

Laney: 'Demands violate the principles of openness'

By Adam Biegel

News Editor

Responding to a dozen demands issued Tuesday by the Students Against Racial Inequality (SARI), President James T. Laney met with the group's leaders yesterday in what he called "a very frank and thorough discussion...about the concerns that underlie their demands."

Although Laney said afterwards that it would be inappropriate to comment on the talks, in an open letter to the Emory community yesterday he said the immediate call for actions, such as the resignation of Public Safety Director Ed Medlin, was "inconsistent with the spirit of what has transpired on our campus in the last few weeks."

"I must confess to being perplexed and disappointed by the statement read at Tuesday's rally," Laney wrote. "The demands...obscure the strong record achieved by many in this University over the years in working to achieve a truly diverse, globally sensitive community."

Laney continued to say that further meetings will be held to discuss the students' concerns, but that "the demands must undergo the time-honored due process of deliberation. The integrity of any university...lies in its freedom to run its own affairs by general consent."

The leaders of SARI, whose demands also included the altering of distribution requirements to include two African Studies courses, increasing the number of African-American students and professors and the construction of two centers for the study of African-American culture on campus, refused to comment following the meeting.

On Tuesday, the student who presented the demands said that, "Unless there is a definitive commitment made to meet each and every one of our demands [within 48 hours], we will take that to mean that it is a hostile environment that Emory University wishes to have exist and prosper and we shall act accordingly."

The nearly two hour-long meeting at the Administration Building yesterday was also attended by Felker Ward, Jr., a University alumni trustee who participated in Monday's forum on the topic.

“We are working very hard together in good faith,” Laney said, “The meeting was very positive.” In his open letter, he addressed a number of the demands and provided evidence of the University’s efforts to make Emory “a truly just and fair community for all.”

He praised the campus’ “sensitivity and concern” following racial attacks that prompted freshman Sabrina Collins to leave the University and receive medical attention.

“This had been a time of reaching into each other’s hearts and minds and cultivating the ground upon which true understanding and pluralism can be based,” Laney wrote. “In their tone and substance these demands betray that spirit.”

Laney also said the demands “seek to preempt the careful work” of groups chaired by Law School alumnus and Atlanta City Council President Marvin Arrington as well as Associate Chaplain Bobbi Patterson that will release reports next week proposing specific recommendations to improve Emory’s racial climate.

In addition, he cited the University’s past actions to foster African-American studies programs and promote education for students of all racial groups. Laney said that within the student body, which is drawn from more than 90 nations, Emory’s percentage of black students (6.9 percent) is higher than that found at

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Students march on Admin., SARI makes demands

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Before a crowd of over 200 students and administrators, a group calling itself “Students Against Racial Inequality” (SARI) presented a list of 12 demands Tuesday aimed at “the creation of an environment that we may prosper [in] as students of African descent.” The resignation of Director of Public Safety Ed Medlin and the creation of an African and African-American Cultural Center were central to these demands.

More than 100 demonstrators gathered in front of the Dobbs University Center at 2 p.m. to participate in a “power rally and march [to the quadrangle]” advertised by SARI. According to the flyers distributed on campus, the purpose of the march was “to show our support for Sabrina Collins and our intolerance of racism.”

Dean of Athletics and Recreation Gerald Lowrey, Dean Peter Dowell and Associate Chaplain Bobbi Patterson, along with other administrators, linked arms with the students as they marched toward the Administration Building.

Before the rally, President James T. Laney remarked that “this shows every indication that the students care and are responding in a correct manner.” Kendall Wood, Lisa Green, Elijah Gardner, Leonard Scriven and Erika Jefferson, who have coordinated this movement since last Friday’s sit-in, led the procession.

After the demonstrators sang “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” Gardner presented opening remarks. “We are concerned bodies unified in one struggle...Let us say nothing to the press,” he told the crowd.

Jefferson then proceeded to read SARI’s list of demands, which had been previously distributed to the Atlanta media but not to the Wheel.

Jefferson began by asserting that “Emory University is a hostile environment for people of African descent” and insisted that SARI stood prepared “to take further action as necessitated by the response of President Laney and the Emory administration.”

Besides requesting that the University pay for Sabrina Collins’ medical expenses “as well as make restitution for damages,” Jefferson called for the establishment of an “African and African-American Research and Studies Center” to be housed in a new “African and African-American Cultural Center” on campus.

In addition, SARI demanded that “African and African-American Studies become a distribution requirement in which two classes must be taken in order to graduate.”

