ARLA GARY LEARNED QUICKLY THAT SHE COULD NEVER miss class at the University of Oregon.

The one time she tried was during her freshman year in 1968. She had come down with the flu and doubted she’d be missed in a lecture hall of 300 students. She was wrong. Upon her return, the professor singled her out to welcome her back.

Gary had been singled out because she stood out. She was the only black student in the entire lecture hall. In fact, she was one of the few black people at the university. Although the university did not track how many black students were on campus in 1968, Gary estimates that in a student body of 15,000, there were just 100.

“The challenge for us was there was no anonymity,” Gary said. “You can’t blend in. It’s harder to blend in. So you are always on.”

Nearly 50 years later, former undergraduate and current law student Kena Gomalo still stands out. He too, is often the only black student in a given class. Despite many outreach efforts and the establishment of a diversity center with a multi-million dollar budget, the percentages of black students and faculty at the UO haven’t changed much since 1968.

Currently, black students make up less than two percent of the UO’s student body. Black faculty is even less—constituting just 1.6 percent of the university’s tenured faculty. The numbers have been all but stagnant, affecting black representation, education and overall experience at the University of Oregon for almost five decades.

It’s an issue current university president Michael Schill is well aware of and one he says is a high priority. The administration has established several working groups to address specific issues facing black students on campus. In May, Schill announced six recommendations from the working groups, including an African American opportunities program to recruit more black students, an African American student advisory board and the recognition of historically black Greek organizations. More recommendations will be announced in the future, Schill said.

“My goal is to improve diversity and inclusion on the campus and I am going to be working quite hard to do that,” Schill said.

Yet, for students like Gomalo, being black at the UO in 2016 still means facing challenges and more changes can’t come soon enough.

“We’re uncomfortable everywhere we go. We go into class and we are uncomfortable because nine times out of 10, we are the only black students in the class,” Gomalo said. “We’re uncomfortable because we can be in a class with 500 students and we will be the one that will be remembered despite barely saying a single word.”

In November, black students didn’t need a single word. They had three. “Black Lives Matter” rang out over and over as hundreds
Carla Gary stands with Kena Gomalo on 13th Avenue at the University of Oregon. Gary was a student at the UO in 1968. She recalled a 300-student class in which she was the only African-American. Gomalo, a law student, said that 50 years later he is frequently the only African-American in his classes. Photo by August Frank
of students gathered at Johnson Hall. They demanded better representation from the administration on behalf of marginalized groups on campus. Students chanted and held signs proclaiming, “None of my professors look like me.” On the building’s steps, they spoke to the crowd about their experiences with racism.

After the rally, Gomalo gathered with other black student leaders in the Prince Lucien Campbell lecture hall—the same hall Gary had been noticed in after her bout with the flu 48 years prior. They planned their next steps, which included a meeting with Schill that night. Then they met with a group of 100 other black students to talk. The students ranged from undergraduate to law students, and represented every black student group on campus. They discussed the problems they faced on campus. On a white board, one of the students began to make a list.

Two hours later, the group had boiled down their experiences to some key obstacles: There were too few black students and faculty. Every day, many had class in Deady Hall, a building named after UO founder and outspoken slavery advocate Matthew Deady. Financial aid and scholarships for black students was lacking.

Gomalo and nine other students—a group that became the Black Student Task Force—took the list from that night. From it, they laid out an action plan in the form of 12 demands. Four days after the rally, the list was sent to Schill.

Discovering a Pattern

Shortly after their list of demands was released, Gomalo and his colleagues received a phone call. It was a university alumnus from 1968. Forty-eight years ago, he, too, had written a list. He and other students from the Black Student Union had sent their own demands to then-President Arthur Flemming. And it was nearly identical.

“We dug it up and were like, ‘Wow, this is pretty much the same thing,’” Gomalo said. “The experience of going to the UO... was eerily similar or dare I say the same because the list of demands they created is essentially the same as ours.”

