OU DAILY

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# ‘INCREDIBLE PASSION’

## New OU Regents Chair Eric Stevenson aims to support alma mater through looming transitions

OU DAILY

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*Since 1916, OU Daily has covered Norman and OU in depth, served as a public forum for community discussion and provided students on our staff real-world media experiences.*




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**COVER PHOTO BY ADEN CHOATE**

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FILE/OU DAILY

A sign at the rally for international students on July 13, 2020.

# FREE SPEECH LIMITATIONS

## *Noncitizen students face threat of deportation, safety risks*

**BY MADDY KEYES • MADELEINE.E.KEYES-1@OU.EDU**

One evening, Brinly Jaja sat at the desk in her apartment and scrolled through her Instagram and TikTok.

She would often re-share posts and news articles she found that advocate for issues such as abortion rights or Palestinian liberation, adding her own thoughts in her reposts. As an international student and education officer for the OU African Student Association, Jaja felt it was her duty to spread awareness and educate others.

This time, however, rather than sharing, Jaja scrolled through her posts and pressed "delete," one after the other, until any post relating to political issues in the U.S. were gone.

It was early November — about a month after the militant group Hamas attacked Israel on Oct. 7 — and prominent Republican leaders were threatening to deport international college students and defund universities seen expressing support for Hamas or failing to address antisemitism. However, the leaders were vague on what language was punishable under the proposals, and many have equated anti-Israel and pro-Palestine sentiments as support for Hamas.

When Jaja's father, who lives in her home country of Nigeria, heard of these threats, he called her and told her to stop speaking out on the war in Gaza and other controversial issues in the U.S.

"You don't want to be a target right now," Jaja recalled her father saying during the November phone call. "You need to take that down immediately."

So Jaja did.

"It's very restricting," Jaja said. "I really want to spread awareness. … The more I post, the more people tend to engage, and people tend to get more education.

"I felt like I was not doing the most for people."

### 'Constitutionally problematic'

While the U.S. is known for its expansive free speech protections, speaking out comes with an added risk for noncitizens, including immigrants lacking permanent legal status, green card holders, immigrant visa holders and nonimmigrant visa holders, such as international students.


OLIVIA LAUTER/OU DAILY

The International Student Services office is located in Farzaneh Hall.

Kit Johnson, an immigration lawyer and professor at the OU College of Law, said while the level of risk is different depending on the noncitizen category a person falls under, the consequences are generally the same.

"The question is, 'Can voicing an opinion alone — can words — result in your expulsion from the country?' And my answer is, 'Yes, it can,'" Johnson said.

Under the Immigration and Nationality Act, noncitizens can be deported for failing to meet visa requirements, violating U.S. law, and engaging in or supporting terrorist activity, which includes using speech that endorses, espouses or incites terrorist activity.

Political speech not under this category is not a deportable offense alone but can be used by prosecutors to prioritize the order in which noncitizens are removed from the country.

"(There's) lots of reasons ... that the government can lodge as the basis for deporting, but then among that you have to decide 'Well, who gets deported first?'" said Eang Ngov, a constitutional and public interest lawyer and professor at the OU College of Law. Ngov said any opinions she expressed in this article are her own and do not reflect the stance of the university.

"The prioritizing can be based on their political views, but it can't be prioritized without a foundational deportable offense. And so that's where the politicians and their comments are a little misleading," Ngov said.

Following a wave of countrywide protests after Hamas' attack on Israel, GOP leaders, including former President Donald Trump, Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis and South Carolina Sen. Tim Scott, called for the federal government to revoke the visas of international students seen as "supporting Hamas," with others going so far as to suggest universities should lose public funding.

Referring to demonstrations protesting Israel's retaliatory bombardment of Gaza, Trump promised during an October rally in Iowa to send Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents to what he called "pro-jihadist" rallies. Trump added his administration would revoke the visas of "radical anti-American and antisemitic foreigners," such as pro-Palestinian demonstrators.

"Jihadism" is a Western term used to describe militant Islamic movements that are viewed as threatening to the West.

At an Iowa GOP candidate showcase just a few days later, DeSantis pledged to revoke the student visas of "Hamas sympathizers" if elected president, and Scott said he would withhold Pell Grants from universities failing to adequately address antisemitism. Both DeSantis and Scott have since dropped out of the presidential race.

Neither Trump nor DeSantis specified how they would determine who falls into these categories, and many have applied a "pro-Hamas" label to people expressing support for Palestine or condemning the actions of the Israeli military.

Ngov described the politicians' proposals for deporting foreign students based on their speech as constitutionally "half right and half wrong," since the politicians didn't specify what language they were referring to. However, Ngov said it would be unconstitutional to defund a school based on the speech of its students, as viewpoint discrimination is prohibited under the First Amendment.

