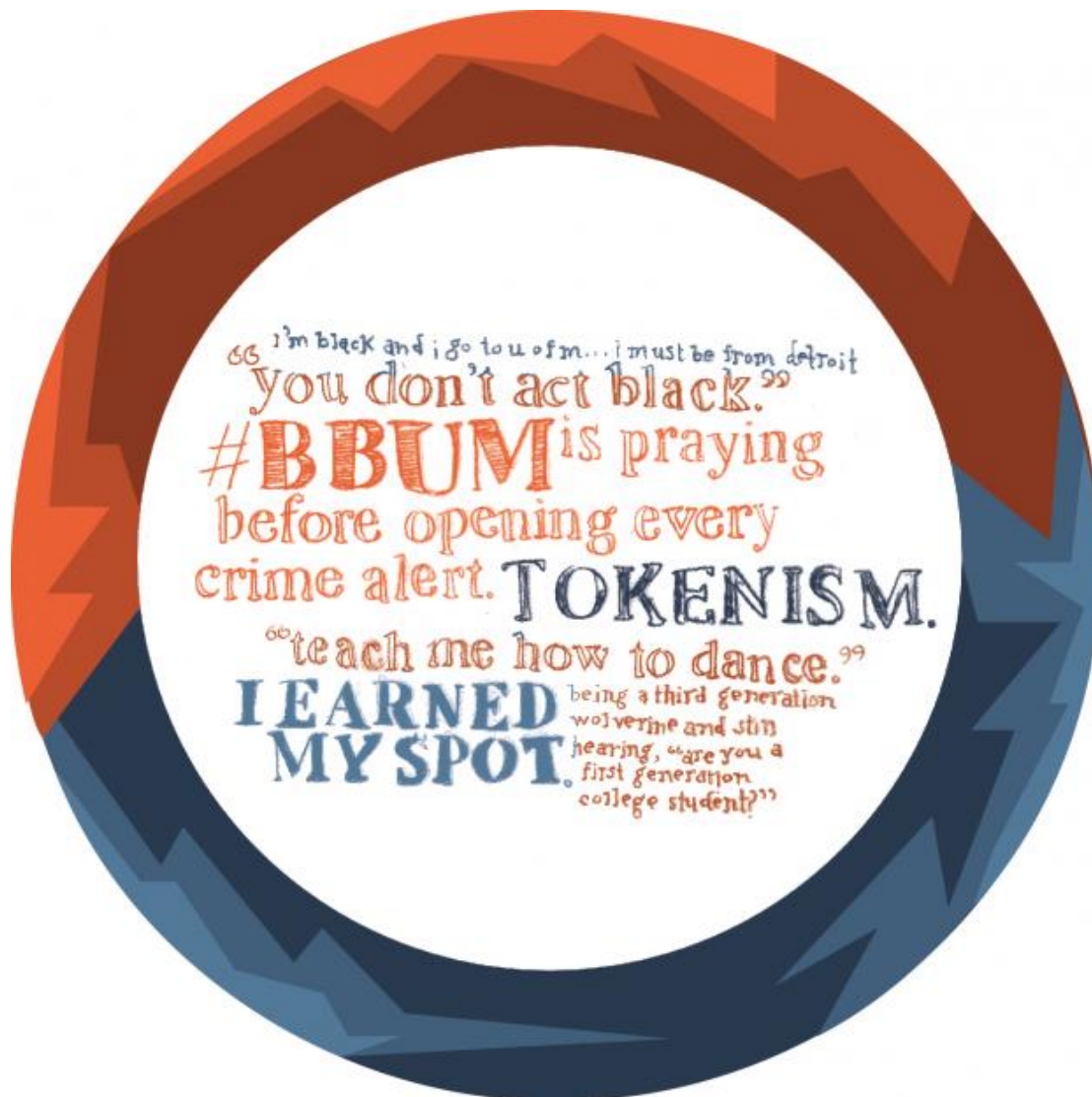


What is being Black at the University?



