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"Iowa has third-highest black unemployment rate"

By James Pusey - Daily Staff Writer

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Iowa has the third-highest unemployment rate for black Iowans of any state, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

"What else is new?" said Rudy Simms, director of the human rights department in Des Moines. "Iowa has always had a high rate of black unemployment, yet we purport to have equal rights and equal opportunities. What's wrong with that picture?"

Simms said the high rate of unemployment for blacks is due to the small percentage of minorities in Iowa. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, minorities made up only 7 percent of Iowa's population in 2006.

"Very low percentage results in very little interaction, therefore we rely on our stereotypes," Simms said.

He said the stereotypes that people form of minorities, particularly of black Americans, are too often guided by the way the media portrays them.

"They show the bad guys to be people of color - African Americans. It just stirs up a fear," Simms said. "We need new knowledge of all these people and new experiences that are different than all the negative stuff we get through various forms of media."

Although Iowa's rate of black unemployment is still among the worst in the nation, it has been consistently improving. In 2005, 20.1 percent of black men and women in Iowa were unemployed and in 2006, the percentage was down to 16.5 percent, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Derrick Rollins, assistant dean of the college of engineering, said being black has never stood in the way of him getting a job.

"I think in most cases, whether you're African American or not, you can find a job in Iowa," Rollins said. "It's finding the type of job that you're willing to do, that's the difficult thing."

He said the unemployment problem in Iowa has less to do with race and more to do with poverty and lack of education.

"The income and opportunities for African Americans are much less than they are for the

average white person in the state of Iowa. There is a bias there, and that bias is that people who come from disadvantaged backgrounds have a higher unemployment rate," Rollins said.

In 2007, there were 597 black students enrolled at Iowa State, making up 2.8 percent of total enrollment, according to the Office of the Registrar.

Iowa State helps these students, and all other students of color, succeed through the Multicultural Student Affairs office, said associate dean of students Mary Jo Gonzales. She said MSA works with companies like Cargill, Target and Hy-Vee to develop work skills, create resumes and do mock interviews.

Kerry Koonce, spokeswoman for Iowa Workforce Development, said she is happy with the progress the state has made, but there is still a lot more work to be done.

"It's going to take time, it's not a problem we can fix overnight," Koonce said. "There isn't one agency or one non-profit group that can fix the problem. It's something that everyone needs to work on."

She said Iowa Workforce Development is trying to fight this by partnering with community colleges to offer more certification programs, some that last only six months or a year. She said more people will be able to develop job skills if the certificates take less time to earn.

Simms said he is hopeful that the unemployment rate will continue to decline, but he said it will take an effort on the part of the public to change their attitudes toward minorities.

"If we keep bringing up the topic, maybe one day we'll overcome these negative stereotypes," Simms said. "Opportunity will be increased and the unemployment rate will go down."

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