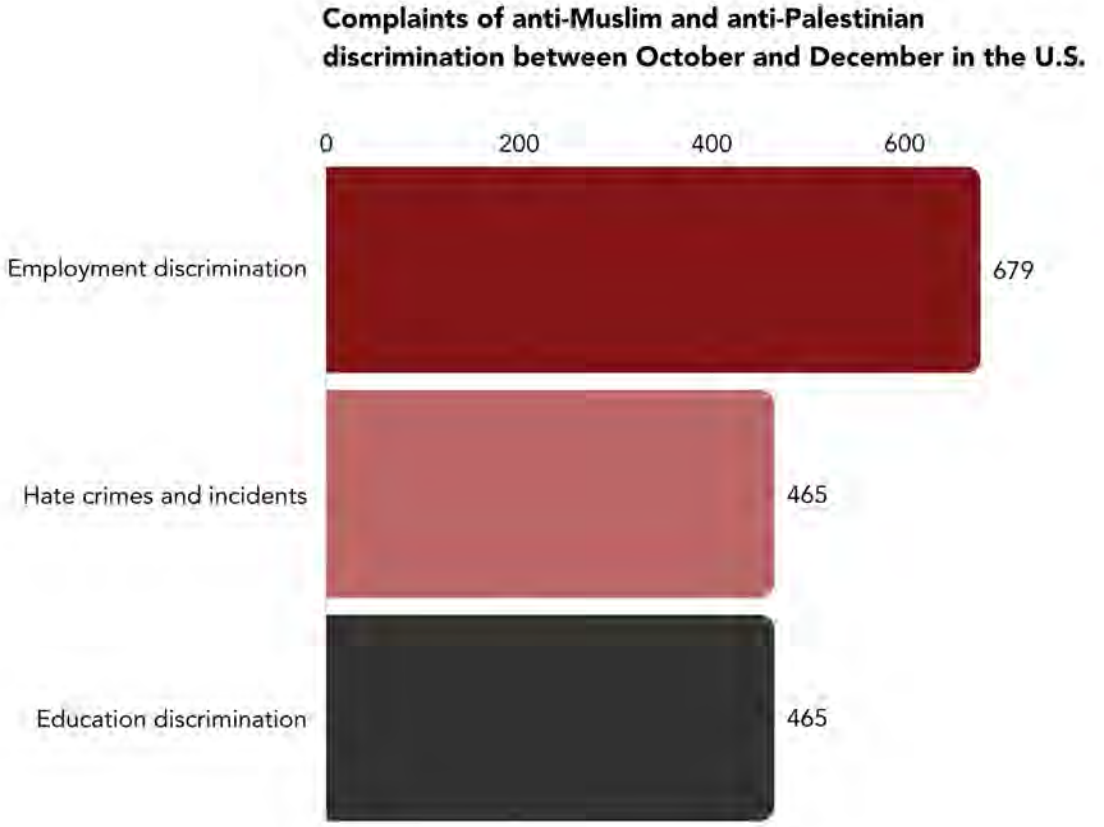
"That aspect of what they are saying may be constitutionally problematic," Ngov said. "It just sounds like campaign puffery."

### 'This is the time for citizen allies to step up'

Still, many politicians and universities are taking measures to regulate speech on campuses.

In October, Ray Rodrigues, chancellor of the State University System of Florida, in consultation with DeSantis, wrote a letter to university presidents calling for the deactivation of two campus chapters of National Students for Justice in Palestine after the group released a "Day of Resistance toolkit." In the toolkit, the students wrote, "We as Palestinian students in exile are PART of this movement, not in solidarity with this movement."

In Rodrigues' letter, he wrote, "It is a felony under Florida law to 'knowingly provide material support ... to a designated foreign terrorist organization,'" and that the National




BELLA GRAY/OU DAILY

SJP "has affirmatively identified" with Hamas' Oct. 7 terrorist attack on Israel. The United States identifies Hamas as a terrorist organization.

In March, Texas Gov. Greg Abbott signed an executive order targeting antisemitism in institutions of higher education. In the order, Abbott wrote that while many Texas universities have acted quickly to condemn antisemitism, "some radical organizations have engaged in unacceptable actions on university campuses."

The order calls for higher education institutions to review free speech policies to address the rise in antisemitic speech on campus; ensure the enforcement of these policies; that "groups such as the Palestine Solidarity Committee and Students for Justice in Palestine are disciplined for violating these policies"; and include the definition of antisemitism, as listed under the Texas Government Code, in university free speech policies.

The Palestine Solidarity Committee and National SJP are student organizations advocating for Palestinian liberation present on some campuses across the U.S.

Florida and Texas are not the only states with speech restrictions on campus.

A Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression analysis found among 489 U.S. universities surveyed, around 85% have policies in place restricting speech.

FIRE gave OU — a university with over 1,500 international students — a "yellow light" rating, meaning it has at least one policy that could be easily applied to suppress protected speech or has policies restricting relatively low categories of speech. The University of Texas at Austin and Oklahoma State University were also given yellow light ratings.

