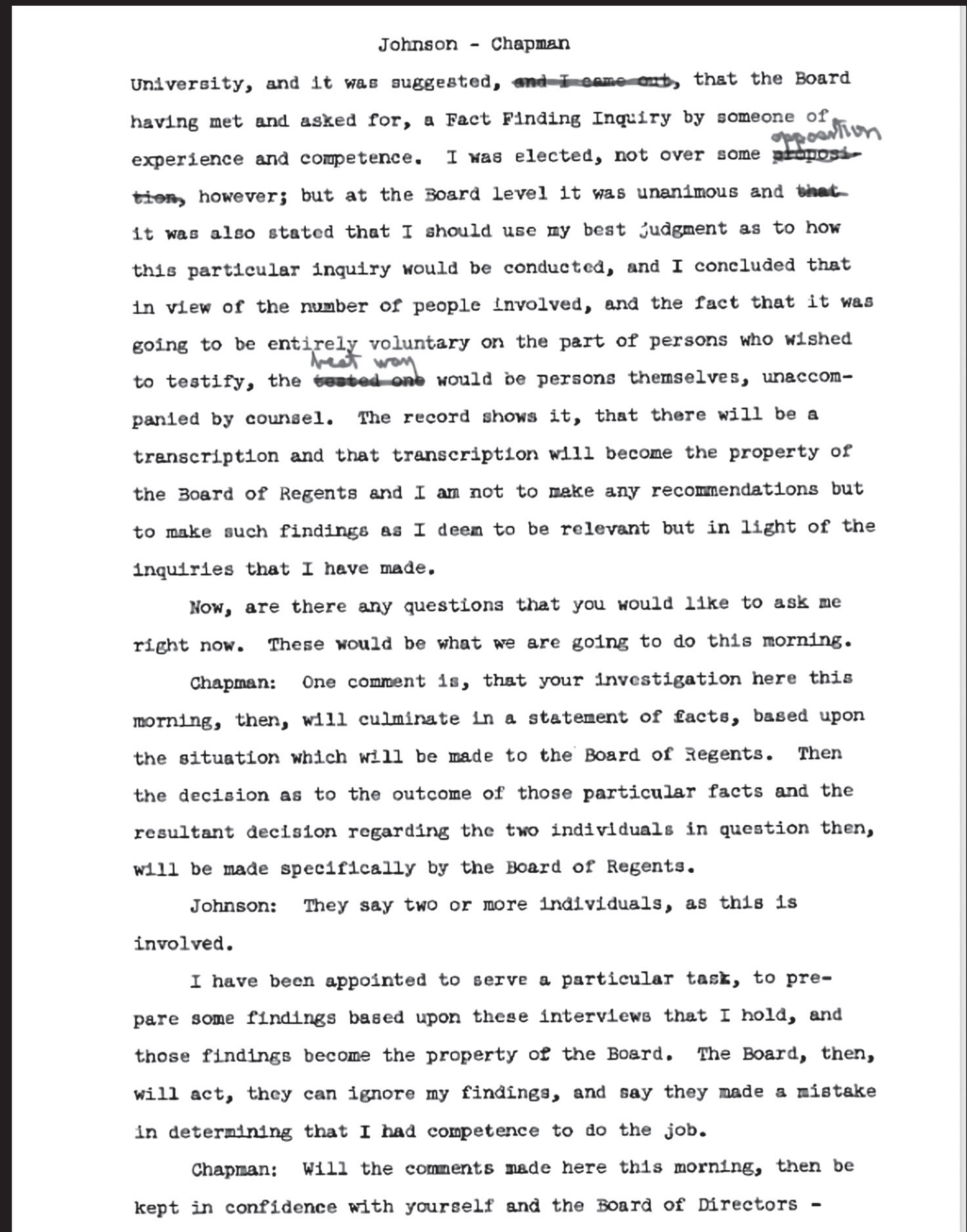
“Plan for Black Studies at the University of Nebraska at Omaha,” February 5, 1971, page 1 of 3, Department of Black Studies Records, UNO Libraries’ Archives and Special Collections, University of Nebraska at Omaha.



“Black Minority Interest Action Committee on Campus letter to Dr. Blackwell, May 12, 1971, Department of Black Studies Records, UNO Libraries’ Archives and Special Collections, University of Nebraska at Omaha.



“UNO Moral Commitment to Black Studies,” November 17, 1971, page 1 of 2, Department of Black Studies Records, UNO Libraries’ Archives and Special Collections, University of Nebraska at Omaha.



“Fact Finding Investigation- Dr. George M. Johnson,” March 23, 1972, page 2 of 14, Department of Black Studies Records, UNO Libraries’ Archives and Special Collections, University of Nebraska at Omaha.

The documents here illustrate the early struggles the department faced for legitimacy from other university departments. The first two chairs of the department, Melvin Wade and Milton White, experienced deep frustration at the lack of progress and resources in building the department. The situation in the

early 1970s became so fraught that White began a hunger strike. Despite the turbulent beginning, the department grew throughout the 1970s. Read full accounts of these and other events chronicled here by scanning the QR codes, which will take you to the UNO Libraries’ digital collections.



