

Diversity (/kickers/race-campus)

Demonstrators gather to stand in solidarity with Mizzou students of color

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Daily Staff Reporter

A candid conversation about race and diversity at the University of Missouri — largely led by students — spilled onto the University of Michigan’s campus Wednesday as hundreds of demonstrators gathered on the Diag in solidarity with Missouri’s Black community.

“Voices are being silenced not only in Missouri, but right here at the University of Michigan,” said Social Work student Wendy Cortes, one of the event’s organizers. “And it is our goal for you to know that you are able to exist without second thought, without hesitation and without genuine fear.”

Hosted by the School of Social Work People Of Color Collective, the demonstration began at the School of Social Work Building, where participants created signs and banners using #Umich4Mizzou. From there, chanting “UMich for Mizzou, we support you,” demonstrators marched to the Diag, where some shared personal experiences about being Black at the University.

Following a string of racial incidents targeting Black students and other students of color at the University of Missouri, Missouri students held demonstrations around their campus, demanding the Missouri system’s president, Timothy Wolfe, resign from his position. Wolfe as well as R. Bowen Loftin,

the school's chancellor, announced Tuesday they would resign from their positions.

And for some Missouri students, the call for change resulted in drastic measures. A Missouri graduate student underwent a seven-day-long hunger strike to demand the president's resignation. Members of the Missouri football team said they would not engage in any football-related activities until the president stepped down.

On the Diag on Wednesday evening, organizers read various posts on social media that followed Wolfe and Loftin's announcement, including one from a Yik Yak user who posted they would shoot any Black students on the Missouri campus. There were also reports of unlicensed vehicles circling Black students in parking lots at Mizzou.

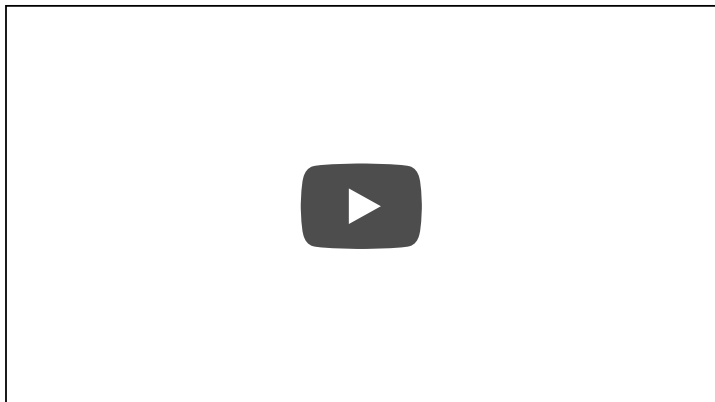
Cortes said she was outraged at the University of Missouri's lack of response to threats toward Black students on the campus.

"Black students at the University of Missouri have continuously experienced racism and discrimination on campus, as many other institutions of higher education have," she said. "As stated by a Missouri student, the University of Missouri administration has continued to overshadow the racism and violence toward students of color with well written PR statements and movements and initiatives that never tackle the issue."

She added that she was disappointed that professors at the University's School of Social Work weren't providing a platform for students to discuss issues brought to light by demonstrations in Missouri. The University is currently in the midst of a [week-long diversity summit](https://www.michigandaily.com/section/news/schlissel-hosts-campus-wide-assembly-discuss-diversity) (<https://www.michigandaily.com/section/news/schlissel-hosts-campus-wide-assembly-discuss-diversity>) intended to garner input from the community as administrators craft a campus-wide strategic plan to improve equity and inclusion on campus.

Social Work student Khalid Bowens echoed Cortes' remarks, saying he has noticed a lack of response from some University faculty members.

"I'm tired of teachers sitting in my classrooms telling me that things that are going on within Black America does not matter in this classroom, because yes the fuck it does," he said. "Because I'm in this classroom, this is my life, and this is what I have to go through."



Engineering and LSA senior Will Royster, a Central Student Government presidential candidate for the 2015-2016 academic year, said both the Black Student Union and members of By Any Means Necessary have coordinated similar efforts in past years, but demonstrations at the University of Missouri show more effective ways to get University officials to respond to concerns raised by Black students.

In Missouri, the threat of football players striking could have impacted revenue from cancelled games. If the team had forfeited its Saturday game against Brigham Young University, Missouri would have lost \$1 million due to an agreement signed by both schools last year.

“With this Missouri incident, we saw the solution,” Royster said. “We talk Black politics, but everybody talks money; everybody talks green dollars.”

He also said that Black students should build coalitions with other multiethnic students.

“Multiethnic people, y’all go through some of the same shit we go through,” he said. “We need to build coalitions. We need to support each other. This shit is intersectional all day.”

Several other demonstrators offered remarks during the event, drawing on personal experiences of racism and navigating a predominantly white campus as a student of color. One student quoted Martin Luther King Jr., and called on those in the community to remain active in times of moral crisis.

Another attendee on the Diag said users replied to a video of the demonstration she posted on Twitter comparing demonstrators to “chimpanzees mating” and something they “saw on Discovery Channel.”