In 2022, the OU Board of Regents adopted the Chicago Statement, a free speech policy statement produced by the Committee on Freedom of Expression at the University of Chicago.

Under the Chicago Statement, the university may restrict expression that violates the law, falsely defames a specific individual, constitutes a genuine threat or harassment, unjustifiably invades substantial privacy or confidentiality interests or is incompatible with the functioning of the university. The statement added the university may reasonably regulate the time, place and manner of expression to ensure it doesn't disrupt university activities.

"These are narrow exceptions to the general principle of freedom of expression, and it is vitally important that these exceptions never be used in a manner that is inconsistent with the university's commitment to a completely free and open discussion of ideas," the statement reads.

Though international students' speech is protected in most cases, Johnson said the risk of speaking out is often too great.

"This is the time for citizen allies to step up," Johnson said. "This is the time when you have U.S. citizen allies be the ones who lead the fight, because I wouldn't want to take on the risks associated with being a noncitizen in the United States."

### 'We're already targeted'

Six months later, the war in Gaza continues to be a contentious topic both on campus and in politics, pushing many international students into silence and testing the limits of free speech protection.

When Silma Nurfadhilah, an international studies sophomore from Indonesia, heard of the politicians' proposals to deport international students, she said she feared for her safety.

"I was really scared. I mean, I am physically Muslim," Nurfadhilah, who wears a hijab, said. "What if someone attacked me or said something in my face or something like that? Just because I look a certain way."

In the three months after the war began, the Council on American-Islamic Relations, the U.S.'s largest Muslim civil rights and advocacy organization, saw a nearly 180% rise in complaints of anti-Muslim and anti-Palestinian discrimination and hate, when compared to a similar period in 2022.

Among the complaints filed between October and December, CAIR reported

employment discrimination, hate crimes and incidents, and education discrimination as the three highest reported categories.

The 2024-25 OU Annual Security and Fire Safety Report, which will report crime statistics, including instances of discrimination from 2023, will not be available until the fall. OU Daily reached out to the OU Police Department for statistics on reports of anti-Muslim and anti-Palestinian discrimination but was told this data is not available.

Ridha Fatima, an information sciences and technology junior from the United Arab Emirates, said speaking out as international students only brings more attention to them, which could lead to harm.

"It's pretty easy to notice an international student. It could just be our color, language, anything," Fatima said. "We're already noticeable in the crowd, and by expressing our political opinions or controversial opinions freely and loudly, it just makes us stand out even more. … We're already targeted."

Both Fatima and Nurfadhilah said they sometimes limit what they say on social media for fear of losing their visas or risking their safety. Like Jaja, Fatima's and Nurfadhilah's families warned them not to speak out on controversial issues in the U.S.

Fatima said it's hard for her not to share her opinions, particularly relating to issues directly affecting her such as the ongoing battle over abortion rights. Noncitizens don't have representatives in the U.S. government, so there's no one they can call to voice their frustrations to, Fatima said.

Even diversity, equity and inclusion — a topic facing intense scrutiny from Republican lawmakers across the country — is a touchy subject for noncitizens to discuss.

Following Oklahoma Gov. Kevin Stitt's December executive order targeting DEI in higher education, the Black Emergency Response Team and African Student Association, two student organizations at OU, hosted a discussion concerning Stitt's order.

At the event, Jaja said she worried talking about DEI on social media would affect her ability to renew her visa. Others at the event reassured Jaja this speech would be protected, but Jaja said she's still cautious about sharing her own opinions on these matters.

Fatima and Nurfadhilah said they are careful with what they say on social media, asking themselves what the consequences of speaking out may be and if it's worth the risk before they press post.

Fatima said she not only has to worry about how her words are perceived in the U.S., but how they might be viewed in other countries as well.

For example, Fatima said in the U.S., she felt comfortable talking about Nex Benedict, a nonbinary student who died by suicide last month after experiencing a fight in their high school bathroom. In the United Arab Emirates, where talking about gender is controversial, Fatima said she could not talk about Benedict.

"I live in three different places," said Fatima, who is a resident of the U.S., India and the United Arab Emirates. "I have three different statuses, I have to think about all my three statuses at the same time. I need to maintain all three of them at the same time. So that can be very challenging."

Fatima and Nurfadhilah said they stop posting on social media altogether before traveling, when U.S. Customs and Border Protection agents can ask to search their phones.

At protests, they turn their phones on airplane mode to prevent potentially being tracked through connection to cell towers. They've seen international students in other states doxxed — having their personal information publicly revealed by someone with an intent to cause harm — for speaking out on social media or participating in demonstrations.

