Student Perspective on Diversity and Policy: 
A Report by Third World Action

Brown University
January, 2000

Submitted to Visiting Committee on Diversity
The University has been laboring under the mistaken impression that we are happy because we have been quiet. We can afford to be quiet no longer.

-Third World Students, 1968 Walkout, Brown University

Today, our vision is that Brown should strive to become the elite university practicing pluralism perfectly.

-President Gordon Gee, November 23, 1999, Brown University

The dominant view of the University Administration is that Brown had made good progress in good faith. The dominant view of the Third World students is that the University has made little progress and is acting in bad faith. The dominant view of the University power structure is that Brown is a liberal university committed to diversity. The dominant view of the Third World community is that Brown is a White university that gives lip service to diversity.

-Lerone Bennett Jr., member on the Visiting Committee on Minority Affairs at Brown University, 1986
Addendum

This report discusses some of the more pressing academic, social, and economic concerns of the Third World Community. It recommends concrete policy changes to address these concerns. As a coalition, we have agreed that in order to realize a commitment to diversity and pluralism Brown University should:

- expand and diversify recruitment, admissions, enrollment, and retention of Third World students;
- increase retention and recruitment of under-represented faculty of color;
- increase financial aid coverage and implement appropriate work-study practices;
- create and expand academic departments, counseling and support programs, and cultural institutions that promote and uphold the commitment to diversity and pluralism;
- implement a living wage for all employees; and
- address the specific cultural issues of queer students of color.

These recommendations must be implemented if the University is to achieve greater racial, ethnic, economic, geographic, and gender diversity within the Third World Community and The University Community as a whole.

Throughout the report, we have tried to be realistic and request what we actually need. Thank for your consideration.
1/27/2000

Dear Visiting Committee on Diversity,

We the undersigned students at Brown University request a meeting whereby Third World students can directly express their concerns to members of your committee. After reviewing the ways in which the Visiting Committee is communicating with Third World students at Brown, we feel that the concerns of Third World students will not be adequately addressed. We feel that this student-initiated meeting will allow the Committee and students to engage in a more effective and proactive dialogue.

In particular we are concerned about the following issues:

- Retention and recruitment of under-represented faculty of color
- Financial aid (need blind admissions, work study)
- Departmental issues (African American Studies, Ethnic Studies, Latina/o Studies, Rites and Reasons Theater)
- Recruitment, admissions, and enrollment of students of color
- Retention of students of color
- University support for the MPC program, TWTP, issues concerning queers of color
- African American female to male gender ratios

*See Appendix A for the 456 signatures collected on Friday, January 28, 2000.*
Dear Visiting Committee on Diversity,

Brown University has a history of recognizing diversity and social justice in its curriculum, admissions, and extra-curricular activities. However, Brown also has a history of racial, ethnic, gender, and economic oppression that dates back to when Brown University financed the construction of its original buildings with slave plantation money. Though some claim that Brown University is a “private University with a public purpose” and has a strong commitment to diversity, we are writing you to contest this hypocrisy and unmask and decodify institutionalized racism in all of its forms and shapes.

Third World Action was created in 1999 by a group of dedicated Minority Peer Counselors who felt frustrated about minority life at Brown. This frustration stemmed from witnessing the various forms of institutionalized racism that occurred during a three-year period of student passiveness and apathy (1997-9). While many Third World students remained oblivious to their histories of struggle, institutions from the Sarah Doyle Women’s Center to the Minority Peer Counseling Program were being attacked left and right.

Third World Action evolved into a multi-racial coalition of students interested in re-introducing Third World activism to this campus. We embarked on many projects, one of which was to collect all documents of Third World activism and to interview students, alumni, deans, and professors. When we found out that an external committee was coming to review minority affairs at Brown, we decided that we needed to be involved in the process. We wanted a time and space where students and committee members could engage in a productive and proactive dialogical conversation.

We are a collective body of Third World students with a great understanding of the way in which the university carries out policies and administers decisions. Though we do not
claim to represent the entire Third World community, our coalition has members who are the leaders of the following organizations:

Organization of United African Peoples (OUAP), Brown Christian Fellowship, Mezcla, Shades of Brown, Urban Debate Initiative, La Fuerza Latina, MECHA, South Asian Students Association, The Next Thing (TNT), The Brotherhood, Young Communist League (YCL), The Student Labor Alliance (SLA), The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Alliance (LGBTA), Asian American Students Association

In creating this report, we asked other leaders of Third World organizations to compile short letters addressing the needs of people in their groups as well as the needs of the Third World community. This executive report is an organized summary of our needs designed to help us better articulate our concerns when six TWA members present this information to you on Tuesday, February 1, 2000. All of the letters and comments that we received are located in the appendix.