STUDENT
UNREST
COLLECTION

CHARTING OUR PATH

CELEBRATING 50 YEARS OF BLACK STUDIES

June 16, 1984

Mr. Chairman and Members of the University of Nebraska Board of Regents:

It is with a profound sense of sorrow that I address you this morning. Only two months ago the Chancellor of U.N.O. withdrew from your agenda and from your consideration a recommendation that he had made at your March meeting that called for the elimination of certain budget items, among which was the controversial proposal to eliminate the Black Studies Department and replace it with a Black Studies Program. He withdrew the proposal because "... the budgetary rationale for these items is no longer present..." (see Exhibit 10 - Excerpt from the Minutes of the Regents' Meeting of April 16, 1984) while he did indicate that he reserved the right to bring these recommendations back to you at a later date, it is absolutely incomprehensible to us that he has done so at this time. What change in "budgetary rationale" has occurred at U.N.O. since April 16, 1984? Mr. Chairman, I can recall that you asked the Chancellor to repeat his reason for withdrawing the recommendation during the April meeting. I remember that the Chancellor again stated that it was because the budget no longer required the reduction. He later explained that this was because of the "successful" negotiations with the AAUP and the action of the legislature in restoring \$2.4 million to the University of Nebraska budget that the governor had cut. As the contract with the AAUP been renegotiated? Has the governor overridden the legislature and taken back the \$2.4 million? No, neither of these things has happened and yet we are back here again this morning discussing with you his proposal to eliminate the Black Studies Department. It is instructive that the other proposals contained in the resolution that was withdrawn at the April meeting are absent from the resolution in front of you. It now deals with the elimination of the Black Studies Department and nothing else! It would appear to us that the Chancellor has been influenced by Julius Caesar's military strategy of "divide et vince."

Saddened as we are, we are here nonetheless to ask you to defeat this resolution. We ask you to consider several points as you make your decision on this resolution:

1. The Black Studies Department is different from every other department in the UN system in at least one significant particular.
2. The Black Studies Department has made outstanding strides in its brief existence yet is compared with disciplines that have been the staple of the university ever since it was founded.
3. The Black Studies Department has been under constant assault from the administration and others and has not received even a modicum of commitment from the administration and the regents.
4. The proposal to eliminate the department indeed came from the chair and members of the department at a time, but only as a contrived defense against the continual onslaught directed at the department over the past 15 years.

NAACP Letter to the Board of Regents, June 16, 1984, page 1 of 10, Department of Black Studies Records, UNO Libraries' Archives and Special Collections, University of Nebraska at Omaha.

EXHIBIT 1

BLACK STUDIES DEPARTMENT
SELF-STUDY

I. DESCRIPTION OF THE PROGRAM

The Black Studies Department is an important section of the College of Arts and Sciences at UNO for the dissemination of Black Culture as a whole to students, University personnel, and the community. Now the department offers courses that reflect a more systematic and comprehensive approach to the Black experience not only in the Americas but also in Africa and the Caribbean. This new approach is of special interest to students from different ethnic backgrounds because of its diversity and the academically oriented aspect of its nature.

II. QUALITY OF THE PROGRAM

1. Faculty

Apart from two or three part-time faculty members that the Department hires every semester to teach some of the courses, all the full-time faculty members and those who are on courtesy appointment with the department have their terminal degrees. Our full-time faculty is comprised of two (2) Americans, one African and one West Indian. This well-chosen diversity is in perfect harmony with the courses we offer and the main objectives of our department.

For the first time in its existence the Black Studies Department was able to have in 1983 its first tenured faculty member; another one followed in 1981, and a third one is now under consideration for tenure. These achievements reflect the progress made by our department in the fields of teaching, research, and service. However we would like to add that while it is relatively easy to verify what is done in the fields of teaching and research, it is difficult to evaluate, in an objective manner, what we have done in the field of service not only to the University but mainly to the community. Our very close link with the community requires of each faculty member a certain amount of time and effort to participate actively in the various activities in the community. We feel obligated to do so since it is the mission of this university to serve this community in every way it can.

2. Courses

A total of thirty-one (31) courses constitutes the course offerings of the Black Studies Department. Ten (10) of these courses can be taken to satisfy the Humanities requirement; and the rest to satisfy the Social Sciences requirement. These courses are well-structured and respond in a positive way, to the needs of the people in this Omaha pluralistic milieu. (See list of course offerings).

Black Studies Department Self Study, December 18, 1981, page 1 of 6, Department of Black Studies Records, UNO Libraries' Archives and Special Collections, University of Nebraska at Omaha.

EXHIBIT 12 9888 PETITION 8888

We, the undersigned, do hereby petition the University of Nebraska Board of Regents to retain the Black Studies Department at U.N.O. as a full department within the College of Arts and Sciences. The discipline of Black Studies is an essential part of the overall mission of the University.

We further request that you strengthen your commitment to Black Studies by requiring Black Studies Courses for students majoring in Education, Criminal Justice, Social Work, Political Science, Public Administration, Psychology, Business Administration and other majors that you deem appropriate. These specialty courses should be developed and the teachers hired to implement this necessary upgrading of the University.