> "It's pretty easy to notice an international student. It could just be our color, language, anything. We're already noticeable in the crowd and by expressing our political opinions or controversial opinions freely and loudly, it just makes us stand out even more. … We're already targeted."
>
> RIDHA FATIMA,
> INTERNATIONAL STUDENT

"We're conscious of what happened to other international students in other states," Nurfadhilah said. "Like, oh, it could be me."

Since the war began, faculty and students at universities across the country have had their faces displayed on billboard trucks branding them as antisemitic.

The trucks, commonly referred to as "doxxing trucks," are operated by the conservative nonprofit Accuracy in Media to "expose antisemitic students and faculty." Doxxing trucks have been seen at Columbia; Harvard University; the University of California, Berkeley; the University of Colorado Boulder; the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; and the University of Southern California.

"You can express your opinion freely as long as they agree with you," Fatima said. "The moment you do not, that's when you are in trouble."

Some international students at OU said while the Office of International Student Services provides a lot of support, OU needs to do a better job of informing international students of what is and is not permissible for them to do to maintain their visa status.

The Office of International Student Services is very small, Fatima said, making it difficult for the employees there to fully inform individual students of the terms of their visas and U.S. law.

The Office of International Student Services holds 12 staff positions, roughly one employee for every 125 international students.

"That's why a lot of times students and student organizations take up the responsibility of educating," Fatima said.

Both Fatima and Nurfadhilah work with the OU International Advisory Committee, an umbrella student organization that represents international students and coordinates international student organizations.

Fatima and Nurfadhilah said those with IAC help share information from International Student Services with other international students.

"These (international) students, they're coming from not knowing anything to a whole different government and everything, and it's a lot of information," Fatima said. "Letting students know and making them aware of what they can and what they cannot do is very, very important. Just because, like it might just be the smallest thing that could get someone in trouble."

Noncitizens can't speak out on issues without at least some personal risk, Johnson said. A post made on an account with only a few followers can easily go viral, possibly putting a noncitizen on the radar of someone who wants them expelled from the country.

"Even though we in the United States think of the First Amendment as inviolate — so important, we can all say whatever it is that we want — that doesn't work for noncitizens," Johnson said.

Jaja said the politicians' proposals to deport international students for their speech highlight the hypocrisy of the U.S. boasting First Amendment rights, all the while restricting them for certain populations.

"This country advocates for freedom of speech, but it doesn't seem like there's an indication that that is actually being done in this country," Jaja said. "(International students) also have rights. … Anywhere we go, we're human beings, so we have human rights. … International students should have the right to say as they please."

ADEN CHOATE/OU DAILY

Newly appointed OU Board of Regents Chair Eric Stevenson during the board meeting on March 12.

# MEET REGENT ERIC STEVENSON

## *New chair aims to support alma mater through transition*

**BY ISMAEL LELE • ISMAEL.M.LELE-1@OU.EDU**

Ever since he was a child, Eric Stevenson had an entrepreneurial spirit.

He would try to make money by mowing lawns and assisting neighbors with random tasks.

Stevenson's interest in business differed from his family who primarily practiced medicine.

"I never thought I was going to be an engineer or a doctor or any of that. I've always just known business was my path," Stevenson said.

With just over 6,000 residents in Wagoner, a little over 140 teenagers graduated from Wagoner High School in 1980. As he exited high school, Stevenson wasted no time in becoming acclimated with his future alma mater. That summer, he enrolled in classes at OU and took a job in the OU office of foreign affairs, now known as International Student Services.

Stevenson attended OU from 1981 to 1985, earning a bachelor's in business administration in finance. He knew early on that he wanted to pursue a career in accounting or finance but was unsure of what area of business he wanted to specialize in.

Since he was a child, Stevenson would jump at the opportunity to lead with no hesitation, a spirit he now embodies as he takes the helm of the OU Board of Regents.

When Gov. Kevin Stitt appointed Stevenson to serve as a regent in 2019, he became the first Black regent in 20 years to serve on the board. In April 1992, Melvin Hall and Ada Lois Sipuel Fisher were appointed to the board on the same day, with Hall later becoming the first and, until now, only Black chair of the OU Board of Regents, stepping down from the board in 1999.

In March, Stevenson was appointed chair of the OU Board of Regents, where he will be leading the university as it transitions to the Southeastern Conference; enters a new age of strict diversity, equity and inclusion guidelines; and strives to close out a $2 billion fundraising campaign to bring more financial stability to the university.

As he does this, Stevenson hopes to bring the spirit he's had since he was a child in order to make sure OU is successful as it undergoes several changes.

### Business aspirations

When Stevenson attended OU, the Price College of Business was yet to be renamed from the College of Business Administration, and Price Hall hadn't been built.

Steve Cesler, business practitioner for Procter and Gamble, gave a lecture in one of Stevenson's marketing classes, piquing his interest in brand management. Brand management is a part of marketing that works to improve the perception of brands and their products.