As one of the final demands, Jefferson called for “an apology and the resignation of Department of Public Safety Director Ed Medlin due to his insensitivity and biases against students of African descent.”

Not realizing that the rally was to be a forum for the presentation of these demands, which were generated during a meeting Sunday open only to African-Americans, a number of students in the audience were alarmed and enraged. "Let it be known that the students did not know anything about the specific demands," said senior Amy Laura Hall. Another woman, who left the rally when Jefferson called for Medlin to step down, proclaimed, "I walked out because I disagree with asking for the resignation of Ed Medlin. That's ridiculous. He has done a really good job."

Medlin was present when the demands were issued on the quadrangle and heard the call for his resignation, "I don't know any more about the basis of it than anyone else who was there," he remarked afterwards.

Admitting that "naturally [the demand] hurts," Medlin expressed concern at the impact of the call for his resignation on the student body.

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Students, faculty not told of rally's purpose

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"I don't want this to become an issue between black students and white students," he said.

Medlin stressed that "hopefully we'll be in a position soon to provide more information on the investigation. Then people will understand what's been going on and there will be little question that things were handled properly."

After the demonstration, Laney challenged anybody to dispute the University's record on minority issues but pointed out that "this does not mean that what we have done is necessarily enough."

Immediately after the rally, Lowrey remarked that "my marching over here was a symbolic act [to protest racism]" and added that "I would have appreciated seeing the demands before the march." In addition, he said, "I don't know that I would have chosen the same list, but I respect their right to present them."

Vera Rorie, director of Minority Programs, expressed her support for the students, but stated that "the Minority Student Affairs office has nothing to do with these demands."

However, assistant director of Minority Student Programs Lisa Middleton participated in both organizational meetings of the student group.

Green, one of SARI's leaders, said at the conclusion of the demonstration that she "felt comfortable that President Laney understands us and will meet our demands."

Despite Green's confidence, debate over the demands and the direction of the movement continues among black students. Sophomore Nigeria Spriggs said that the demands "were made up by a select few. They're ridiculous." She specifically took issue with the exclusion of other minority groups from the movement. "They say they're against racism and for a multi-cultural center, but everywhere I look it says 'African-American,'" she said.

Spriggs also disagreed with calling for Medlin's resignation. "Just because he's the director doesn't mean his head belongs on the chopping block," she said. In addition, she expressed her opinion that "they're making anyone who's white the enemy."

"Black students at Emory need to get over their own inner prejudice. They're not united at all," said another African-American woman. "I could see some hotheads going for sit-ins and things like that," she continued.

A different black woman, who was involved in formulating the demands, agrees that more drastic action might be taken in the future. "We've been asking for these things for 15 years and the time for asking is over," she said. "President Laney's hands are tied, but if he doesn't find a way to untie them, the shit's going to come down," she continued.

Although many students are angered at the involvement of the Atlanta media in events on campus, this woman pointed out that the African-American group views the press as helpful. "We need the media to put more pressure on the administration and keep Atlanta abreast of what's been going on," she said.

The black student also explained the exclusion of non-African-Americans from last Sunday's planning meeting. "We're very sorry our supporters were kept outside, but we didn't open the doors because we were still hammering things out," she said. There are some things we can discuss a lot easier among ourselves."

Sophomore Kwame Lawson, who helped draft the demands and supports SARI's aims, walked away in "frustration" from Tuesday's rally "because I felt we were too focused on our

own community.”

Attempting to account for the exclusion of other minority groups from the demands, Lawson said, “The African-American community felt hurt and felt they needed to respond. The natural response is that of self-interest.”

The five leaders of SARI continue to refuse to comment.

Laney responds to group

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any Ivy League school.

“It is a fact that Emory has awarded more doctorates with specialties in African-American studies than any other university in the South over the past 15 years,” he said, also citing the University's Institute for African Studies and the Carter Center’s Institute for African Governance.

Laney also pointed out that “Emory has been committed for some time to covering all [of Collins’] medical expenses.”

Laney said repeatedly that SARI’s demands will be considered as part of ongoing reforms efforts. “As part of the American culture, Emory has a lot of work to do in human relations...our policies and programs should be on the cutting edge.”

Although SARI members did not wish to comment after the meeting and some refused to state their names, the group quietly distributed a statement of apology concerning their Sunday meeting that was limited to African-Americans only.

“The purpose for the separate meeting was to foster better understanding among various factions of the African-American community,” the statement said. “Our intent was not to alienate those who waited patiently.”