

Colleges 'diversify' in Ohio

The state of Ohio is home to many different universities of all different sizes and cultures and yet, they all share the same problem: diversity – or lack thereof.

“There are a lot of people who grow up without being exposed to diversity and the older generation mindset is all people see at a very young age,” said Bill Cohen, a graduate teaching assistant of engineering at The Ohio State University.

I researched and compared three different universities and their diversity and inclusion programs within the state of Ohio. Those schools include the University of Toledo, the University of Cincinnati and OSU.

I considered size, popularity, competitive programs and of course student representation, but chose to focus on these three schools due to the representation of the three different sizes of the typical universities in the state of Ohio.

UT has a total enrollment of around 23,000, while UC has 44,000 and OSU has a total enrollment of around 58,000.

In a list of 100 of the most diverse universities by Niche.com, only one Ohio university was represented: Case Western Reserve University.

That same publication released a list of the most diverse universities in the state of Ohio. Out of 61 schools, UT is ranked 32nd, one ahead of OSU and two ahead of Bowling Green State University.

In an interview, UT student Carter Steude and UC student Tyler Siebert both said that they did not see any issue with diversity on their respective campuses.

Each university offered many different programs and trainings to create a more welcome and inclusive environment, yet many

students are not aware that they were even implemented in the first place.

“People don’t want to be educated on the subject,” Steude, a third-year education major, said. “They believe it is someone else’s problem and not theirs so they don’t do anything about it.”

At UT, the month of April means Diversity month. UT is offering different forums and events to engage and welcome students from all over the globe in addition to educating students on the subject of diversity.

Shanda Gore, chief diversity officer at UT, said that while UT is making strides, there is still work to be done.

“It’s important that we support one another and continue to have these conversations,” Gore said.

In addition to this new initiative at UT, UC has started inclusive workshops that are new for this school year in addition to holding different events, such as hosting guest speaker Jennifer Eberhardt.

The associate chief diversity officer at UC, Kathy Riehle, said the university stands by their mission to make campus environment inclusive and welcoming to students, staff and faculty. UC sits at number 14 on the list of most diverse universities in Ohio, doubling both UT and OSU.

“When you walk around campus, it sure doesn’t seem like there is an issue,” said fourth-year architectural engineer at UC, Tyler Siebert. “Almost everyone gets along and it comes right from President Ono really.”

UC President Santa Ono has created a partnership with students and staff to refocus on diversity efforts around the university. Some of those include new diversity teams and committees, new strategic hiring efforts and holding different

discussions on the topic of diversity and inclusion.

According to the rankings, the majority represents 80 percent of OSU's campus with only 20 percent representing the minority. Like other universities in Ohio, OSU offers different inclusion workshops, diversity forums and hosts many different guest speakers to speak on the subject at hand.

"OSU is such a big campus with a large number of different students, anyone who wants to learn or know more can by just walking into the Office of Diversity and Inclusion," Cohen said.

All universities are different but these three all still choose the same path towards a more accepting university. While many different outcomes come from given efforts, the university can only do so much.

"Everyone works incredibly hard," Gore said. "Everyone is working from their own place to make sure students feel welcome and safe while studying at UT."

To learn more about diversity at the UT, you can contact the university's Office of Equity, Diversity and Community Engagement at 1-800-586-5336.

[Asian Culture at UT](#)

While the Asian community represents only 2 percent of the student population at the University of Toledo and are often clumped into one generalized category, the unique student groups on campus reflect the diversity and culture of each individual facet within the community.

One of these groups is the Chinese Student and Scholars

Association. Yuan Hu, the president of CSSA, said that the organization is all about supporting and providing resources for newly arrived Chinese students, scholars and their families, all while promoting the culture and building connections with other student organizations.

Hu also said that it is important for students to understand other cultures in order to get to know them better. Cultural differences in how people relate to one another can often lead to misconceptions or misunderstandings, according to Hu.

“Chinese people are very friendly – they like to make friends with other people, but sometimes they are shy – it is because of the culture,” Hu said. “Sometimes American students think we are silent and do not have much eye contact with the other person. It is not because we are impolite, it is because of Chinese culture. We are trying to adapt to American culture.”