Stevenson obtained a summer internship at Procter and Gamble in Dallas, where he immediately fell in love with the marketing side of business.

From then on, Stevenson made an action plan for how he would succeed in the field. If he wanted to work in marketing at top companies such as Procter and Gamble, he knew he needed to earn a master's degree from a top-tier business school. Stevenson set his eyes on Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management, but he needed to bolster his resume before applying to the graduate business program.

After graduating from OU, Stevenson worked in sales at Xerox until he was admitted into Northwestern in 1991. He earned his master's in 1993 and continued pursuing his passion in business.

Stevenson currently lives in Ohio where he is the president of Nationwide Retirement Solutions. Stevenson began working with Nationwide in 2006. He previously served as senior vice president of Nationwide retirement plans distribution and was a significant contributor in helping grow the retirement plans operation to over $175 billion in assets.

According to his wife, Davia, Stevenson was dedicated to building up his community when they moved to Columbus, Ohio. The two of them established a restaurant, and Stevenson took it upon himself to tour the neighborhood looking for property he could purchase and use to improve the community.

"I mentioned, everything is done in groups. If you don't have any work experience, you don't have anything to contribute to the group," Stevenson said.

Stevenson's friends described him as strategic in his approach to business and other avenues of life. Stevenson said his experience of working in marketing while juggling being a father has prepared him for the leadership positions that he seeks today.

"The community that I built at OU is amazing. I've talked about the whole experience. The whole experience changed my life. The friends, the challenges that you have, the obstacles that you run into as (a resident adviser), the fraternity, the internships, all of that is what helped me to grow up," Stevenson said.

OU holds a special place in Stevenson's heart.

It was at OU where Stevenson met his wife and close friends Todd Chandler and Sherad Cravens. Davia and Cravens had gone to the same high school and were friends before meeting Stevenson. Stevenson and Davia met in their freshman year and dated throughout college before getting married in 1987.

The couple has two sons named Eric and Tyler, and a granddaughter named Serenity.

In the early stages of their relationship, Davia was undergoing chemotherapy after being diagnosed with cancer her senior year of high school.

"He just made it safe, and he celebrated who I was because I came back looking different sophomore year than I started freshman year," Davia told OU Daily. "You'd have thought I was the trendsetter the way he hyped me up. I think it was then that I was convinced that this was my dude."

Cravens, an instructor of marketing and supply chain management at OU, became friends with Stevenson in the summer of 1980 and they have remained close ever since. After the two hit it off, they were dead set on becoming roommates.

The problem was the dorm that Cravens originally planned on residing in, Walker Tower, didn't have room for Stevenson. Cravens ended up sacrificing what he described as the equivalent of Cross Village at the time to room with Stevenson at Cate Center, which didn't have air conditioning.

Cravens described Stevenson as a persuasive leader who was easy to follow, even during his time in undergrad.

"I think one of the reasons he's an excellent leader is he kind of has the savvy way of taking you where he wants you to go," Cravens said. "He's encouraged me to do something that I haven't wanted to do. But he has encouraged me to do things I wouldn't have thought about doing."

While at OU, Stevenson became president of Alpha Phi Alpha, a historically Black fraternity, which Cravens had also pledged. The

FILE/OU DAILY

OU Regent Eric Stevenson speaks at a press conference at the Oklahoma state Capitol on March 1, 2019.

Black student population at OU was strong during the 1980s, and that was in part due to Stevenson helping foster the community.

"It was like we had our own (historically Black college or university), and in some way it fortified us to have competence to navigate the larger university," Davia said. "I don't recall, honestly, any overt difficulties around race."

Cravens said he and Stevenson have managed to keep their friendship strong post-OU despite living in two different states.

Stevenson accompanied Cravens when he learned he had prostate cancer. Cravens said Stevenson has been checking in on his progress to show support as he battles through the illness.

"It's been an amazing friendship," Cravens said. "He's been there for me. Hopefully he's gotten the same support from me that I've received from him and his wife."

Stevenson reconnected with OU in 2014 after Daniel Pullin, former dean of Price College, approached him about joining the Price College Advisory Board, composed of Price College alums who offer assistance and insights on how the college functions.

Four years later, Stevenson was appointed to the OU Board of Regents, the governing body of OU, Cameron University and Rogers State University. Seven regents appointed by the governor serve on the board, headed by a chair. Each regent serves a seven-year term, while chairs serve for a year at a time. Stevenson is in his fifth year on the board.

"I think he saw the opportunity to serve a place that means a lot to him and certainly means a lot to me as well," Davia said.

**Stevenson and Stitt**

As Stevenson steps into his role as chair, he is watching the university transition due to Stitt's December executive order requiring universities to formally review diversity, equity and inclusion within their institutions.

