

Fewer students of color at WSU

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While enrollment is up at Washington State University, the number of African-American students on campus is down.

The change - at a school with an already small African-American population - has administrators and advisers worried.

A few weeks ago, WSU touted its best-qualified freshman class in history. In a press release, WSU officials noted that minority enrollment rose by .19 percent.

But the trends not mentioned included African-American students, a campus population which dropped by close to 13 percent this fall, to 489.

Though that's just 67 students fewer than a year ago, the decline was significant enough to catch the attention of WSU's Board of Regents, who vowed to take action.

Regent Ken Alhadeff, a Seattle-area business leader, said the school needs a pipeline for students of color.

"We must look at everything we can do individually and collectively," he told fellow board members.

Regent President Bill Marler, a Seattle lawyer, echoed his concerns. "I'm interested in seeing what went wrong and why," he said.

Applications were down too, with 329 African Americans applying this fall, 46 fewer than last year.

The school is wasting no time in researching the enrollment numbers, said Janet Danley, WSU's executive director of enrollment services. Her office especially wants to talk with African-American students who applied, received scholarships, but decided not to attend, she said.

Danley already has formed some ideas about the decline.

Recruitment targeting that ethnic group had been handled out of the office of Multicultural Student Services. Last year, those recruiters didn't do as much in high schools and communities to attract African-American students, Danley said.

Ironically, as the 2002 school year began, the Multicultural Student Center was lauded for its recruitment efforts. It even made a video for other Washington schools on "Effective Strategies to Recruit and Retain Students of Color."

This year, the four multicultural recruiters will be moved to Danley's office to work alongside the general student recruiters.

“There's a greater network with support and resources in that office,” said Steve Nakata, director of Multicultural Student Services. “We're in a new era, and more people needed to get involved.”

Being in his office in a way “isolated them from the bigger operation.”

In researching the drop in African-American student enrollment, Danley is asking whether the Top of China incident had an impact.

The well-publicized event took place last fall when Pullman police responding to a fight released pepper spray at a downtown nightclub where an African American student group was holding a party. Some students and faculty say race played a part in the officers' actions and have filed a class-action lawsuit against the city.

The Top of China incident “may have had an effect. However, among the students we talked to, that was not a factor,” Danley said. “I'm not trying to minimize it. For their parents it may have been a bigger factor.”

But more often, she was told the choice was based on money. Some students said they opted for community college for their first two years.

WSU is not alone in the drop of African-American student applications. The University of Washington also saw a decline, from 418 in 2002 to 397 this year. That may not change the number of African Americans on campus, though. This year 150 students accepted UW's offer of admission, no change from 2002.

At Eastern Washington University, the number of African-American freshman applications rose from 105 in 2002 to 116 this year, and the number enrolled rose from 18 to 35. At the Community Colleges of Spokane, African-American students have remained a steady percentage for nearly a decade, holding at 2.5 percent at Spokane Community College and 2 percent at Spokane Falls Community College.

“Our ethnic student population makes up between 10 and 12 percent of our student body,” said Anne Tucker, public information officer for CCS. “But the total number of students is going up as our overall enrollment increases.”

At Seattle Community Colleges, where the student body numbers 55,000, enrollment of African-American students has been trending up by about 400 a year. Black students now constitute 4.9 percent of the total student population, said Patricia Paquett, spokeswoman for the schools.

As for WSU's troubles, junior Erika Coleman of Spokane said to attract more African-American students, the school should have more faculty of color. Breaking for lunch last week on the steps in front of the student union building, she and her African-American classmates said WSU has several hurdles to overcome.

“For example, there's not that many people of color on this side of the state,” said Dione Cason, a junior from Long Beach, Calif.

They also suggested more direct recruitment and more incentives, such as grants and scholarships.

Some African-American students, including Dorothy Whitman of Spokane, chose WSU because they have family members at the school. Others, such as Kimberly Walker from Renton, Wash., think getting the input of students already here would help.

“It's simple to do,” said Walker, a senior. “They can survey the high schools, improve the programs already here and encourage more student involvement.”