



THE UNIVERSITY OF
TENNESSEE
KNOXVILLE

Education Policy Studies
and Center for Leadership
and Service



Student Leaders in the 1960s Knoxville Sit-ins

Student Leadership the Changed *Our* World

“In periods where there is no leadership, society stands still. Progress occurs when courageous, skillful leaders seize the opportunity to change things for the better.”

— Harry Truman



Players

College Students

Primarily KC students
Some UTK students



Non-Student Leaders

KC College President
KC and UTK Faculty/Staff
Pastors (mostly without congregations)
Civic Leaders
African American
Other

General Public

Knoxville Gov't

Leaders

Mayor
Council
City Officials
Chamber of Commerce

Merchants

Local
National
Chains



Highlights of Student Leadership in the Sit-ins

1st full-scale sit-in held 84 days after 1st planned sit-in

4 delays in action to allow for negotiation

3 times told a desegregation plan was coming from the negotiations....and it did not.

Twice the merchants “blamed” a cancelled meeting on the students, after students waited more than 2 weeks after last official communication

Downtown businesses desegregate 34 days after beginning continuous full-scale Sit-ins and “Trade with Your Friend/Stay Away From Downtown” movement

Different Time, Similar Experiences

- Four times students agreed to negotiate in lieu of sustained action.
- Students waited on average 2 weeks after deadlines to pursue further action, with the exception of the May 12-16 sit-ins.
- After at least twice merchants delayed meetings because of students' presence in their businesses (both announced after the events).
- Governmental and merchants did not provide timely response/action, except in the wake of student action.

Practical Implications for Student Leaders

- Align your values with actions
- Develop critical and ethical thinking to analyze issues and challenges
- Embrace a vision worthy of a lifetime
- Find and listen to mentors
- Cultivate your community – leaders, peers, and those you lead
- Know, understand, and consider culture
- Motivate others to act, but be reasonable....yet bold
- Be strategic and responsive to timing
- Recognize and accept that there is a cost to leadership
- Understand that success is not always obvious
- Know what matters to you
- Act

“One of the great liabilities of history is that all too many people fail to remain awake through great periods of social change. Every society has its protectors of status quo and its fraternities of the indifferent who are notorious for sleeping through revolutions. Today, our very survival depends on our ability to stay awake, to adjust to new ideas, to remain vigilant and to face the challenge of change.”

Martin Luther King Jr





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Prelude to 1960 Knoxville Sit-ins

- 2/1 Greensboro Sit-ins begin.
- 2/16 Knoxville College (KC) students delay planned 2/17 sit-in per President's request to allow negotiations with city leaders and merchants.
- 3/1 First Mayor's Committee Meeting (continued meeting almost weekly through April 22).
- 3/? Student "File Through" of local businesses. Merchants stated they planned to meet that afternoon, but didn't because of the students' presence in their businesses.
- 3/23 KC President tells students, per the Mayor, a desegregation plan is in place. Students begin planning peaceful integration. The next day national merchants backed out.
- 3/29 Local merchants did not attend a planned meeting with the Mayor's Committee, instead meeting in private to craft a proposal.
- 4/6 KS students send letter to community African American leadership asking for a Boycott. Student again agreed to negotiate giving Knoxville leaders a 4/13 deadline.
- 4/18 The Mayor's Committee and merchants met for 2.5 hours (5 days after the deadline). Merchants wanted an agreement from a core group of downtown and surrounding community businesses to participate. The National Companies were hesitant to desegregate and risk profits.
- 5/6 National Corporations would not meet with the 2 students who flew with the Mayor to NYC to encourage desegregating their businesses in Knoxville.
- 5/12 In the morning, the Mayor again tells KC President that merchants were meeting tomorrow and an agreement is at hand. That afternoon students sat down at 2 lunch counters, but left after a call from the President.
- 5/13 Students delayed planned sit-down until 3:30 (merchants typically met at 3:00). After verifying that the KC President had been notified of any change, the student staged a sit-in. Later the merchants stated that they planned to meet at 4pm, but didn't because of the sit-ins.
- 5/16 Student Sit-ins launched throughout downtown.
- 5/17 Mayor's Committee met for the first time since 4/22.
- 5/18 Merchants and Mayor's Committee met. Merchants were "willing to consider" desegregation if given a 10 day "cooling off period", but the Mayor verified that they were actually willing to commit to it. Students asked for 5 days due to impending graduation.
- 5/28 5 of the required core of businesses agreed to desegregation, but no official word released.
- 5/30 Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. speaks at Knoxville College graduation.
- 6/7 Summer KC students "tested" 10 businesses and were turned away from all but one (later told that service at the one was a mistake.)
- 6/9 Consistent Sit-ins (students and non-student citizens) began, with a boycott to follow
- 7/12 Merchants agreed following significant demonstrations of community support for desegregation

Taken from Diary of a Sit-in by Merrill ProudFoot (1962)

Attribution

These documents were prepared by Dr. Karen D. Boyd with the assistance of Kimberly Hill, a University of Tennessee doctoral candidate at the time of the event. This content was primarily taken from first person discussions with Mr. Robert Booker, a review of the archives at the Beck Cultural Center, and the content found in *Diary of a Sit-in* by Merrill Proudfoot (1962) and *Sit-Ins in Knoxville, Tennessee: A Case Study of Political Rhetoric*, Zagumny (2001).

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