In February, OU responded by restructuring its Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion into the Division of Access and Opportunity. OU President Joseph Harroz Jr. later reaffirmed that no one would lose their employment with the university due to the executive order. On April 4, a sign on the division's front doors in Copeland Hall announced the offices would be closed to the public.

Throughout his life, Stevenson has been consistent in funding and leading minority-based organizations and supporting candidates who champion diversity, despite working in conjunction with politicians and leaders who may not hold the same beliefs.

Cravens said a valuable skill he and Stevenson learned in their time at OU was how to effectively navigate predominately white spaces, something they would both take with them as they transitioned into graduate school and the workforce.

"You learn how to not just survive, but to survive and thrive," Cravens said. "How to develop … relationships and where to give and not to give."

Stevenson told OU Daily that with these transitions come changes that he is excited about, such as the new shape the Division of Access and Opportunity will take.

"I feel like we're on an incredible run, and I feel like it's all before us. And any student, Black, white, Native American, any student that applies OU (who) is admitted, we will make sure they have the money to go there and to succeed," Stevenson said. "I love the new name."

Regarding how students may feel in the wake of Stitt's executive order, Stevenson said OU is handling the situation as well as any other institution could.

Stevenson expressed the importance of maintaining scholarships and cited Harroz's frequent discussions on ensuring financial support for admitted students. Stevenson said a major goal for the board is to continue increasing enrollment and stressed the importance of students graduating and increasing their chances to improve their lives.

Stitt's executive order stands in direct contrast with what Stevenson has chosen to support politically despite being appointed by Stitt to the OU Board of Regents.

Since Stevenson was appointed, he has donated $2,800 to one Democratic candidate, and a total of $1,250 to two Republican candidates.

His donation of $2,800 was made to U.S. Rep. Joyce Beatty (OH-3) in 2020. Beatty was elected 27th chair of the Congressional Black Caucus the same year.

Stevenson donated $25,000 to President Joe Biden's Unite the Country super PAC and $5,000 to the Congressional Black Caucus PAC in 2020.

In contrast, Stitt has voiced public support for former President Donald Trump and was endorsed by him when he made his first bid for governor in 2018. Stitt recently re-endorsed Trump after Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis dropped out of the presidential race in January. Stitt said that Trump is the right person for the job and that the world was safer with him in power instead of Biden.

During the contentious 2020 election year, Trump signed an executive order threatening DEI in the workplace. Since Trump lost his bid

ADEN CHOATE/OU DAILY

OU President Joseph Harroz Jr. and Board of Regents Chair Eric Stevenson during the board meeting on March 12.

for reelection to Biden, DeSantis has taken the spotlight as the main proponent against DEI.

In his time as Florida governor, DeSantis has persistently pushed legislation attacking DEI in both public universities and K-12 schools. He signed the "Don't Say Gay" bill and has run his presidential campaign on the idea that "wokeness" is infringing on American Democracy.

DeSantis signed his bill banning DEI in May 2023. One month later, he visited Oklahoma where Stitt made his formal endorsement.

"As far as protecting our kids in school, the DEI, and the things that we're doing in Oklahoma, I'm copying a lot of the stuff that DeSantis does," Stitt said in Iowa with DeSantis. "He'll tell you all about that."

The candidates Stevenson and Stitt have chosen to associate with and support stand in direct contrast with one another.

When analyzing each regent's political donations, John R. Braught and Stevenson stand out as the only regents to have never made a donation to Stitt.

As a result, OU students will endure a year in which the chair of the Board of Regents and the governor of Oklahoma are opposed in beliefs regarding diversity and inclusion and other political ideologies.

Despite these differences in political beliefs, members of the OU Board of Regents are excited for Stevenson to take the helm as chair. Regent Rick Nagel, who has previously supplied money to Stitt and Trump, voiced his support for Stevenson as chair.

"He's got an incredible passion for the university. He has a strong history of supporting particularly our business school," Nagel said. "He's a visionary. He understands what it takes to execute, and I think there are no limits for regent Stevenson in charge."

Stevenson, who has not shied away from showing his political ideologies through his donations, will have to work with people he might disagree with, something Cravens said is learned as a person of color in the South.

"Because we grew up in the South and in states like Oklahoma and Texas, we learned what to watch out for, and we learned how to survive," Cravens said. "And you learned that everyone that appears to be your friend might not be your friend."

Harroz's relationship with the OU Board of Regents is pivotal, not only as the university enters an evolving age of DEI, but also as higher education across the country grapples with disruption.

Harroz and the board are planning to apply pressure by ensuring OU is a desirable place for new students, especially as the value of a college degree has been called into question amid the predicted enrollment curve.

OU is also undergoing a transition into the SEC and is working through the logistics of how athletes can make money, whether it be strictly through "name, image and likeness" or direct funds from universities.

Harroz said in a time of disruption in higher education, the Board of Regents has been "exceptional" in how they are navigating these changing times.