In order to promote their culture, CSSA hosts several events throughout the year both to celebrate within the community as well as to raise awareness with those who may not be familiar with Chinese culture.

“We assist Confucius Institute to hold some culture events. We also have our own culture activities, Chinese Spring Festival gala, carnival or other events,” Hu said.

In addition to interacting with student organizations, language is an integral and defining part of any culture. At UT, there are currently six Japanese instructors, one of them being Joseph Hara, the Director of the Japanese Studies Program.

Hara was born and raised in Japan and came to America about 45 years ago.

“I have been teaching the language and culture at UT for the last 26 years,” Hara said. “[The] study abroad program in Japan that I developed has been continuously active for the

last 17 years and we have 26 UT graduates working in Japan today as the result.”

Students in Hara’s classes have always been interested in the cultural aspect of what he teaches, which is why Hara said that he tries to incorporate as many aspects of Japanese culture in the classroom as he can.

“I have Japanese Culture and Civilization courses every semester and they are always full in enrollment. It is an indication of how much students are interested in learning about the culture,” Hara said. “I usually cover not only historical aspects on cultural development such as diet, fashion, festivals, religions and different view point based on philosophical background.”

Hara said there are many non-Asian students who participate in things like CSSA and take the Japanese language courses, whether it’s to gain more knowledge of the culture, or to learn a skill that will increase their career opportunities.

“Students who are taking Japanese language courses as well as culture courses are from all areas of disciplines. I would say a good number of students have some exposure to Japanese anime before showing their interest in the Japanese culture. Also a majority of students seem to think of future job opportunities after graduation,” Hara said.

Hara said that he feels that the Japanese culture is well represented on campus, due to the fact that the Japanese section of the Foreign Language Department is the second largest behind Spanish.

Hu also feels this way about the Chinese culture, and all cultures in general.

“We can see different culture events in every semester. UT provides them as much as it can, it promotes every culture event, it makes us feel at home,” Hu said.

From Birmingham to Ferguson

Not much can stay the same over 50 years, and civil rights activism is not immune to change – but what’s the difference between Black Lives Matter and the plain old civil rights movement? Is it really just a hashtag?

University of Toledo history instructor Jason Jordan said it’s not so simple. Jordan said both movements have groups of people with overlapping opinions, but not necessarily identical opinions.

“We tend to think of the civil rights movement as this monolithic thing where everybody is on the same page, everybody has the same goals, they agree on the same tactics, and it really couldn’t be further from the truth,” Jordan said. “Some people go as far as saying there wasn’t one civil rights movement, but [many] civil rights movements ... because there was such a diversity of thought.”

Jordan said activism battles before 1960 were mostly fought in the halls of government. Think of *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act. However, when activists at the time lost their faith in the ability to make change from within the system, action-oriented groups started popping up.

“People started to realize that real change in society wasn’t going to come solely from the courtrooms,” Jordan said. “Take for instance all of the student activism that you see across the country today ... a lot of that ... reminds me very much of the types of young-person- or student-led activism that you saw in the mid-to-late [1960s].”

Jordan said he sees similarities between different movements,

even across generational lines. He said the surge of young adults in the Black Lives Matter movement reminds him of the 1960s Black Power movement.

“It tends to be younger, college-age students who are kind of cynics, tired of banging their heads against [the] brick wall holding them back,” Jordan said.

One brick wall in the way of progress is the belief that race issues are a thing of the past, which Jordan said can slow things down.

“[Activists] kind of get frustrated with what they see as this slow pace of change in American society, and just kind of a general apathy to issues having to deal with race,” he said. “So there’s a lot of frustration, there’s a lot of anger, there’s a lot of discontent that you can see bubbling to the surface.”

Now, the slow march of progress may be upping the tempo. In the 1960s, activists had to deal without the advantage of tweets or viral videos, a luxury the Black Lives Matter movement enjoys.