The lists do vary in their specific demands. The 1968 list highlights the lack of black students in the dorms and requests a soul food night. It addresses the lack of black student athletes and coaches. It asks for an African American studies program and that black arts and culture be recognized on campus. The 2016 list, on the other hand, asks for Ethnic Studies 101 to become a required course. It specifically asks Deady Hall be renamed. It asks that UO recognize historically black fraternities and sororities.
"We’re uncomfortable everywhere we go. We go into class and we are uncomfortable because nine times out of 10, we are the only black students in the class."

- Kena Gomalo

However, many of the demands in both lists focus on the same core issues facing black students. The demand for more diversity among faculty. An increase in representation for black students. More financial aid and recruitment programs. More emphasis on African American academia. It was all there. The language of the document had changed over the decades, but not the intent.

That’s not to say some things haven’t changed since 1968. The UO now has an Ethnic Studies program. Since 2011, over $1 million has been spent on hiring minority faculty through the Underrepresented Minority Fund. Through the Division of Equity and Inclusion, the UO provides cultural competency training to faculty and staff, as well as numerous programs to support and retain students and faculty of color. Since the 1960s, recruitment programs have increased the representation of minority and low income students. In fall 2014, the UO’s freshman class was 27 percent minority students – the highest in university history.

However, these changes have not significantly improved the lives of black students on campus, according to the task force. Though the overall student body has become more diverse, the percentage of black students specifically has barely grown. In 1974, the earliest year records could be found, black students made up 1.4 percent of the student body. More than 40 years later, that number has grown less than one percentage point. Despite university efforts to recruit faculty of color, the UO is one of the lowest ranked schools in the Association of American Universities for faculty diversity.

It’s important for the university to recognize that growth in diversity for other minority groups on campus has not reflected growth for black students, Gomalo said. The way to fix that, he said, is to focus on issues specific to the black community.

“Being a black person at the UO is a unique experience and an experience that can’t be compared to any other group,” Gomalo said. “What I mean by that is a lot of folks think we are a post-racial American or UO society and that isn’t the case for black students here.”

The Original List

“Post-racial” wasn’t a part of the conversations that began around campus in 1968 as riots following the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. erupted across the country. Mike Fancher was the editor of university’s Oregon Daily Emerald newspaper that spring. Fancher said after King was assassinated in April, the discussions on campus intensified. Ten days after King’s death, the Black Student Union drafted a list...
The experience of going to the UO... was eerily similar, or dare I say the same, because the list of demands they created is essentially the same as ours.

- Kena Gomalo
-Americans,” Gary said. “It’s being on, having to stand and deliver, because you may make or break the opportunity for another African American student to get a chance.”

Nearly 50 years later, Gomalo said that pressure remains. During his freshman year, he recalled a professor telling him to drop a class because he might not understand the material.

“Being one of the very few African American students going to class was uncomfortable because the teachers were telling you that you just need to drop out of the course because you’re not going to get it,” Gomalo said. “All these experiences are essentially the same (as in 1968).”

The pressure isn’t just limited to black students. There are only 12 black faculty members and 62 staff members employed at the UO, according to the most recent data from the University’s Office of Institutional Research.

More Than Students

Those numbers were even lower in 1966 when Dr. Edwin Coleman arrived on campus as a graduate teaching assistant.

Coleman moved to Eugene from Chico State College in California in order to get his Ph.D. in theater. When he graduated in 1972, he was hired as an English professor to start black literature courses in the department.

Every day, Coleman dressed in a suit and tie – he had to in order to be seen as qualified as white professors, he said. His work in the English department led to the creation of the Ethnic Studies department, of which he became co-chair of in 1981.

Coleman saw many black professors come and go, but he says the lack of black faculty is not for lack of effort on the UO’s part. Despite many recruitment efforts, the UO often loses black faculty to other institutions who are able to pay more and offer more academic opportunity, he said.

“It’s not a lack of the university attempting to (recruit and retain faculty),” Coleman said.

As one of the few black professors on campus, Coleman served as a liaison between the school and students for African American issues. One spring day in the early 1970s, the Eugene Black Panther party marched down 15th Avenue to protest racial disparities. That day, UO President Robert Clark spoke with Coleman. Clark knew Coleman had been

“I knew that every time I opened my mouth in class, I was speaking for African-Americans.”
- Carla Gary
active in mentoring minority students on campus. One of the students in the Black Panther protest was in Coleman’s class, and Clark wanted Coleman to speak with him.