"This board is as good as I've ever seen. They're really engaged. They know it is a time of real, real disruption in higher education," Harroz told OU Daily in an April 2 interview. "I couldn't have more respect for Eric Stevenson and for the board itself, and I think that's one of the reasons that we're in a really good position right now."

Other than Stevenson, the board currently includes Vice Chair Anita Holloway, former chair Natalie Shirley and regents Nagel, Braught and Bob J. Ross.

Stevenson said the board is united in making sure Harroz is provided with everything he needs to effectively govern the university in a manner that benefits all its students.

"That's part of the work of regents, just to make sure that the president has what he needs to be successful, whether it's staffing or direction, or he tells us what's important in terms of funding," Stevenson said.

As a former OU student and current board member, Stevenson said he wanted to serve as an example of someone who gives back to his community and as a representative of Wagoner. Staying true to his roots has motivated Stevenson to invest in helping both OU and Price College thrive, such as by supporting a scholarship program to assist students who struggle to afford college.

As Stevenson takes on this new role, he's excited to foster an engaging and encouraging environment on campus.

"What I believe university and college does for people is that it opens your aperture, you get exposed to differences, you get exposed to different cultures, to different foods, to different experiences, to different religions and faith," Stevenson said. "All of that happens at the university, typically in a pretty safe environment, and that's why I say I think we are doing it better than most."


PHOTOS BY SUTTON SPINNER/OU DAILY

OUPD officer during the suspicious package alert at Gaylord Hall on Feb. 16.

# ‘RUN. HIDE. FIGHT!’

## *OUPD reviews lessons learned, develops swatting response*

**BY PEGGY DODD • PDODD@OU.EDU**

When a call reporting an active shooter on OU’s Norman Campus came in, David McLeod, interim director of the Anne and Henry Zarrow School of Social Work, immediately checked to see if his college was holding nighttime classes.

McLeod rushed to figure out where the potential shooter was on campus and worked to make sure that his students and faculty were safe.

“How do we lock the building down? How do we make sure everything, everyone, is taken care of and safe?” McLeod asked himself that night.

On April 7, 2023, Friday night plans were interrupted at 9:25 p.m., when OU sent out an alert warning students of a potentially deadly situation:

“There is an active shooter at the Van Vleet Oval. Take immediate action now. Run. Hide. Fight!”

For the next 90 minutes, OU’s campus would be on a complete lockdown. The South Oval would be blanketed with a sea of blue and red flashing lights as first responders from eight different state agencies rushed to investigate a possible active shooter threat.

OUPD issued an all-clear at 10:53 p.m., determining there was never any threat to campus. Those 90 minutes were the result of a swatting, the act of falsely reporting mass violence to attract the attention and services of several law enforcement agencies, a situation that has become more frequent in past years across the nation.

Between April 4 and 9, 2023, 10 universities were swatted including OU: Clemson University, University of Florida, Boston University, Harvard University, Cornell University, University of Pittsburgh, Rutgers University, Middlebury College and Wake Forest University.

Before joining OU’s faculty, McLeod was a police detective and SWAT operator for six years in Sherwood, Arkansas.

“Something I think when we look at all these (swattings) on college campuses over the past year is, why?” McLeod said. “Who would benefit, why do we want to have all this fear and disarray on college campuses?”

In 2008, the FBI released a blog post detailing the “new phenomenon” of swatting, calling the schemes fairly sophisticated. The post read the reasoning behind these swattings include

Norman police officer removes a protest art display made of bricks, rocks, raw meat, hair and ripped clothing, which triggered a suspicious package alert at Gaylord Hall on Feb. 16.

ego-driven factors and bragging rights.

McLeod said the impact of calls can stick with community members as they begin to unpack how they felt during the incident.

"The idea of a shooting on campus is terrifying," McLeod said. "I don't want my colleagues to lose their lives. I sure don't want my students to lose their lives, and it's just not funny. … It's worse than a bad joke, the consequences can be really significant, and they can last a long time."

**Signs and frequency of false calls**

Two months after OU's swatting, the Norman Police Department released four calls, three to the Norman Police Department's non-emergency line and one to 911. The calls included simulated gunfire, locations and suspect descriptions, leading officers to the Bizzell Memorial Library.

One caller told operators a 6-foot-tall white man was heading north to the library carrying an AR-15 rifle. Another called from inside the library, saying their friend had been shot in the stomach and leg. A final call reported shots at "Ravenson Hall," a nonexistent location on campus. Gunshots were heard on these three calls.

OUPD Chief Nate Tarver was part of the response to the South Oval. Upon reflection, Tarver said there were certainly signs that would point to a swatting attempt but nothing could be confirmed until officers responded.

"Don't get me wrong, even with all those clues, when we get them, we're still gonna go to the building, we're still gonna go check it out," Tarver said. "We have too many people on campus. Our responsibility is too big not to ensure that there is not something going on, and we need to make sure that everyone is safe."