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By Will Greenberg (/people/wrgree/Will Greenberg), Senior News Editor

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When the #BBUM campaign garnered national attention in November, University administrators and students alike were caught off-guard by the raw emotion captured in 140 characters. And despite thousands of tweets, there isn't one single answer to the question 'what is being Black at the University of Michigan?'

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 Statement Cover

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Black, brown, Afroamerican or African-American — whatever the name — it's a group that shares a trait which has enormous implications for their social and academic experiences: their race. And while college is a time of learning for all students, both in and outside the classroom, many Black students at the University have an extra layer to their experience: a specific racial consciousness that hangs over the community.

A Cold Racial Climate and the Never Ending Question

"Being Black at the University of Michigan is like an extra job," said Chris James, an LSA junior from Flint, Mich.

James is a Black man on a campus of mostly white students. According to the most recent enrollment data, the University's undergraduate population is 4.65 percent Black and 72.6 percent white — a disparity that has grown since the passage of a ban on affirmative action policies in 2006. As a member of a racial minority, James said he feels the isolation of being outnumbered. He feels an additional set of burdens unique to the Black community. Others feel the same.

"I never saw any racism or anything like that until I got to Michigan and then I was like, 'Wow, this actually happens,'" said LSA and Music, Theatre & Dance sophomore Nadia Weeks.

Growing up, Weeks said she was used to being outnumbered in her school, having been one of the few Black students in her class until high school. However, only when she began her time at the University did she start to see how her race defined her to others.

Weeks is one of two Black students on her dance team. As a dance major, Weeks spends the majority of her time within the dance school with a group of about a dozen other students.

During one dance rehearsal, Weeks was practicing with her team when another girl's foot became lodged in Weeks' hair extensions as the two spun by each other. When the other dancer pulled her foot away, a portion of both Weeks' extensions and her natural hair went with it. When the rest of the group saw what had happened, they burst into laughter. No one asked if Weeks was all right.

"The fact that I was wearing extensions — I don't know, it's just something they weren't used to," Weeks said. "They were laughing at me and I was like, 'Wait, I actually could have gotten hurt — no one wants their hair pulled out.'"

Weeks said she doubted most of her team had been exposed to Black hair much before and that except for maybe the one other Black student on the team, no one knew how to react.

For the first part of the year, Weeks said she tried to avoid the other Black student in the class, staying as far away from her as possible so her professors wouldn't mix them up. Despite her efforts, Weeks said she frequently was confused for the other girl.

"This girl looks nothing like me. I wear braids; she has long, straight hair; my complexion is much darker than hers; our structure is way different; our personalities are different; so how could you always be calling me her name?"



Weeks' experience on the dance team is emblematic of the many challenges Black students at the University face in clashing cultures with students who are not of the same background. These exchanges often involve an awkward question, quick assumption or off-color statement. Rarely are the cases of overt racism or prejudice, and many times Black students attribute these incidents to misinformation or lack of understanding.

Allison Farrand/Daily Kinesiology sophomore Capri Nara Kendall in a protest organized by the Black Student Union in front of Hill Auditorium on January 20th.

Still, many Black students are left wondering if race was an influencing factor in these encounters.

Engineering senior Frankie Reed is the president of the University's National Society of Black Engineers (NSBE). However, Reed said many of his peers assume he is an athlete rather than a scholar.

"I get it so much that I just tell them, 'No, I'm an electrical engineer,' and I guess that kind of off-sets that thought like, 'Oh, wow, really?'" he said. "It just happens so much that I handle it and get through it."

Like many other Black students, Reed has experienced other racially charged incidents. He described how frightened pedestrians sometimes avoid him on the street. At times, it is difficult to wear a hoodie without feeling like he's being viewed as a threat.

For each crime alert that includes a Black male as suspect, Reed explained that essentially any Black male on campus could be targeted. When campus crime alerts are released with a Black male described as a suspect, there is an inherent anxiety with reading “afro or bald,” in the criminal description, he said.