Gary and her classmates adored Coleman, she recalls. He was one of the only black professors they had.

“They were overwhelmed by all of us. Because everyone wanted their time. I mean, they had a sense of who we were,” Gary said.

Even with mentors like Coleman, Gary said she struggled with racism as a student. She said she and her friends never went into Springfield at night because unwritten sundown laws set a curfew for African Americans. One evening, Gary and a group of her friends went to see a John Wayne movie at the Springfield movie theater. When they got out of the theater she recalls a group of white men confronting them. As they approached, though, they recognized Gary’s friend: He was a nationally ranked football player.

The men’s reactions changed immediately, Gary recalls.

“That is, for me, the absolute perfect snapshot of the dichotomy of race when it comes to celebrity,” she

In a wide-ranging interview conducted in March, President Schill answered questions about race relations on campus in the weeks before announcing initiatives to improve them.

Q: Would you consider the University of Oregon to be racially diverse?

A: Certainly not as diverse as we would like it to be. I think that, particularly in regard to underrepresented minorities, I think that we do better in terms of our representation of Latinos in part because the state has a growing Latino population. Our African-American diversity is really not good and it’s not what I’d like it to be.

Q: During the “Lessons from Mizzou” talk you held in November, you heard from many in the campus community about the lack of diversity on campus. You were quoted as saying, “Talk is important, deliberating is important, but at the end of the day, we need progress.” What tangible progress can you note since November regarding the university’s diversity and race relations?

A: If we go back to the conversation the way it began, our Black Student Task Force gave us, what they called demands. Almost all of the demands were asking us to do things by fall of 2016 and we’re right on schedule for a lot of those. You know, my sense is we’ll announce certain things in the next month but there’s other things that need more work. For example, one of the things that they requested was an Ethnic Studies 101 course for everybody. I think everybody understand that’s impossible. We only have six faculty members, or seven faculty members and I’m sure the person teaching it doesn’t want to teach 21,000 students. Everything else, we should be in pretty good shape to begin making decisions… Some of the things, even if we decide to do them, they’ll require us to find the funding and to fundraise.

Q: Our next question relates to that. Late last year, the Black Student Taskforce submitted to your office a list of demands and it strongly resembled a list that the Black Student Union gave to the president’s office in 1968. So, what steps are being taken to insure that we won’t be having the same conversation with another similar list of demands 50 years from now?
A: Well, you know, I can’t really say anything about the 1968 demands because I’ve never seen them. What I can say is that my goal is to actually improve diversity and inclusion on campus and I’m going to be working quite hard to do that. I can’t write a binding contract to sort of say what I’m going to do in the future but if the proposals that come forth from the working groups are feasible and in the best interest of the university and we have the resources to do them, I’m going to implement them. I think this is a high priority on our campus.

To me, one of the chief advantages of coming to a residential university is that you get to meet people who are different from you, you get to learn from people who are different from you and that goes for underrepresented minorities being mixed in with Anglos and Anglos learning from underrepresented minorities. That’s how we make progress in our country or don’t make progress in our country because we’re segregated. We’re not giving our students a full, enriched education if we don’t put together a group of people here that is more representative of the society around us.

Q: Flux held a community conversation in January where we asked members of the campus and broader Eugene community what they thought were important issues or stories concerning race. There was a suggestion that minority advisors

for all majors may be a solution. Is it something the university would be interested in pursing in its ongoing effort to improve student experiences?

A: So I think we are going to increase the number of advisors on campus and I think that, I’m not willing to say that a white advisor can’t advise a minority student just like I’m not willing to say that people should be eating lunch separate from each other. So I think that it would be great as we recruit these advisors that we try to make sure there’s diversity in them and so I think that’s very important but I would hate think that you’re in a world where you can’t talk to someone and take advice from someone, in particular curriculum issues, if that person doesn’t have the same skin color. At the same time, I do think it is useful for people to have people who have shared experiences so they can let down their guards so they can talk with them.

*Edited for length and clarity