“This is what people look at us today as: animals,” she said. “They don’t see the injustice in this world, they don’t open their eyes to see what’s really going on.”

LSA freshman Jason Young said in his remarks that he felt devalued and unappreciated at the University.

“My presence is not desired here,” he said. “But what does this ‘M’ mean? If this a symbol of hatred and it’s saying that I’m not welcome here, what does it mean? It hurts me to think that I came to this college to be accepted and to just learn and instead, I’m seen as this oddity.”

Bowens echoed Young’s remarks, and said he’s tired of being treated as the token Black student in his classes.

“I’m tired of sitting in a classroom with Black students who look at me like I’m supposed to educate them,” he said. “Don’t look at me as your token Black student to tell you about the Black experience, because we all have Black experiences. Look at all these Black faces here tonight and I can tell you we all live different lives.”

Some students connected events at the University of Missouri to the 2014 killings of unarmed Black men in Ferguson, Mo., and Staten Island, N.Y. In his remarks, LSA sophomore Theo Nobles, recounted his experience his freshman year and feelings of shock when these events broke.

“I was in my dorm room at Mary Markley Hall with my roommate, and we just sat and looked at each other and thought, this is the world we live in,” he said. “A man can get killed in cold blood and his murderer can just walk away.”

Nobles said being a Black man at a predominantly white institution has caused him to be looked down upon by peers. It was understood, Nobles said, that as a Black man, he would be treated differently.

“From the get-go, you are looked at as beneath,” he said. “From the get-go, you are looked at as a future criminal, a future statistic. I get asked why I decided to go to a predominantly white institution, not a historically Black college, every day. I’m sure people at Missouri that look like me get asked the same thing.”

Upon request for interview, some white demonstrators declined to comment for the purpose of elevating the Black perspective on the issue. White and multiethnic demonstrators also allowed Black community members to stand at the front the group during the march to the Diag.

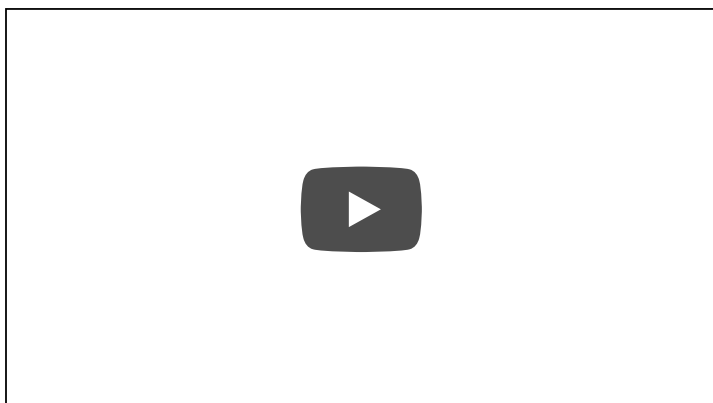
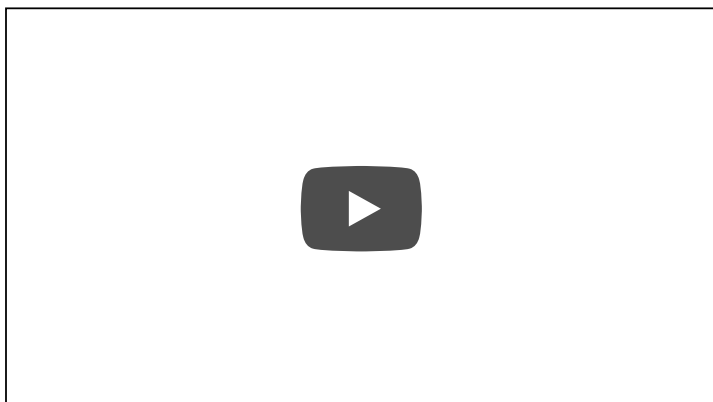
In an interview with The Michigan Daily after the event, LSA junior Julia Wang, who attended the demonstration, said she believes giving minorities a platform to express themselves is an integral part of the process toward change.

“It’s a really important event to come to as someone who falls into the minority category but may not always feel the effects of it as an Asian woman,” she said. “I think really important that that platform is available and we let those people speak and hear the other side.”

She also said she was shocked that issues affecting the Black community on campus are often not discussed.

“Every time I come, hearing people’s voices and hearing their stories about how they're treated makes me shocked,” she said. “It makes me feel very lucky, but in the worst way possible. No one deserves to feel that way, no one deserves to be treated that way, and it’s horrifying that this is the only way I hear about it.”

A community prayer for the University of Missouri is scheduled to take place Thursday night on the Diag.





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Brittney Williams · Medical Case Manager at Health Emergency Lifeline Programs

This is a nice piece, but the bit about black protesters being "allowed" to stand at the front by white ones is not only untrue, it's a poor choice of words, especially given the topic at hand.

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Erin Renee

I agree. I noticed that too when reading it.

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