David Young, director of the Office of Excellence, which operates an educational program for underprivileged youth, said social media brings advantages to an activist movement. Raising awareness about social issues and documenting evidence of incidents like police killings is much easier with the help of modern technology.

But every coin has two sides, and Young said social media is no exception. The lightning-fast speed of social media means both successes and mistakes are amplified to an unprecedented level.

“We just always have to remember to be responsible in sharing ... just as exciting as this instant news is, and instant awareness is, there’s a level of responsibility that has to

come with that as well,” Young said. “As their tweet goes out, the judgment of the tweet is just as instantaneous.”

UT is no stranger to activism or the Black Lives Matter movement. On Martin Luther King Jr. Day in 2015, a group of 30 protestors interrupted the annual Unity Celebration by approaching the stage and chanting, “Hands up, don’t shoot!” The protest lasted several minutes before the ceremony could continue.

Unity Celebration organizers and attendees were not upset by the demonstration, but more intense demonstrations across the country have received criticism for being too disruptive. Jordan said it’s hard to draw the line between reason and excess, especially when many protestors believe disruption is necessary for change.

Young has his own experiences in student activism to draw from. He was involved in the campaign to ask UT to divest from the South African apartheid in his college years. Looking back on his involvement, he said it’s important to strategize.

“You’ve got to be prepared, you have to do your research, it has to make sense, you have to make sure that you’re well-informed,” Young said. “And sometimes there’s a tendency to move out of emotion rather than real understanding of what the situation is, and what the problem is, and students have to guard against that.”

Bridging the cultural divide

Thinking about diversity makes you distinguish some very personal and intricate details about yourself. It makes you really look at your identity and realize it isn’t just a plain

account your experiences and surroundings. Rather, you realize you are bigger than just you; you are a converging point of different cultures and histories. At UT, we have an unusual, but predominant, culture of students that are a product of a complicated combination of cultures. These are the first-generation Americans and the international students.

Being on a university campus you realize that genetically inherited features or socially inherited habits no longer completely embody the entire structure of a person. This is because what we have now have are first-generation Americans who have immigrant parents but habitually Americans, juxtaposed with international students or immigrants who have come to America for higher studies and are merging with the American culture, but who are essentially a product of their homeland.

Student organizations that represent this diversity hold events showcasing unique features of the different cultures, which are so knowledgeable and enriching, and definitely exciting as the SU is adorned galore with fliers advertising some cultural event or the other at UT throughout the year.

I feel a sense of pride and uniqueness when I educate others about the history and ways of my people, the Bangladeshis. On the other hand, I enjoy learning more about the surrounding American ways and inherent American characteristics and traditions. Keeping these in mind, I've come to realize a very important quality about myself. Having been in the US for almost a decade now, trying to learn and integrate myself with the American culture to better adjust to the new land, I have increasingly become somewhat "American" too. It is a sentiment many internationals say as well.

Starbucks has become my coffee, Walmart my grocery store, pasta the go-to dinner and I have other such American additives integrated into my cultural background, which make me a non-genetic, non-historically and a non-traditionally

American. Thus, while I still identify primarily as a Bangladeshi and enjoy educating people about the Bengali way of making "bhaat" (rice) and "daal" (lentil soup), I believe the staple American burger and fries has become an integral part of my being as well.

The cultural events showcasing the unique traditions of particular culture are inclusive, but on a very superficial level. Other than educating others on food and traditional performances distinctive to their particular country, there is very little else these events do. While these events can provide internationals with some sort of nostalgia or feelings of solidarity with their country people, it doesn't do much else. It is important to talk about these events, because they are one of UT's primary ways to showcase diversity on campus. But there is an important part of the UT population who don't obtain the inclusion or identification promised at UT. These are the first-generation Americans.

A huge portion of the first-generation Americans feel very disconnected from their history, simply because their backgrounds are not even identified as a culturally distinct existence. They are a combination of two different cultures, and while you'd think that because of the two cultures to choose from they'd have more space for inclusion, it is exactly the opposite.

