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Towson University student group's messages spark debate over racism

Youth for Western Civilization draws concern from other students

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A student group at Towson University has again drawn criticism from other students who claim it is racist. But school administrators say they won't be taking any action against the group.

On Saturday night, members of Youth for Western Civilization chalked messages that included the words "White Pride" at several locations on campus, including the Student Union and Freedom Square, said its president, Matthew Heimbach. When discovered Monday, the messages angered other students.

"As a black student, those words scared and concerned me," said Kenan Herbert, a 24-year-old senior and president of the Black Student Union. "A lot of other students and I feel unsafe with this organization being on campus."

Herbert said the group is setting back efforts to make the school more inclusive and diverse.

The debate culminated Thursday with a meeting, attended by about 400 students, where Youth for Western Civilization and concerns about racism at the school were discussed, said Teri Hall, associate vice president of campus life.

Hall said the meeting was useful in moderating what had become a heated debate.

Youth for Western Civilization faces no punishment because it has not violated any school rules.

"They are within their First Amendment rights," Hall said.

The Towson chapter of Youth for Western Civilization is part of a national group that was formed at American University in 2008 and has since slowly spread to about 15 campuses, according to Kevin DeAnna, the president of the national organization.

The national group's politics have alarmed civil rights organizations such as the Southern Poverty Law Center and the Anti-Defamation League, which have been monitoring the group for several years. While not explicitly racist, the group's language demonizes minorities, gays and lesbians, and non-Christian religious groups, said Marilyn Mayo, who studies extremist groups for the Anti-Defamation League.

"What they're talking about is preserving white culture when we live in a diverse, multicultural society," she said.

At Towson, the group has staged controversial events since its inception last September. In December, they set up a Nativity scene at the Union that appeared to compare President Barack Obama to Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin. And in November, during an event promoting traditional marriage, about 150 students came to protest the group for what students claimed was homophobic language.

Heimbach, a 20-year-old junior, said the group is only promoting traditional conservative values and is not racist. He said he's advocating pride in his culture, not "white power."

"White pride is no different than gay pride or black pride," he said. "I'm not trying to put anyone down. We want to celebrate our unique culture, and we encourage every other group to do the same."

Hall said Towson is reviewing its chalking policy and is encouraging students to participate in other groups that promote dialogue over conflict on campus.

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