When reading this report, listening to students at the Dinner in Sayles Hall, or in having a dialogue with members of Third World Action, we want you to contextualize this event and keep in mind a few important considerations. We are worried about a conceptual shift in how the university’s administration represented this committee. In 1986, Augustus A. White, III, initiated an external review called “The Visiting Committee on Minority Life and Education at Brown University.” The report was entitled “The American University and the Pluralist Ideal” (also known as the Blue Ribbon Report).

In a letter to all students and faculty at Brown University on November 23, 1999¹, President E. Gordon Gee announced that there was going to be a Visiting Committee coming to Brown University to assess diversity and pluralism. He referred to the 1986 Blue Ribbon Report and said that we need a new report because the “dialogue on race has shifted.” Coupled with this statement was the fact that the Visiting Committee’s name

¹See Appendix B.
had also shifted: from the Visiting Committee on Minority Affairs to the Visiting Committee on Diversity.

The purpose of pointing out this minute shift is not to condemn the University administrators or to charge the University with racism. Rather, this point was made because we feel that it is important to question concepts of race, ethnicity, minority, diversity, and pluralism. In fact, “pluralism” can mean different things to different people. In a decade largely influenced by conservative theorists in education such as Allan Bloom and Dinesh D'Souza, it is important to question every time the term “minority” is exchanged with “diversity.”

In 1986 the emphasis was on analyzing minority life at Brown and finding out better ways that the university could curricularly, institutionally, and socially affirm and embrace Third World identities. In 2000, our University has clearly re-framed the Visiting Committee’s agenda to promoting “diversity” and “pluralism”, which have been used to de-emphasize the category of race in institutional dynamics. Third World Action feels that there is a need to interrogate this conceptual “shift” as well as the administration’s definitions of “diversity” and “pluralism.”

“Pluralism and diversity” for us means the affirmation and celebration of differences. However, we realize that this celebration cannot begin in a racially stratified society. Rhetorically celebrating and promoting “pluralism and diversity” in such a situation only works to simultaneously obscure and reinforce existing inequalities. Programs which have maintained a commitment to serving and enhancing the Third World community have consistently been rolled-back and attacked by this university under this banner of “Pluralism and Diversity.” We insist that the university adopt an explicit politics of position, and recognize existing and historical inequalities.

3 Excerpts from Blue Ribbon Report, Letter of Transmittal: “the members of the Visiting Committee met together four times to consider curriculum, faculty composition, student support programs, residential life and the campus environment with special attention to the implications for minority students.”
Our other concern involves our ability to participate as students in the evaluative processes of this committee. We were slightly disturbed that we did not publicly hear about this committee until November 23, 1999, that we were forced to coalition build while on our winter breaks, and that we only had a handful of days at school before the Visiting Committee came to Brown University. Although it may not have been the intention of President E. Gordon Gee, Augustus White, or Dean John Eng-Wong, we certainly felt left out of the process.

While we have many concerns and issues to be addressed, we are excited about the upcoming committee report and we welcome all of the Visiting Committee to Brown University. We have read many of your articles in our Ethnic Studies-related classes and for many of us, you serve as role models.

We would greatly appreciate it if you could suggest that the University make copies of your report to distribute to all of the Third World organizations on campus. This way, we hope, we can begin a democratic community building process, where we can fully negotiate, in mutual dialogue, what “community,” “diversity,” and “pluralism” mean. On a last note, we hope that you find our report helpful for your investigation and analysis at Brown University.

Sincerely,

Third World Action

Seth Andrew ’00 (President of Undergraduate Council of Students)
Abena Asare ’02 (Brown Christian Fellowship, MPC)
Lola Brown ’01 (National Society of Black Engineers)
Flavio Casoy ’03 (Student Labor Alliance)
Sade Clarke ’02 (MPC)
Anniedi Essien ’02 (Organization of United African Peoples, MPC)

3 Excerpts from President Gee’s Letter on November 23, 1999: “Brown is committed to taking a leadership role in pluralism and diversity among higher education institutions....Today, our vision is that Brown should strive to become the elite university practicing pluralism perfectly.”
Kohei Ishihara '02 (The Next Thing)
Kenneth Knies '00.5 (Brown Students for Financial Aid)
Gustavo Licon '02 (MEChA, MPC)
Justin Smith '02 (The Brotherhood, MPC)
Sarath Suong '02 (AASA, MPC)
Eric Tucker '02 (Urban Debate Initiative)
Irene Tung '01 (Brown Students for Financial Aid, TNT)
Charles Walker '00.5 (Young Communist League)
Veena Villivalam '02 (AASA, MPC)