

## **Black Students face extreme pressures at while attending Ohio University**

By: Nia Dumas



Alexis Wright, a junior at Ohio University and treasurer of Ohio University Recruitment Society. Photo taken by Nia Dumas.

African American students undergo cultural issues such as microaggressions due to the lack of diversity within the faculty and student body at Ohio University.

There are 21,028 students enrolled at Ohio University and only 1,001 black students enrolled, which includes all of their locations: Athens, Lancaster, Eastern, Lancaster, Pickerington, Dublin, Southern, Chillicothe, Cleveland, Proctorville, Zanesville and Beavercreek, according to Ohio University's Annual Diversity Report that was published during the 2018-2019 academic year.

Due to this lack of diversity, many black students find themselves to be the only black student in their classes, leaving them with a less amount of people to relate to.

Alexis Wright, a junior majoring in general business, explained how she experiences a certain amount of pressure in her classes.

“There’s a certain pressure to make sure I got the right answer so I don’t look stupid,” Wright said.

Winsome Chunnu-Byrada, Ph.D., director of the Ohio University Multicultural Center, works closely with multicultural students to help ensure the success of programs and organizations.

Chunnu-Byrada explained that due to this pressure to perform, many students feel the need to code-switch. Code-switching is when people alter their language and mannerisms to fit in with the majority.

Wright has experienced code-switching especially in her classes.

Wright further explained that if she were to get an answer wrong her white peers would notice. She feels that it is important to her to not feed into the stereotype that black people are typically uneducated because she is the only black student in her classes.

Being the only black student in class, Wright stands out. If she were absent from class, her peers and her professors would notice, which adds to the pressure she already undergoes.

Many universities, like Ohio University, have departments that primarily focus on the needs of multicultural students. Ohio University's Department of Diversity and Inclusion ensures focus on making the university accepting of all cultures. The department also focuses on retention rates amongst minority communities.

In 2018, only 32% of black full-time students pursuing a four-year undergraduate degree graduate, according to Ohio University's Annual Diversity Report.

Many black students notice this lack of diversity within their first year at Ohio University. The lack of diversity negatively influences their decision to return for the following year, according to the year Diversity Report.

Ohio University has 39 fully-tenured black faculty members out of 826 fully-tenured faculty members. Ohio University also has 11 non-tenured black faculty members out of 399 non-tenured faculty members, and 10 adjunct black faculty members out of 514 adjunct faculty members, according to Ohio University's Annual Diversity Report.

Wright explained that since she has arrived on the Athens campus her freshman year, the majority of her professors have been white. While attending Ohio University, she has only had two black professors. She has had one of the black professors twice.

Wright is very satisfied with the relationship she has developed with her professor. Her professor is able to understand her at a more intense level.

Wright feels that it is easier for her to express herself to her professor. She feels she is able to identify with her professor due to their similar background and experiences.

The relationship Wright has with her professor has been good for her. It has provided her with someone she is comfortable with confiding in with her academics but someone who is willing to vouch for her.

Wright applied for the Global Consulting Program, which sends Ohio University students to study abroad. Her professor conducted her interview for a program to France, which led to Wright being accepted into the program and also a scholarship to help fund her expenses.

Obtaining a scholarship for this program will allow Wright to be able to continue her education and travel at an affordable cost.

The lack of diversity amongst Wright's professors is slightly intimidating.

"I feel like I can't identify with business because I rarely see anyone in my field that looks like me," Wright said.

Wright said that she is least comfortable attending her white professors office hours.

"I feel like I am not heard or understood by [my white professors]," Wright said. "They say that they are understanding, but that is not how I feel."

Wright feels that certain white faculty members can be unprofessional.

“Sometimes they make me feel dumb, which is why I do not go,” Wright said.

For Akil Houston, an Associate Professor at Ohio University, black students are more likely to build a rapport with him and attend his office hours.

Houston explained the burdens and consequences of being black while attending a predominantly white institution. Houston has made his observations from his black students by comparing his experiences from attending a historically black university.

“The challenge of a PWI — predominantly white institution — is just that,” Houston said. “All the issues your gonna find in society — the university is a microcosm of that. Racism, sexism ... all of that is going to be here.”

For most black students, it isn't blatant racism that's an issue for them — microaggressions, which are small, crude and uninformed comments they receive on a day-to-day basis from peers and faculty.

Wright stated that she often has experienced some inappropriate comments from faculty. Wright also noted that interactions with her white peers do not feel genuine.

Wright has a work study position in the Office of Community Standards. Her employer often makes comments on her hair while she is at work.

“Whenever I come in to work with my hair in a different style she always says something like, ‘How did you get your hair that short that fast?’ or ‘I see you decided to change your hair,’” Wright said.

Wright further explained that these comments make her extremely uncomfortable and feels that her boss thinks that it is humorous. Wright’s white counterparts have the privilege of not being asked any of these questions.

As Multicultural Center director, Chunnu-Byrada makes it her duty to build a strong connection to black students so they do not feel uncared for or unimportant. One of her main focuses is getting freshmen in the black community involved in student organizations.

Wright is also treasurer of student organization Ohio University’s Society, OURS, which was denied funding and university assistance from The Senate Appropriations Commission..

SAC is a subdivision of Ohio University Senate and administers funds from the general student fund for campus programming, according to Ohio University website.

According to the Annual Diversity Report, 84% of undergraduate students are white. Ohio University has extremely low rates of diversity amongst its minority students and despite that, the university doesn’t provide aid to a program that helps increase campus diversity rates and doesn’t unwilling to give OURS the attention that it deserves.

OURS hosts an annual visit program in which they invite high school students to stay overnight and explore Ohio University's campus known as the Multicultural Visit Program, M.V.P.

The organization's mission is to strive for diversity on campus. They travel throughout Ohio to various high schools to recruit minorities.

OURS divides students by their prospective majors and provides them with a tour of campus. After the tour, students go to a variety show where different multicultural organizations perform for them in order to attract prospective students to campus.

Several student-run black organizations feel that Ohio University does not care about them. Due to a severe lack of attention given to these organizations and a low black population, black students feel that they can only rely on being an athlete or joining Greek life to find their community.

"You usually only have Greek organizations as source [sense of community for black students]," Houston said.

Greek life is not necessarily a bad thing, but if there were more representative organizations and outlets, black students would have more to resonate with in the Athens community.

The effectiveness of the MVP also affects the amount of black students that apply. Students want to attend a school where they can relate to their peers.

However, black prospective students don't feel included at OU due to the absence of black students on campus. This makes members of the black community think that the university's attempt to increase enrollment rates amongst the black community is insincere.

Although attending a PWI has its disadvantages, it also comes with one key benefit. Society is a majority white and PWIs prepare minorities for reality, especially in the corporate world.

Chunni-Byrada, said that white people still are the ones in power in America.

"Whites are still going to have the power and economic control in the United States," Chunni-Byrada said.

Similar to Houston, Chunni-Byrada emphasized that Ohio University is a microcosm of society.

"When you get a job, the job will be functioning at a level that is similar to OU that will allow you to succeed at your workplace," Chunni-Byrada said.

There are many factors that contribute to the lack of diversity at colleges and universities, all of which are reflections of society outside of these environments.

Universities, like Ohio University, need to be willing to acknowledge the issues that black students are faced with while attending their campus.



Not-for-publication

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I interviewed Chunnnu-Brayda because of her position she is able to build relationships with black students.

2018-2019 University and Inclusion Annual Report

<https://www.ohio.edu/sites/default/files/sites/diversity/files/FINAL%202018-19%20Annual%20Report.pdf>

I chose this document to get facts regarding black students and faculty at Ohio University.