“I got pulled aside by DPS inside the cafeteria and they said, ‘You fit the description of blah, blah, blah, where were you at such and such time,’ and I had to explain to them, ‘I was in the cafeteria the whole time,’” he said.

As a part of the minority, many Black students say they feel a responsibility to serve as a representative for the larger Black community. This occurs both within the classroom, with professors sometimes tokenizing students to speak for an entire race, and outside the classroom, with Black students feeling scrutinized by their peers, including students that have no experience with Black culture or Black people at all.

Jeremy Tyler, a fifth-year senior and member of the cheerleading team, said he feels like he can’t make any mistakes in school. He doesn’t want to reinforce or confirm any preconceived stereotypes or give further reason for discrimination.

“When was the last time you were in a class and someone said, ‘Why do white people do this?’” he asked. “It’s pressure to make sure you’re articulate when you speak so you sound intelligent and people don’t think you’re an idiot.”

These encounters weigh heavily on many Black students. What’s even more frustrating for the Black community is that these incidents are not always explicitly racist or intolerant. Thus, for many students, the never ending question remains: “*Would it be different if I wasn’t Black?*”

BBUM Statement



Bait and switch

The first sentence of the ‘Prospective Student’ section on the University’s main website reads: “Welcome to an amazing place filled with unparalleled opportunities, interesting and engaged minds, and a richly diverse campus community.”

On the site, the University highlights the wide variety of students “from 50 states, 127 countries — nearly 1,500 international students — a campus comprised of multiple races, cultures, languages, religions, and perspectives, where intellectual and cultural interaction happen.”

Additionally, the photographs on the page feature many students of color, a representation many see as disproportionate to the student body’s actual demographics. Many Black students who are now at the University said when they saw these pictures and read these descriptions, they were under the impression that the school was a melting pot of cultures, a comfortable, inclusive racial environment.

This is not the case.

“When I chose the college I was thinking, ‘Oh, there’s going to be so much diversity, there are people from all around the world,’ and when I got here it was something that was completely different,” said LSA freshman Dezha Dial.

Dial said she has already seen the interracial tension that comes with being a Black student. She’s been called the n-word. She had a white roommate who transferred dorm rooms because, from what Dial understood, she took issue living with a Black woman. Dial said the only place she truly feels safe now on campus is alone in her room.

"I don't feel like I should hate it here. I chose this school for a reason. I came here to get an education but I also came here for an amazing experience," Dial said. "College is supposed to shape you educationally but also socially and there is something socially that is lacking here."

The problems persist across campus and into the city of Ann Arbor itself.



Students participate in a protest organized by the Black Student Union in front of Hill Auditorium on January 20th. (Allison Farrand/Daily)."

Following a football-Saturday this past fall, a group of high school students was on a scavenger hunt in Ann Arbor. The group was from the Neutral Zone's Students Educating Each other about Diversity (S.E.E.D.) program — a student group dedicated to discussing and leading diversity education workshops.

The group was walking through the crowded streets as fans were exiting the stadium and heading downtown. At the corner of State Street and East Liberty Street, the high school students came across a small group of University students.

One of them held up a blow-up doll of a Black woman, which he said he had brought along as his "date." The men were making obscene, sexual gestures toward the doll, shocking and confusing the S.E.E.D group members.

The S.E.E.D. group approached the University students and asked them why they had the doll. The men responded with jokes and laughter. Why the rushers had the doll at all was not made apparent, but the impact on the S.E.E.D. group was painful.

"My whole group just stopped and we got closer ... when I saw (them), there was a physical, 'Really? Is this really happening right now? Am I seeing what I'm seeing?" said Leo Thornton, a member of the S.E.E.D. group.

S.E.E.D. Leadership Coordinator Danny Brown, an alumnus of the University, said many of the students were overcome by the incident, with some breaking into tears. Brown said that the significance of the blowup doll was likely overlooked by the young men, who didn't have to think about the racial intent and power they were carrying.

