

features

Shifting the culture: a look into the African American experience at AU

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Reporter

Robert Gaston stands at a solid six-foot-two-inches and carries 260 pounds with ease. He walks fast, but moves faster. He has often been spotted at the Ashland University Rec Center gliding up and down the basketball court, or bursting out of a 3-point stance on Martinelli Field.

Most of the time, the man deemed “Big Rob” is seen socializing with anyone he comes in contact with on campus.

Gaston represents a portion of the 4.5 percent of African American students enrolled at the university. His mocha colored skin, coarse and curly hair and vibrant personality undoubtedly make him noticeable.

“Starting off it was very hard because people had an opinion of who I was already, not even knowing who I am,” Gaston said.

Fortunately for Gaston, he was able to build relationships, put himself out there and sink his feet into the Ashland environment because of the diverse background he came from in Toledo, OH, he said.

Unfortunately for other students who look like Gaston, a large portion being African American male athletes, they often withdraw from the university in search of something more familiar.

“Other times they feel as though they cannot find a place to fit in, they do not feel accepted, some are set in their ways and will



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Students can find the commonground room on the second floor of the Hawkins-Conard Student Center.

for me, as a student of color,” Link said.

When asked what brought Link to AU, she unexpectedly overcame with emotion.

“You don’t have too many jobs that allow you to intentionally and effectively give back to a marginalized group of students,” Link said.

Similar to Gaston, who spent his first semester as the only black student in all of his classes, Link often finds herself as the only splotch of color in faculty and committee meetings.

“The biggest thing I have heard is that there is not enough representation,” Link said. “Students don’t see enough of themselves.”

doubt in her future.

“When you’re aspiring to be a leader in the workplace and you don’t even see it for four years, it’s really hard to envision that for yourself,” Graves said.

The Pittsburgh native used AU’s lack of representation as her motivation to be involved in diversity organizations like Black Student Alliance and Women of Excellence.

“When I went to college and I saw that we didn’t have much diversity I knew then and there I [needed] to get involved with some diversity organizations to see myself being represented and to just be with my community,” Graves said.

versity.

For these student-athletes, there was not a sense of belonging – if football did not workout, they left for other schools in search of a better opportunity and a better college experience, Link said.

To improve the retention of black males on campus, Link is pushing to establish black greek organizations on campus.

“We’re in the process now of trying to get three to five greek organizations here on campus as a chapter to capture and create spaces for students of color who need a sense of belonging,” she said.

During her undergraduate experience at Ohio University, a campus that offers eight out of the nine established black fraternities, Link witnessed the effect a brotherhood or sisterhood can have on students of color.

“I’ve seen how students, black males or black females, struggle academically but then are surrounded by their brothers or sisters and academically excel,” Link said.

Gaston can also speak to the benefits of being in a brotherhood as a member of Omega Psi Phi. He was drawn to the fraternity through the involvement of his teammates on the football team who were trying to make the chapter active on campus.

“I went places with them and I liked how they communicated, knew each other, got along and built more relationships everywhere [they] went,” Gaston said.

Gaston withdrew from AU after the fall semester of his sophomore year and chose to enroll at the University of Toledo in his hometown. Gaston’s mother was diagnosed with lupus and family complications called him to be in closer proximity to his family.

While at Toledo, he had the opportunity to be a part of a more diverse environment and it encouraged him to be even more involved. However, Gaston did not feel the same connection at UT that he did at AU, and it brought him back to Ashland.

Upon his return, he decided to join the Omega Psi Phi fraternity and frequently transported back and forth between Ashland, Cleveland and Columbus to complete the pledging process. Now, he serves as a vessel to other Afri-

can American students interested in being a part of his extended family.

“I’m happy that I did it because I have so many more interested at AU because I took the step and did it myself,” Gaston said.

Gaston feels his involvement in Omega Psi Phi will increase his chances for success in life after college due to the everlasting bond shared by members of his fraternity.

“You got people in the workforce that would do anything for a member of Omega Psi Phi,” Gaston said. “It’s an expansion of your family, whose family wouldn’t let them succeed in life?”

Accountability

There are several organizations on campus such as Brothers in Action, Black Student Alliance, Diversity on Campus and International Club that work to make Ashland a more inclusive place and build community for minority groups. But, without proper training, these organizations can often be ineffective.

“I think that it really takes some of our educators, our administrators to come in and talk to the students if we are going to implement some of these diversity organizations well,” Graves said.

Kyrah Karlatiras, the executive director of communication for Black Student Alliance, wants the university to give the same effort to African American organizations as athletics and other clubs on campus.

“We’re trying to make Ashland diverse because that would make Ashland a better school,” Karlatiras said.

The limited support of diversity organizations speaks to the issue of accountability which Link feels has created a cycle for international students and students of color to be mistreated, targeted and silenced without repercussions.

“Accountability is very huge for me because I don’t think people are being held accountable here,” Link said.

In order for accountability to be established, it requires for administrators to be held accountable, protection for students of color through policy and tapping into each and every area to inquire what resources they have for students of color, Link said.

Establishing Common-ground

On Sept. 24, 2019 a breakthrough occurred at Ashland.

It has nothing to do with statistics of achievement or leaps in academia, but it will mark an advancement in Ashland’s push for diversity.

It was the grand opening of the Commonground room.

Two welcoming chairs and a charcoal couch can be seen when a passerby peeks into the room. On both sides of the couch are two foot rests that appear to be wooden from afar, but are made soft enough to give weary feet a break.

The wall closest to the door holds a wooden shelf-like surface that serves as a desk for students to work. A few feet above the desk are lamps that resemble Pixar’s Luxo Jr. and students slide up to the long desk on swivel chairs that offer freedom to peek at the LG TV hanging on the center wall.

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Commonground provides a welcoming atmosphere with couches and a tv.

not adapt to their environment,” Gaston said.

Terri Link, the director of diversity inclusion at AU, has prioritized the African American student body and strives to be a familiar face, a support system and a family member, she said.

“It’s important for me to have very strong relationships with students of color here, to ensure that they know there is someone here who advocates for you,” Link said.

Link was hired in June after spending five years as the director of student life at Langston University, a historically black university.

“It’s just like she’s family,” diversity and inclusion intern Ariana Graves said.

Link spent her undergraduate years pursuing a Bachelor’s degree in English at Ohio University. She later pursued a Master’s degree in education with an emphasis in Urban Education at Langston University.

Link’s experience at a predominantly white institution (PWI) and at a historically black university have allowed her to see both sides of the spectrum and formulate a plan on how she wants to impact black students at AU.

“I now have an opportunity to be who I wanted someone to be

To put it into perspective, out of the 22 NCAA Division II sports teams offered at AU there is only one African American coach.

“I’m here to shift the culture,” Link said.

Now in her final semester as a political science and psychology double-major, Graves is certain a greater African American presence amongst faculty and staff would have been “life-changing” throughout her years at AU.

Graves is an Ashbrook scholar, peer educator, served as the secretary and interim president for the Black Student Alliance and has been involved in numerous clubs during her time at AU.

However, even in all her efforts, a lack of representation planted

For some students, minimal representation forces them into internal isolation.

“They don’t have anybody who can relate to what they have been through to get to where they are,” Gaston said.

A Brotherhood

Link’s initial task upon arrival at Ashland was to identify the reason behind low retention rates for black males. She was able to discover that the majority of these black male students are athletes, and more specifically athletes on the football team.

Link found that 86 percent of black males on the football team will not be retained by the uni-



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AU’s Black Student Alliance offers inclusion and diversity on campus.