The
Johns Hopkins University
Black Student Union

1967-1971

-The Implementation of an Idea-
Preface

I was fortunate enough to contact two of the key players in the founding of the Johns Hopkins University Black Student Union: Reverend Douglas Miles and Mr. John F. Guess, Jr. In the following presentation of their narratives, they will take you through the first four years of the creation of the organization. While, during their term at the university, they had to suffer more set-backs than advancements, their work remains important because it laid the foundation for many of the advancements that were to come and formulated some of the ideas that the University still benefits from today.

Adrienne NH Baksh
Class of 2006
The Year Before

1966-1967
Douglas Miles, a co-founder of the BSU, matriculated into the Johns Hopkins University the fall of 1966. Miles had a unique relationship with the university due to his status as a Baltimore native.
According to Miles, in the late 1960s, Baltimore was quickly becoming a predominantly poor black city. [AUDIO] In juxtaposition with its changing surroundings, the Johns Hopkins University sat on top of the small hill before its lawn of North Charles Street, isolated and disconnected from the outside as an “island,” as Miles described.
This disconnectedness did not only exist between Hopkins’ students and Baltimore; the student population seemed to be just as nonchalant towards world issues as well.

The 1960s was a time of action among college students all over the United States. Protests against the very controversial Vietnam War, and Apartheid in S. Africa took place on many campuses throughout the states. However on the isolated island of Johns Hopkins University, the students exhibited a attitude of apathy and disinterest. In the welcoming issue of the school’s newspaper, *The Newsletter*, a student poked fun at the university student’s inactivity. [AUDIO]
Around 1967, the emergence of Black Student Unions and changes geared toward the improvement of the black student life at predominantly white institutions was spreading fast across the United States, especially in the Northeast. Keeping to its reputation of inactivity, the Johns Hopkins University was one of the last to join the growing trend.
At the start of the fall semester, the Hopkins administration were boasting an increase of black student enrollment, however the conservative southern sentiments of the Baltimore community were making improvement of the black student experience at the university quite a task.
An event receiving the most press attention involved a white barber’s refusal to cut black students’ hair. [AUDIO]
The barber, operating out of the Marylander barber shop, found himself in a lose-lose situation: If he did not cut black students’ hair, he would suffer a boycott from his student customer pool; on the other hand, if he received black customers, he would lose many of his Baltimorean clientele. After much protest by a united student front, the conflict was finally resolved.
Student Life

Though the administration was making efforts to improve black student life on campus, for some students, the changes did not seem to be coming fast enough. [AUDIO]
According to Miles’s description of the academic life of most incoming African-American students, many pupils arrived the first day of classes to find themselves ill-prepared.

[AUDIO]

There was very little available to the black student’s to indulge themselves in socially, emotionally, or otherwise as they made the transition from their black communities into the “white world.”
John Guess, co-founder of the Black Student Union and eventual student council president, entered into Johns Hopkins University the fall of 1967.

Having come from a more affluent environment, he did not face many of the academic struggles that Miles described. [AUDIO]
Also unlike Miles, Guess had a more optimistic prospective on many aspects of the university. Though he himself had to cope with “culture shock” and a limited black social scene, he was able to cope with this by building his social life off campus, traveling between visits to his girlfriend at Hampton University, in Virginia, and partying with friends at Howard University in Washington, D.C.  [AUDIO]

Of course, the constant traveling back and forth cause Guess to fall behind in his studies.  [AUDIO] After that first semester, he decided to buckle down in Baltimore before he was forced to leave.

Guess: “I found Milton Eisenhower Library because I didn’t want to go home.”

Once back on campus, Guess began to become more active in the socio-political world of Johns Hopkins University. His perception of the state and possibility of black life on campus was more optimistic than that of Miles. Whereas Miles criticized the black students for being disenchanted with the concept of black community on campus, John Guess saw a need and, eventually, a movement was started to fulfill it.
The idea to start a Black Student Union was first brought up over a friendly basketball game, one night, between Guess and his good friend Bruce Baker. [AUDIO]

Note: Eventually, Baker was to become the first president of the Black Student Union and Guess, its first chairman.
Getting Started

Initially, John Guess and his friend Bruce Baker tried to get the attention of university administration by appealing to Robert Billgrave, the dean of Admissions. Unfortunately, their efforts met defeat. According to Guess, the administration perceived a student-run African-American-directed interest group as a threatening and radical.