"They're giving this message that's saying: 'Women of color, you are not people. You're objects and the fact that we're dehumanizing you is not only not serious, not only not a concern to us, but it's funny,'" he said.

William Frey, another S.E.E.D. staff member and University graduate student, said that as a white male, he knows how easy it can be to dismiss race, and that often many white students find ways to overlook their own impact.

"This gives another kind of playing card like, 'I go to a diverse University, therefore I cannot possibly be racist.' But I think that it's a way to deflect and a way to not actually deal with these things that are inherently inside of us because we were brought up," Frey said. "I've seen that and experienced that a lot on U of M's campus."

Black or Blue

At a University where Blacks comprise 4.65 percent of the undergraduate population, interacting with those outside of one's demographic can be difficult.

"It's a salad bowl," said LSA senior Tyrell Collier. "It's not a melting pot."

Collier is the speaker of the Black Student Union and president of EnspiRED, a fashion organization on campus. As a senior, Collier said he has seen how racially divided the school is, and has watched as the Black community has been forced into itself, with its members having nowhere else to go.

"I feel like most of the times you are pushed away, pushed toward each other and you sort of cling to each other as sort of a way of survival, a way of showing solidarity," Collier said.

Black students are frequently made to feel like outsiders both inside and outside of the classroom. During group work, Black students often face difficulty having their ideas taken seriously by their peers. Classmates often assume Black students were admitted to the University through affirmative action initiatives, despite the fact that such programs were banned by a popular statewide referendum in 2006.

Collier noted that on a social level, it is very disheartening to be a Black student at the University. There are often smaller venues for social events than other students get to use, Black students are usually outnumbered on game day or other major University events, and rarely feel welcomed or comfortable going to fraternity parties.

Collier told a story he had heard from a staff member of the football team talking to a player after a big win:

“She asked him, ‘Did you go out and party after the game?’ And he was like, ‘No!’ She said, ‘Why?’ and he said, ‘Because there’s no place for Black people to go.’ She said, ‘You mean to tell me, you just entertained over 100,000 people in the stadium, thousands nationwide, and you can’t go celebrate because there’s no place for Black people to go?’”

“And that’s the truth,” Collier said. “There’s no place for us to go party. If there is it’s in a small, sweaty house.”

Despite the alienation that some Black students face on campus, there are still opportunities to find homes and spaces to call their own. Many in the Black community say they often centralize within the all-Black institutions such as the BSU, NSBE, Black fraternities and sororities, among others.

“To be at Michigan is to be white at Michigan,” said Tyler. “There are times where it really sucks, you have to just do things to fit in.”

LSA senior Dominique Crump, president of Sister 2 Sister — an organization comprised predominantly of Black women — discussed her challenge, as a leader of a Black organization, in carrying the responsibility to seek out young Black students and offer them a home, when the majority of students don’t need to be purposefully sought out. She explained how difficult it was to constantly be a “race person,” finding it hard to get people to listen and even harder to create change.

“A permanent underclass has been created since slaves were bought from West Africa and people want to ignore that part of history because, ‘Oh, we live in the United States and you can pull yourself up by your bootstraps.’ Okay, you’ve given me straps but I don’t have boots so what am I pulling up?” she said.

Crump’s on-campus resumé includes jobs such as Residential Advisor, member of Sister 2 Sister and The Office of Academic Multicultural Initiatives’ Leaders and Best program, to name a few. While in these positions, she has taken on the role of mentor, trying to help her fellow Black students and guide younger ones as they learn some of the difficulties of being Black at the University. Crump said it has taken a considerable toll on her and that beyond the natural experiences of senioritis, she is ready to leave the school.

“I’m tired. My soul is tired, my body is tired, my mind is tired,” she said.

#BBUM and the future

Though the hashtag started in November, the #BBUM (Being Black at U of M) concept began much earlier.

Following the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the Trayvon Martin case, the BSU held a forum in July to discuss the event and offer a chance for people to share their feelings. Collier, having recently taken the role of BSU speaker at the time, said the discussion began as a reflection on being Black in America, and quickly evolved to being Black at the University.

