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University of Missouri president resigns amid campus racial tensions

By Associated Press, adapted by Newsela staff

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Grade Level 9 Word Count 1,021

COLUMBIA, Mo. — The president of the University of Missouri system resigned Monday over his handling of racial tensions at the school. The football team and others on campus had been in open revolt, in an effort to get him to step down. President Tim Wolfe said his resignation was effective immediately. He made the announcement at the start of what had been expected to be a lengthy closed-door meeting of the school's governing board. The complaints came to a head a day earlier, when at least 30 black football players announced that they would not play until the president was gone. One student had gone on a hunger strike a week ago.

"We Stopped Listening To Each Other"

Wolfe took "full responsibility for the frustration" students had expressed and said their complaints were "clear" and "real."

"This is not the way change comes about," he said, referring to recent protests, in a halting statement that was at once apologetic, clumsy and defiant. "We stopped listening to each other." He urged students, faculty and staff to use the resignation "to heal and start talking again to make the changes necessary."

For months, black student groups have complained of racial slurs and other slights on the overwhelmingly white flagship campus of the state's four-college system. Frustrations flared during a homecoming parade Oct. 10 when black protesters blocked Wolfe's car, and he did not get out and talk to them. They were removed by police.

Protests Were Growing

Black members of the football team joined the outcry on Saturday night. By Sunday, a campus sit-in had grown in size, graduate student groups planned walkouts and politicians began to weigh in.

Until Monday, Wolfe did not indicate that he had any intention of stepping down. He agreed in a statement issued Sunday that "change is needed" and said the university was working to draw up a plan by April to promote diversity and tolerance.

The Tigers' next game is Saturday against Brigham Young University at Arrowhead Stadium, the home of the NFL's Kansas City Chiefs, and canceling it could cost the school more than \$1 million.

"The athletes of color on the University of Missouri football team truly believe 'Injustice Anywhere is a threat to Justice Everywhere,'" the players said in a statement. "We will no longer participate in any football related activities until President Tim Wolfe resigns or is removed due to his negligence toward marginalized students' experience. WE ARE UNITED!!!!!"

Coaches Support Players' Strike

Head football coach Gary Pinkel expressed support for his players on Twitter, posting a picture of the team and coaches locking arms. The tweet said that team staff stand "as one. We are united. We are behind our players."

A statement issued by Pinkel and Missouri Athletic Director Mack Rhoades linked the return of the protesting football players to the end of a hunger strike by Jonathan Butler, a black graduate student. Butler began his effort Nov. 2 and had vowed to not eat until Wolfe was gone.

"Our focus right now is on the health of Jonathan Butler, the concerns of our student-athletes and working with our community to address this serious issue," the statement said.

After Wolfe's announcement, Butler said his hunger strike was over.

Racial Slurs Reported

The protests began after the student government president, who is black, said in September that people in a passing pickup truck shouted racial slurs at him. In early October, members of a black student organization said slurs were hurled at them by an apparently drunken white student.

A swastika drawn in feces also was found recently in a dormitory bathroom.

Many of the protests have been led by an organization called Concerned Student 1950, which gets its name from the year the university accepted its first black student. Its members besieged Wolfe's car at the parade, and they have been conducting a sit-in on a campus plaza since last Monday.

At least 150 students gathered at the plaza Sunday night to pray, sing and read Bible verses, a larger crowd than on previous days. Many planned to camp there overnight, despite temperatures that had dropped into the upper 30s.

Also joining in the protest effort were two graduate student groups that called for walkouts Monday and Tuesday and the student government at the Columbia campus, the Missouri Students Association.

Ferguson Shooting Seen as a Factor

The association said in a letter Sunday to the system's governing body that there had been "an increase in tension and inequality" on campus since last year's fatal shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, which is about 120 miles east of Columbia. The letter charged that Wolfe and his administration had done nothing to respond to the growing climate of racial intimidation.

Brown, an unarmed black 18-year-old, was shot and killed by a white police officer during a struggle. His death helped spawn the "Black Lives Matter" movement criticizing police treatment of minorities.

The association said Wolfe heads a university leadership that "has undeniably failed us and the students that we represent."

"He has not only enabled a culture of racism since the start of his tenure in 2012, but blatantly ignored and disrespected the concerns of students," the group wrote.

One of the sit-in participants, Abigail Hollis, a black undergraduate, said the campus is "unhealthy and unsafe for us."

"The way white students are treated is in stark contrast to the way black students and other marginalized students are treated, and it's time to stop that," Hollis said. "It's 2015."

The school's undergraduate population is 79 percent white and 8 percent black. The state is about 83 percent white and nearly 12 percent black.

Wolfe, 56, was hired as president in 2011. He is a former software executive and Missouri business school graduate who had never worked at a university before becoming the school's leader.

Possible Response Questions:

- Another article from 2014 mentions that a "new civil rights movement" is on the rise in the U.S. Do you think the Missouri president's resignation is a victory for this new movement? Why or why not? Use evidence from both articles to support your answer.

“U of M president resigns” Quiz

1) Which of the following statements BEST represents President Wolfe's approach toward black students' concerns in the article?

- (A) He tried to talk with the students, but they were frustrated by his viewpoints.
- (B) He did not address the concerns as quickly or as meaningfully as the students wanted.
- (C) He ignored the students completely and still believes they are incorrect in their views.
- (D) He made jokes about the black students' concerns rather than handling them in a responsible manner.

2) How does the article develop the idea that the many people across campus want racial tensions to be addressed?

- (A) by giving statistics about the numbers of students involved
- (B) by stating that every student wanted the president to resign
- (C) by giving examples of student protests and other adults supporting them
- (D) by criticizing school policy and arguing that the students were right

3) Read the paragraph from the section "Coaches Support Players' Strike".

A statement issued by Pinkel and Missouri athletic director Mack Rhoades linked the return of the protesting football players to the end of a hunger strike by Jonathan Butler, a black graduate student. Butler began his effort Nov. 2 and had vowed to not eat until Wolfe was gone.

What is the BEST substitute for the word "vowed" in the paragraph above?

- (A) protested
- (B) promised
- (C) argued
- (D) complained

4) Read the paragraph from the section "Protests Were Growing".

Until Monday, Wolfe did not indicate that he had any intention of stepping down. He agreed in a statement issued Sunday that "change is needed" and said the university was working to draw up a plan by April to promote diversity and tolerance.

Which word has the SAME meaning as "indicate" in the sentence above?

- (A) show
- (B) argue
- (C) deny
- (D) pretend