The social events that the student organizations, representing different countries, often have little impact on the first-gen Americans. They feel like they aren't able to connect with internationals from their parental birth-country and don't really get to understand the ways and language of the people. UT never holds discussion of issues related to first-generation Americans. Getting that real feeling of solidarity and identification with a non-American culture is difficult. Despite these feelings of isolation, UT does not have system to address these issues.

I have asked first-gen and international students from the same cultures to talk about their feelings about how they feel their cultures are represented at UT, and if they feel a good sense of belonging and inclusion because of their backgrounds. The answers I got were surprising.

All of the first-generation Americans I have talked with for this article have expressed how eagerly they want to learn about their parent's cultures and incorporate it into their lives. A lot of the time I didn't even think it really mattered to first-generation Americans where their parents hailed from; I thought they were not even concerned about identifying as anything other than Americans. However, that was not the case.

Both first-generation Americans and internationals have expressed how high schools often have little diversity and so they rarely got a chance to know about their parent's ancestral heritage. When they came to college, they expected to be properly integrated and understand the values and traditions their ancestors have. They want to know and feel connected to their parents' cultures, since that is also, despite them never being having grown up there, an essential truth of who they are. However, this group or "culture" isn't something that isn't acknowledged, despite the fact that their sentiments are actively being ignored as they are denied their historical and cultural values.

It was surprising to find that it was the international students who felt integrated into the American culture and found people from their own countries to share new experiences and with. On the other hand, the first-gen Americans felt left out of this side of their identity. They often just had their American identities to rely on, and some people felt left out even then, as at first glance, their genetically inherited appearances weren't American.

Meeting at a single event, where all you see are some food and

clothing from your parents' country, don't really solve issues of inclusion. The interaction and ability to really identify as an American-Korean, or American-Bangladeshi or American-Indian, aren't addressed. From personal experience, both internationals and the first-generation Americans are left feeling like another American who just learned about a new type of food or new type of dance.

UT needs to address the issues of first-gen Americans. As the administration increases efforts to improve diversity on campus, they need to understand that the correct way to make them feel integrated and at home and at one with the ancestral heritage for their own personal identification, is to actually increase personal interactions between the first-gen and people from that culture. It is the only way to clearly visualize those lines that converge to form your unique racial identity.

The White Student Union

How exactly would you define white heritage?

This is the question Ronald Pheils, the man who is organizing a student group that aims to "celebrate white culture and heritage" at the University of Toledo, is attempting to answer.

"There is no 'white heritage.' There is no one thing we can point to," Pheils said.

Despite that lack of concrete common heritage, the group is seeking to unite around cultural celebration and defense against accusations of racism.

“We don’t believe any race is superior to any other ... we aren’t all white radicals,” Pheils said.

For now, the group has operated under the name “White Student Union,” a name that harkens back to decades of controversy and racial tension across the U.S.

WSU groups are not new. They have formed on campuses like OSU, Penn State and Michigan State.

In December, a UT White Student Union page appeared on Facebook, sparking controversy. They have since deleted that page, but the group is still organizing and working to form a recognized UT student organization.

According to Pheils, the group wants to form based on the premise that there is not a space for white students to celebrate their culture and heritage. As a matter of free speech, Pheils believes it is important to organize. Pheils also said that since there is space for other minorities to meet and celebrate their culture and identity, there should also be space for white people to do the same.

He shares this opinion with dozens on college campuses across the U.S., as official and unofficial White Student Union groups begin to appear on a dozen other campus across the U.S. Pheils is the unofficial president of the group at UT and was one of the administrators on the UT WSU Facebook page.

“There are white student unions on other campuses. Unfortunately some of them have gone to the extreme,” Pheils said, emphasizing that it is important to distance themselves from the radicals.

Pheils said many of these groups resort to Facebook organizing because it is easy to remain anonymous via the social media’s “Page” function. The creator of the UT WSU Facebook page used that anonymity. Pheils did not create the group, but joined one created by an anonymous Facebook user going under the

pseudonym of Themistocles Pierre.

The reason Pierre said he wishes to remain anonymous is to protect himself from threats of violence.