The next milestone came in September, Collier said, when Bloomberg News reported that Black enrollment had fallen 30 percent over the six years after Affirmative Action was removed. Collier said the Fall 2013 semester was a particularly racially tense year on campus, noting upsetting comments on stories on The Michigan Daily’s website, as well as racially insensitive events such as the Theta Xi incident in which the fraternity planned a “Hood Ratchet”-themed party (“<http://michigandaily.com/article/racist-party-plans-cause-controversy-and-investigation-0>) in October.

“I’ve seen a lot of stuff happen throughout my time here but it was sort of on a consistent basis last semester that racial tensions were arising,” Collier said.

Collier and BSU Secretary Geralyn Gaines explained that while the #BBUM movement had been in its planning stages before November, the Theta Xi party controversy served as impetus for the group to move forward with the hashtag. The plan to present the University with a list of demands had been developing since the summer, Gaines said.

The #BBUM hashtag took Twitter by storm after its launch, with students, faculty and even alumni sharing personal accounts, both positive and negative, about the Black experience at the University.

“BBUM is also protection because if it weren’t for me going to the Black Student Union, meeting Tyrell and our vice president and all them, I wouldn’t feel as protected on this campus,” Gaines said.

The two months following the launch of #BBUM have been incredibly busy for the BSU. The group presented its seven demands to the University in a protest outside Hill Auditorium on Martin Luther King Jr. Day, and has received national media attention for their efforts, receiving endorsements from figures such as Reverend Jesse Jackson, a noted civil rights activist.

BSU members and University officials met for the first time to discuss both BSU’s demands and the University’s new diversity initiatives, as discussed in a public e-mail (“<http://michigandaily.com/blog/wire/bsu-leaders-meet-administration-officials-regents-discuss-seven-demands>”) from Provost Martha Pollack.

Thus far, the University has pledged \$300,000 to repair the current Trotter Multicultural Center and is in the process of designing and site planning a new building closer to Central Campus. The BSU and University administrators discussed all seven demands and plan to meet once a week for status updates.

E. Royster Harper, Vice President of Student Affairs, said the demands are comprised of short-term and long-term goals, and that the University is very willing to work together with the BSU. Harper said in the first meeting numerous ideas were proposed. These ideas included alternatives to Affirmative Action, such as reorganizing the recruiting method to include specialized staff members, whose job would be to scout for potential students nationwide. Harper said University President-elect Mark Schlissel is supportive of the idea.

Additionally, she said the school may expand the Program on Intergroup Relations (IGR), offering more classes on race dialogues through the program possibly by next year.

Still, Harper admitted that it will be a long road ahead, as is often the case when dismantling racial stigmas and split opportunities.

“Despite us talking about what it means to be in a respectful community, despite having a hate and bias team, there are still students who are inexperienced and intolerant and homophobic and you don’t get this many people together and not have some of that. Our work has to constantly be around education,” she said.

Moving forward, Collier said, students can take comfort in the fact that the BSU’s work these past months is “only the beginning,” and that the Black community is a support system for all its members.

“As long as there are Black students at Michigan, #BBUM will exist,” Collier said.

Professor Elizabeth James, a professor of African-American studies and advisor to the BSU, said as an alum she understands the types of issues students go through here and how difficult it is to be a Black student at the University. She said over her time as a student and faculty member, she has equated the racial climate on campus to that of the entire country, saying the University does prepare Black students for life beyond college.

Still, James said she is optimistic and extremely proud of the Black community on campus today, saying that while the Michigan difference *is* different for a Black student, she sees the leadership, perseverance and strength in those students is the same as all Wolverines.

“I believe, in this particular case, they’re only continuing a legacy of people who have questioned and dared the University to be the best that they can be in terms of all their students,” she said. “You have to find ways to kind of broach the ivory tower and say, ‘Hey, we’ve all got to do this together.’”

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