

At Towson Univ., A Student Makes His Case for a White Student Union



by [Julianne Hing](#)

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Race has arrived on the front doorstep of Towson University, and it's a package no one wants to open. This fall Matthew Heimbach, a student at the public university in the Baltimore suburbs proposed starting a white student union. His calls attracted immediate attention; with his cloudy but very emphatic views on race, he's excellent at courting publicity for the 21,000-student university.

It might have been but another in the long line of incidents of campus racism that pop up every few years around the country. Young people who imagine themselves political provocateurs or satirists have defended their "ghetto themed" parties and stereotype-laden newspaper column missives or acts of campus vandalism by begging offended parties to have a better sense of humor. Chalk those incidents up to colorblind liberalism. Heimbach is entirely sincere, and definitely not a liberal. He wants a student organization at Towson University for white students, a place of solidarity where white students can support and protect each other, and has thrown the school in high-profile turmoil for it.

And so Towson University finds itself in a difficult position—legally required to uphold a student's free speech rights but with a sticky race problem on its hands—and, in the American way, both compelled and loathe to confront head-on the issue of race.

White Students Under Siege?

Heimbach, who prefers being associated with southern nationalists over white nationalists, said a photo of him holding a Confederate flag this summer in front of Dexter Avenue King Memorial Baptist Church, where Martin Luther King, Jr. pastored in Montgomery, Alabama, ought not to be misconstrued. "[The Confederate flag] has never been a symbol of race," Heimbach said. "Someone who has no connection to Dixie, no connection to the confederacy just doesn't understand it."

Heimbach's got a history of stirring up controversy on campus, as well. Last year his fledgling group Youth for Western Civilization pasted posters around Towson with slogans reading "White Pride," as a test, Heimbach said, of the campus's tolerance. Youth for Western Civilization didn't last a year before its requisite faculty advisor [resigned](#) from his post, and the group was summarily disbanded.

Heimbach decided to start a white student union at Towson this year, he said, because he's witnessed Towson become home to "a culture of crime where primarily it's non-whites doing it to white students and we perpetually have to live in a system of victimhood just because no one wants to sound racist." And while Towson espouses values of tolerance, diversity and inclusion, Heimbach feels his political views have been met with fear and disdain. But chief among his reasons for wanting a dedicated space for white students is that black, Latino and Jewish students get their own organizations. If Towson believes in equality, Heimbach argues, why shouldn't white students be allowed to have their own space?

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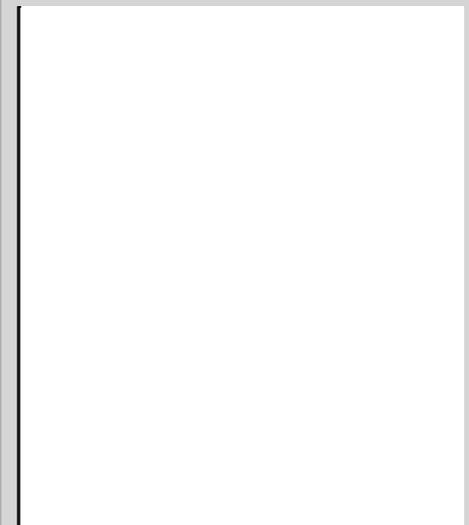
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"I personally believe this is a kind of false comparison," said Victor Collins, Towson's Assistant Vice President of Student Affairs for Diversity and the director of Towson's Center for Student Diversity.

For one, Collins said, Towson is a predominantly white institution; 68 percent of Towson's student body is white, while 13 percent of students are black ([PDF](#)). If they were students at an historically black college they might have a stronger case on their hands, Collins said. "However I do in fact totally support all our students' rights to form an organization as long as those organizations comply with the rules and procedures we've established for all students."

That is the fine line Towson is walking right now—balancing their legal obligation to uphold students' free speech rights with the public embarrassment of having a vocal student [with ties to white supremacist organizations](#) on campus. It's created a tense climate on campus, said Phylicia Sampson, a Towson University student.

"It befuddles a lot of people, and angers people," Sampson said, of the proposed student union. "With the United States' history on slavery, race, immigration, you have this white supremacist history, and white students are the predominant group of people [at Towson]. It raises flags. What are your intentions?" An [online petition](#) urging Towson University President Dr. Maravene Loeschke to denounce the formation of Towson's white student union has garnered nearly 2,500 signatures toward their 3,000-person goal. The uproar prompted Loeschke to release a statement Tuesday, citing university policy which prohibits the formation of student organizations which discriminate on the basis of race. "At Towson University no recognized student group is permitted to discriminate against anyone," Loeschke said.