Guess: “…that’s always been the problem at Hopkins. It’s okay as long as we’re [blacks] not driving the train.”
While the administration’s, “no” response was disappointing, it was made unbearable as Guess and other blacks at Johns Hopkins saw their peers at other universities gaining ground as the creation of black student unions spread throughout the country.

Eventually, Guess and Baker were forced to go to the President of the University. Their attempt to get an appointment with the university president failed. In response to this, the students were left with no other choice than a more militant response.

Guess: “Well, that was like the straw that broke the camel’s back because by then the Bobby Hydes and the Kenny Browns who had excelled at these things and Allan Peels knew that we had done what they had suggested. We went through the channels, we did all the things and constantly rebukes and meanwhile, we’re looking at our colleagues at other places, other schools, getting in the door and so we marched, we occupied Homewood House.” [AUDIO]
On [date] John Guess and Bruce Baker marched into the Homewood house and presented twelve demands to the university administration which included an increase in black student enrollment and black professorships as well as the hiring of a black person to the admission office’s staff. They requested that committees be formed to “facilitate the integration of the Black community into Homewood, while still maintaining their Black identity. Sections of the Milton Eisenhower library were to be dedicated to the works of black authors. In order to improve the quality the black social scene on campus, Hopkins-Morgan State mixers and a black barber on campus were asked for.

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Formative Stage

Following the submission of the demands, the Black Student Union (an unofficial organization at the time) was branded as militant and rebuffed by the administration.
Rejection of Constitution

In mid-October 1968, they submitted a constitution proposal which would serve to make the Black Student Union an official university organization. After a period of discussion and debate, the Student Council Body delivered its decision: the proposed charter was rejected. The main argument behind the proposal’s failure to capture two-thirds of the council members centered on Article IV of the document which defined membership of the BSU as open to “all black students” which, in the opinions of some, implied a discrimination against whites.

John Guess and Bruce Baker attempted to explain their concerns of opening up the Black Student Union to whites:

-“In a school where the black students account for only one percent of the general student body, the spokesman for the BSU suggested that it would be easily possible for a white membership to exert the dominant influence. A membership thus composed would only serve to perpetuate the Hopkins image as a ‘lily white’ school.”-
Reactions to the Const. rejection

“The Hopkins Admissions office continually bewails its inability to attract black students to Hopkins. The reason is obvious—in a semi-Southern City and in a predominantly white university, the prospective black student must feel that he is entering an alien situation. The Black Student Union, as an officially recognized and supported organization, could have made giant strides in letting prospective black students know that they would have somewhere to turn once they arrived at Homewood...”

-Editorial; October 25.1968
Upon receiving news of the submitted proposal’s rejection, the decision was made to ignore the student council’s vote and continue of the formation of the Black Student Union, starting with the carrying out of recruiting and fund raising operations.

The University even ignored the council’s decision and granted the BSU permission to use the name “Johns Hopkins” in its title.

“Baker confirmed that ‘the University administration has aid that the Student Council’s decision will have no effect on the relationship between the administration and the Black Student Union.’”
Finally, in the spring of 1969 the Black Student Union became an official university organization. Bruce Baker took office as president and Guess as chairman.

In their remaining years at the university, the first BSU members continued to lay the foundations in work towards achieving the demands which they had submitted years before.
BSU PROGRESS-
THE FIRST YEARS
In September of 1970, after “rotting in academic council” without action for almost a year, the Hopkins Black Studies plan was launched in the form of a federally funded effort which aimed to bring together the history departments of Johns Hopkins University and Morgan State University in a joint program. Originally, Hopkins _ a grant for its own program, but were answered with a suggestion by the government to join ranks with the historically black university which had already made notable advances in the study of black American history with a “valuable manuscript collection and strong black studies faculty.”
At the closing of the spring semester of the 1970-1971 school year, George Hayward, Director of Admissions, predicted “a significant increase in the enrollment of women and black students” in the next year’s class. Women were to make up twenty-five percent of the incoming class. Although there was an increase in the black student population, the enrollment still remained below three percent.
The search for black professors was very trying for the Hopkins Administration. On top of that, the University was losing professors. Between the '69-'70 and '70-'71 school year, the total number of black faculty dropped from nineteen to eight.

“We're hiring blacks, but we're losing them too...The proportion of minority employees is not likely to increase soon.”
OTHER ACHIEVEMENTS

- BSU Given Space in Basement of AMR II to hold meetings
- BSU inducted as an official student organization and was allowed university funding
- In March, the BSU organized a month-long program of black speakers who spoke on Black Awareness which they titled, the Black March