“Too many people already think they know who I am,” he wrote via Facebook. “I’ve heard so many threats of violence, you wouldn’t believe. If I can even be connected to a friend, or friend of a friend, I might be in danger. And naturally, I don’t want to put myself or others in danger.”

That fear of danger is what Pheils said is part of the reason why there have been problems with WSU’s becoming an official UT student group. They have not turned in an application to become an official group yet, according to Kaye Patten-Wallace, the senior vice president for student affairs.

“If they meet the criteria to become a recognized student organization, they would have the same rights and privileges of any other recognized student organization,” she wrote in an email interview.

According to Willie McKether, special assistant to the president for diversity, any group is able to organize as long as they do not spread hate and intolerance, which is what Pheils said was a concern brought to him from Dean of Students Tamika Mitchell.

Pheils and Pierre both said they do not condone hateful speech, racism or racial violence. They actually want to distance themselves from organizations that promote racism, like the KKK.

Despite these beliefs, both individuals said they fear being labeled a racist because of the color of their skin. Pheils and Pierre cited the Jan. 24 incident with Rayshawn Watkins as what they perceived to be an example of falsely labeling whites as racist by jumping to conclusions too quickly.

Pheils said he can acknowledge the historical perspective of racism, and he understands that white privilege exists, but he said things are starting to shift.

“It’s almost starting to turn now, now [whites are] starting to be persecuted,” Pheils said. “Now we are starting to be perceived as the bad people if we do have an opinion. I’m the last person that would be a racist, you know. I was honestly one of the biggest Ben Carson supporters out there, I was still a Condoleezza Rice fan.”

The “persecution” Pheils mentions includes being left out of the ongoing conversation on race, and even being targeted by it. This is why Pierre said many white student union groups have begun.

“White Student Unions, and other pro-white activism, is the natural consequence, and logical extension, of identity politics,” Pierre wrote.

Pierre questions the notion that, if other cultures and races are allowed to have pride in their identity, then why is it wrong for whites?

“I don’t want people thinking that pride equals hate,” Pierre wrote. “I don’t hate anyone. In fact, I agree with some of what I’ve heard from Black Lives Matter protesters. We should all have pride in our identity, without hating anyone.”

What Pheils said he does not want is white heritage to be labeled as automatically racist. “What we don’t want is the incident that happened in a fraternity house several months ago to automatically be pointed [sic] as the white guy is the bad guy,” Pheils said.

Pheils said that if the student group actually organizes next year will probably go by the name “European Student Union” as an effort to distance themselves from the perception of being hate group.

Regardless of the efforts to organize as a group solely dedicated to European culture and heritage, Lance Price, president of UT's Black Student Union, said he still does not understand the group's claim.

"I fail to see the need in having a 'White Student Union,'" Lance Price wrote in an email interview. "We attend a university where white students are already the majority."

In a speech to the university two weeks ago, President Gaber presented the racial demographic of campus, which showed that whites make up more than 50 percent of the student population.

Price said he would encourage the White Student Union to reach out to other campus cultural organizations to increase dialogue, but "if the 'White Student Union' continues to take the path they are currently on, I doubt we'll be welcoming them with open arms."

Pheils said he would rather work with BSU and the Latino Student Union, rather than fight with them.

"I don't want to create a war with BSU or LSU," he said. "I have great friends and great leaders from the past that have been presidents of those groups, and I have talked to them and they thought it was a great idea, if we stay on the path of an open dialogue."

However, Price said he thinks that forming a WSU "misses the point" about white privilege, while Pierre said he thinks skin color has less to do with privilege.

"There is a disconnect between theory and practice, if I am supposedly privileged, or not, based merely on skin color," Pierre wrote. "When someone assumes you are privileged, without knowing your personal circumstances, it shows that they don't care about you as a person. They don't want to hear my story. They don't care. They've already made up their mind, without needing to know anything about me."

Pheils said this is the crucial problem they hope to address, to avoid being labeled and grouped as privileged or as racists. He said that these labels target and hurt overall relations and that they make all white people out to be against other races.

“Really, the biggest thing is we are not anti-anybody, we are not,” Pheils said.