Collins said ultimately, he welcomed the opportunity for the university to reflect on its values, and encouraged the vigorous, forthright political debate so essential to a university's, as well as a democracy's health. Yet, it's unclear how the issue is being tackled and what role the university is taking to engage the campus, and Heimbach, in an open dialogue. According to Loeschke's statement, flat university policies are the only guardrail against the formation of Heimbach's group. There is no spelling out explicitly, why with the United States' history and present-day racial reality a white student union simply is not equivalent to a black student union. Race is everywhere but engaging the topic in an explicit way is a risky, fraught move. Explaining why white pride isn't, as Heimbach says, any different from gay pride or black pride, would require acknowledging the legacy and present-day existence of racism in the country.

What No One Wants to Talk About

It's not just universities' fault for not knowing how or to what extent to engage these ideas. Yet campuses avoid these race conversations, difficult and emotional and charged as they may be, to the detriment of their students' personal development and the health of the larger campus, said Derald Wing Sue, a professor of education and psychology at Columbia University. College campuses are the perfect settings for these thorny incidents and teachable moments—young people from disparate backgrounds arrive and often are encountering people of different backgrounds for the first time while testing out their ideas about the world in a public way.

"In public if you have a disagreement with someone you can say: Screw it, I'm out of here. But in the college campus you can't remove yourself from that issue," Sue said. And college campuses, artificial as they may be, are but a microcosm of the race relations in the larger society.

Sue said that incidents of campus racism can often come as a result of white students being unaware of their own racial privilege. "I call it the invisibility of whiteness," Sue said. "The analogy I give is of a fish in water; the fish doesn't realize that water, which represents the default standard of whiteness, nurtures them, validates them, promotes their well-being, until they're forced out of the water."

And yet, we all, people of color and whites alike, live in this water. It suffuses our culture, it informs the foundations of U.S. political institutions, it permeates large structural forces and everyday person-to-person interactions. "If we use this analogy, for people of color it can be very toxic and invalidating," Sue said. "When white people say: we need a white organization to talk about pride in our values, I say: You have it all around you. You have it in your curriculum, in your history, in your arts and crafts and policy, practices and institutions. But you don't see it because it's a default standard which tells you that your group owns this place."

As the country continues to undergo dramatic demographic changes and remains mired in its economic woes while the job outlook for young people, harsh even for [recent college graduates](#), stagnates, more young people may turn to regressive ideas about race to make sense of the world, said Noel Kent, a professor of ethnic studies at the University of Hawaii. "A movement like this tells us that some youth are going to reach for traditional racial stereotypes and a traditional form of protection for white people because they basically feel threatened to the core of their American dreams, their sense of what they can be."

"We have to engage these young people and talk to them and show them the consequences of what this will lead to," Kent said. The difficult conversations will not be had on their own, and no one is served by flatly denouncing such moves without engaging in an honest dialogue, he said.

A Waiting Game

In order for student groups to become affiliated student organizations of the university, they need to follow a multi-step process that begins with a meeting with a Towson staff member in charge of coordinating student organizations, said Brandy Hall, Towson's student body president. Students who can round up a minimum of eight members and a faculty member willing to serve as an advisor for a new organization then submit their paperwork and meet with the Student Government Association to begin a two-week process that ends with a vote by the 25-member student senate to decide whether or not to approve the affiliation of the new student

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group. Heimbach has yet to file the necessary paperwork to register his student group with Towson even though he said he has "more than enough" potential members.

After the dissolution of his former student group and the widespread press Towson's garnered, it's been tough to find another faculty member willing to advise his new group. "Therein lies the big issue," Heimbach said. He's spoken with interested faculty members who've backed out because of pressure from administrators who are "trying to shut us out," he said. "I guarantee if a black student was trying to organize a student group and couldn't get an advisor, the NAACP would have filed a lawsuit already," Heimbach said.

In the meantime, the university's in a bit of a holding pattern. Heimbach can't yet move forward with registering his student group and the only holdup, according to Heimbach, is the social taboo of being associated with a white student union. It's a wait and see moment for everyone on campus. Less than a month into the school year, Hall has dealt with her share of heated feedback, even though the final decision is not hers to make. "I have been getting phone calls from people, some very angry parents, who want this student group to be on campus and say I'm a racist for not protecting these students," said Hall, who is Towson's first black female student body president.

Heimbach, encouraged by the response he's received and undeterred by the administrative hoops standing in his way, is moving ahead with planning activities for his proposed White Student Union. His group's first event is slated for October 2. Heimbach's invited Jared Taylor, the noted white supremacist author, to speak on campus. He'll discuss the changing meaning of white identity.

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