The struggle to establish and to maintain the Black Studies Department has taken up a significant portion of the past decade. Isn't it about time that the Board of Regents declare its commitment to this essential aspect of this University's mission in 1984 and beyond? We think so!

| NAME | ADDRESS |
|--------------------|--------------------------------|
| Lennie Rivers | 6748 N. 35th St |
| Walter A. Brown | 2440 Crown Point Ave |
| Oliver J. Lee | 3535 S. 35th St |
| James L. Rivers | 1820 W. 4th St |
| Ruthie Mathlock | 2624 Bryant St |
| Dorothy M. Lee | 6716 Raymond Ave |
| Virginia C. Lucas | 1501 N 48th St #5, Omaha 68104 |
| Virginia M. Rivers | 2527 West St Omaha 68111 |
| Angela W. Lee | 5875 Whitmore Circle 68152 |
| Robert S. Williams | 5036 Wilburton Cir. 68152 |
| John J. Smith | 6005 York Ave Omaha 68104 |
| Howard Brown | 4500 Lafayette Omaha 68114 |
| Robert L. Rivers | 3945 N. 37th Omaha 68111 |
| Hermit Kellough | 2522 Bristol St. Omaha 68111 |
| James M. Rivers | 5406 Wilbur Cir. 68152 |
| Thomas G. Rivers | 5406 Wilbur Cir. 68152 |
| William S. Rivers | 1442 Wilbur Cir. Omaha 68114 |
| Jewel Kay | 7339 Ohio Omaha, Ne. 68111 |

Community petition, circa 1984, page 1 of 48, Department of Black Studies Collection, UNO Libraries' Archives and Special Collections, University of Nebraska at Omaha.

U.S. Department of Justice
Civil Rights Division

Office of the Assistant Attorney General
Washington, D.C. 20530

OCT 6 1997

The Honorable Chuck Hagel
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510-2705

Dear Senator Hagel:

This is in response to the letter from your constituent, Dr. Everett Reynolds, President of the Omaha NAACP, dated August 19, 1997, requesting an investigation of a recent letter received by the Chairman of the Black Studies Department at the University of Nebraska, Dr. Conyers. Dr. Reynolds stated that the letter received by Dr. Conyers threatened the lives of African-American students who are graduating from the university.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation is conducting an investigation into this matter. You can be assured that if the evidence shows that there was a prosecutable violation of federal criminal civil rights statutes, appropriate action will be taken.

Thank you for bringing this matter to our attention.

Sincerely,
Isabelle Katz Fintelner
Acting Assistant Attorney General
Civil Rights Division

Letter from Omaha NAACP Chapter to U.S. Sen. Chuck Hagel, October 6, 1997, U.S. Senator Chuck Hagel Archives, UNO Libraries' Archives and Special Collections, University of Nebraska at Omaha.

The department survived the conservative backlash of the 1980s, which defunded Black Studies departments across the country. In 1984, a motion was made to downgrade the department to a program, housing faculty in other colleges and cutting the number of courses available as part of University of Nebraska system-wide budget cuts. The Black community and NAACP were once again active in supporting the department, and Black

Studies survived the budget crisis and efforts to cut the department.

A troubling episode in the history of the university was a threat of violence against graduates in 1997. According to the Omaha World-Herald, a letter was slipped under the door of the department, threatening to harm and kill Black students during graduation. The situation was escalated by the NAACP and brought to the attention of U.S. Senator Chuck Hagel and the FBI.

CHARTING OUR PATH

CELEBRATING 50 YEARS OF BLACK STUDIES



"Roots Author Alex Haley Visits UNO," March 18, 1977, UNO Photograph Collection, UNO Libraries' Archives and Special Collections, University of Nebraska at Omaha.



Black Studies students, faculty, staff, and alumni marching in the Native Omaha Days Parade on North 30th Street, Saturday, August 3, 2019.



Malcolm X Festival, February 4-6, 2004, Poster Collection, UNO Libraries' Archives and Special Collections, University of Nebraska at Omaha.



"Maki Mandela Visits UNO," April 19, 1989, UNO Libraries' Archives and Special Collections, University of Nebraska at Omaha.



Omaha 54 and 50 Years of Black Studies Event, July 28, 2021.

Though there have been significant moments of turbulence during its 50-year history, Black Studies remains a thriving and interdisciplinary department that maintains its original mission of attracting leaders in the field, providing avenues of engagement with rigorous scholarship, involving the community, and supporting students as they grapple with academic, political, and cultural topics.

The Black Studies department has always sponsored speakers, events, and programs for the campus and community. The most enduring is the annual

Malcolm X Festival, first held in 2002. Notable speakers to visit campus include Alex Haley, Maki Mandela, Kwame Ture (formerly Stokely Carmichael), and Ibram X. Kendi.

On July 28, 2021, the Department of Black Studies and UNO Libraries' Archives and Special Collections welcomed members of the Omaha 54 back to UNO to celebrate and recognize their courage and activism 52 years prior. This important event kicked off the 50th anniversary year of the Black Studies department. View video and photos of the event by scanning the QR code.



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