

UB students discuss racial experiences and lack of diversity on campus

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Angelique Romulus is used to being the only black person in her class.

Romulus, a junior psychology major, feels UB's campus is lacking in diversity. UB faculty and other students agree with Romulus, saying UB's population does not accurately reflect New York State racial demographics. Some say the low number of black faculty on campus is the issue. Others feel it is because the Transnational Studies Department doesn't receive enough funding and there isn't an African American Studies Department on its own.

There are currently 1,881 black students at UB out of 28,444 total students, according to UB Spokesperson John Della Contrada. In Fall 2015, UB had a total of 98 black faculty members. Forty-one were tenure track and 57 were non-tenure track, according to Della Contrada. UB had 202 black state-supported staff in Fall 2015.

UB officials have acknowledged the lack of minorities on campus and have implemented classes and programs in hopes of increasing those numbers. But some students feel the lack of black professors is discouraging to black students.

"It's important for me as a black person to sit down and be learning from another black person," Romulus said.

Aliyaa Reeves, a junior political science and legal studies major and member of the Black Student Union, finds it puzzling that many African American studies professors



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Angelique Romulus and Malcolm Gray joined the Black Student Union to engage with the black community on campus. Black students and faculty feel the campus is lacking in diversity.

at UB are white.

"How can you be an African American studies professor when you're not African American yourself so you can't even talk about your experiences," Reeves said.

Malcom Gray, a senior political science major and BSU historian, said he feels a pressure to conform on a campus with so few black students.

"There's a sense when you're engaging with other students that sometimes you need to like censor views or censor how you act in an attempt not to stand out too much or not to come off looking stereotypical to

wards other students," Gray said.

When Gray joined BSU, he said he was able to be himself.

BSU staged a peaceful protest at the Buffalo versus Army football game last month in an effort to raise awareness of the Black Lives Matter Movement. They wore black for solidarity chanting, "black lives matter."

"An older white gentleman was like 'black lives matter, but white lives matter more,'" Reeves said. "And then this black guy walked next to us [with his white friends] and he said 'all lives matter.'"

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Gray described this experience as frightening and intense.

Carl Nightingale, chair of the Diversity or Learning Committee and Transnational Studies and American studies professor, thinks the Black Lives Matter movement has become the spark in which race relations are examined in the U.S.

Nightingale said black students have a lot working against them.

"The fact that African Americans have about one twentieth the wealth of white people and no matter what educational level, no matter what income level, you take a poor white person, he's gonna have twenty times more wealth than a poor black person," Nightingale said.

Students with "black sounding names" have harder a time finding jobs than students with "white sounding names," Nightingale said.

"Personally over the summer, and especially recently this semester with the killings of the black men and women in society, it took an emotional toll on me. It hurts," Gray said. "What if one day I walk in the street and I get in a problem? I can't really trust cops to protect me and I have to depend on myself really. Even though I come in a peaceful matter, I may still be deemed as a threat and it's scary sometimes to think of that."

Gray said whenever he walks to campus from his apartment in Hadley Village, he looks around to make sure everything in his surroundings is OK.

"It's no secret that black students and white students get treated differently," he said. "I feel like with more enclosure with my own people, I feel more safe and watched over."

Reeves feels a lot of the white students on campus segregate themselves from people of color. For this reason, Reeves said most of her friends are black.

Tavaine Whyte, a junior African Studies major, said he tends to encounter more racism outside of UB's campus.

"When I'm in Wegmans or Tops or something like that, I get a lot of looks because I wear all black, I'm very tall, dreadlocks, very intimidating," Whyte said. "I get a lot of people walking very quickly away from me or trying to avoid me and it's kind of obvious that it's based on how I look."

Many students and faculty feel the ab-



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Romulus (left) and Gray (right) both say the university can do more to enhance minority students' experience at UB.

sence of an African American Studies department promotes segregation on campus.

African American Studies is encompassed under the Transnational Studies department, which includes Global Gender Studies and other ethnic studies.

"There's always been this sense of resentment towards the Black Studies department from the country in the same sense that there's been a resentment towards women's studies or gender studies," Whyte said. "The idea of learning about these groups and the way the world interacted with them denotes that there has been problems or inaccuracies in the way that these groups have been observed or interacted with this country."

Whyte said to bunch African American studies into one field of transnational studies, ultimately limits the amount of funding UB needs to give to the entire department.

Lakisha Simmons, a Transnational Studies professor, also said black studies programs need more resources and funding.

She said UB has lost faculty of color over the past few years and is continuing to lose more. Simmons believes the program is currently in a "dire situation."

"African and African American studies no longer has a department and I think that's important because it reflects values of the university," Simmons said. "Where the funding is going often reflects the university."

Whyte said UB should put more money into understanding black history.

"I believe the university needs to hire diverse faculty in all departments and units,"

Simmons said. "Cluster hires on a variety of topics relating to diversity and inclusion would show that the university is truly committed to serving the students and providing more classes across campus."

The university has taken a number of steps to increase diversity.

Teresa Miller, vice provost for Equity and Inclusion, said there are several programs that are meant to "retain and enhance" the experience of black students.

The Cora P. Maloney College includes the Arthur O. Eve Educational Opportunity Program (EOP), Daniel Acker Scholars Program and Student Support Services (SSS) Program and other programs, which help to recruit underrepresented minority students.

The university introduced the Diversity of Learning general education requirement last year in an effort to provide students with cultural knowledge and awareness.

While Whyte believes the diversity of learning general education requirement is a step in the right direction, he wonders how effective it will be for students in the long run.

"A diversity of learning requirement is important but it's also kind of vague," he said. "As much as it in theory does a lot to quell relations or to teach at the end of the day it's only one foot in the water. In the same way that you probably don't remember a lot from your Psych 101 course, you probably won't remember a whole lot from your diversity course," Whyte said.

Whyte said the new requirement is more beneficial for UB's press and politics than it

is for engaging and teaching students.

Keith Griffler, chair of the Transnational Studies department, said the media has played a big role in raising awareness for the Black Lives Matter movement.

"The year I came in [to the University of Cincinnati] in 1998, the student worker in African American Studies was shot by the police on campus. The police alleged that this student had robbed an ATM but none of the evidence presented by the police held up."

This was one of at least 15 killings of blacks in Cincinnati in a five-year period, according to Griffler.

"Of course it's incontestable that all lives matter, but the point of Black Lives Matter is that black lives have not mattered and seem to continue not to matter to a nation that allows the police to shoot particularly black males at such a disproportionate rate," said.

Griffler said UB's student body should reflect the high school graduating class in the State of New York.

"We are not close to being diverse enough," he said. "It's a state institution. We have the mission of serving the people of the state. When we have achieved that level of diversity, we'll be there or at least close to there."

The university is attempting to attract faculty of color by requiring training to reduce barriers around diversity and faculty searches, according to Miller. The training is focused on understanding implicit unconscious bias and how it can affect faculty searches.

"One of the best practices is don't use questions that ask people about their national origin or race or ethnicity," Miller said. "Another best practice is you write job descriptions broadly to make sure that you attract the most qualified people that you can in the applicant pool."

The university is currently writing a "diversity and inclusion strategic plan," Miller said, which charts out a number of strategic directions to "move the needle on diversity."

One of the initiatives of the plan is to create a Center for Inclusive Excellence at UB. She said the center will help the university deal with issues of diversity and inclusion.

"Blackness is a universality that transcends regional structures," Whyte said. "Blackness is not something you can take off or you can wear out, no matter where you are in this world, colorism will affect you."