Tarver pointed to the use of the 10-digit NPD phone number rather than the quicker 911 as one of the first red flags he noticed. While students typically refer to the Van Vleet Oval as the South Oval and the Bizzell Memorial Library as "the Bizz," the callers used the official names of those locations, another detail that stuck out to Tarver.

"In the heat of the moment, those aren't things you sit there and think, 'I wonder, why would they say that?' when we should be moving toward going over there to find out what's going on," Tarver said.

Amy Klinger, director of programs at the Educator's School Safety Network, said most swatting calls sound similar to the ones NPD received. Klinger's organization specializes in K-12 safety.

In the 2022-23 school year, the Educator's School Safety Network found that the most frequent violent incident in K-12 schools was false report of an active shooting. Over 63% of violent incidents were swatting calls.

False reports increased by 546% from the 2018-19 school year to the 2022-23 year. As of April 1, 128 false reports have been called into K-12 schools this academic year.

"We know these things occur, and so we should be having these conversations beforehand. We should be talking about what swatting is, what it means and how people should respond," Klinger said. "We should be talking about all different types of response so that people feel competent and capable to respond so that you don't have that sense of panic."

Klinger said the increase of swattings can partly be attributed to the fact that the calls generate panic, achieving the response the swatters set out to get through their false report. Klinger said swattings are meant to cause anxiety and chaos, and callers want to make people feel unsafe.

"Swatting stops working when people are prepared, when people know what to do and they're empowered to do it, and they feel less anxious, and they understand what's happening," Klinger said.

**Lessons learned from April 7, 2023**

As OU community members began to unpack the swatting event, responding agencies began to do the same. McLeod said swatting calls lead departments to review their responses to the incident and any associated calls.

"(Swatting) changes the way that we police communities and think about covering communities, and respond to changes, the way that we respond to calls or threats or incidents like that," McLeod said.

In the days following April 7, OUPD started examining how they responded along with analyzing the calls from that night. That's when they were able to point to some of the mistakes in the calls.

"We evaluate it to see how we can do better because we try to do better every time we go through an incident, see where we might have made mistakes, or where things could have been improved," Tarver said. "We did a lot of good things that night."

The swatting on April 7 brought swarms of law enforcement to campus, from Oklahoma Highway Patrol, Oklahoma State Bureau of Investigation and police departments from Norman and surrounding communities.

Tarver said in some ways, the April swatting was almost like practice for an actual event.

He said the swatting was a waste of resources and time initially, but as he thought more, Tarver saw it as a learning opportunity. While most departments have some kind of simulated training event, Tarver said the April swatting had the anxiety and elevated emotions a real active shooter event would have.

Klinger said departments have the opportunity to debrief and evaluate following a swatting, similar to what Tarver's staff did. In terms of new policies post-swatting, departments can examine the call as it comes in, look for those warning signs of a false report, and respond accordingly on top of tracking the location of a caller, Klinger said.

"The ability to dial up our response and dial it back, to be able and have the capability to respond quickly and very aggressively and very impactfully to save people and to ensure you're responding, but also to be able to dial it down," Klinger said. "To be able to quickly pivot to something that is clear very quickly that it's swatting, and so we can still respond, but maybe not an all 'one size fits all' kind of response."

OUPD's evaluation of calls was put into practice on Feb. 17, when someone called in another false active shooter threat on campus, seemingly directing law enforcement to Evans Hall.

Instead of the "Run. Hide. Fight!" message sent during the April swatting, the university sent an alert that instead read:

"Reported Law Enforcement emergency on Norman campus in area of EVANS HALL. Avoid Area."

Tarver said likely within the first minute or two, a dispatcher could determine whether the call is an active situation or a false report, which happened with the February call to Evans Hall.

In a call to the 10-digit NPD non-emergency line, obtained by OU Daily, the caller told the dispatcher they were "at the main entrance" to the university and would not say a building name or street name, a seemingly odd way to describe a location on campus given OU has no official entrance. The caller, however, gave the exact street address for Evans Hall, 660 Parrington Oval. The call also had simulated gunfire.

Body camera footage from that day showed NPD responding to campus, closing down the Parrington Oval and parts of Boyd Street. A police incident report obtained by OU Daily labeled the event as a domestic disturbance.

"Our officers went over (and) said, 'Hey, this sounds like this is not the real deal,'" Tarver said. "But we're gonna go over, and we check and we listen."

In less than 20 minutes, an all-clear was issued for campus. Only a few OUPD officers responded to the call, which found no threat to Evans Hall or anywhere near OU.

**Impact**

In December and January, Harvard University was swatted multiple times. There are instances where several school districts are targeted in swatting calls within a similar time frame. On Jan. 17, 13 school districts in Iowa received calls reporting false incidents. In October, 10 districts were swatted in New York.

McLeod said when these events happen several times over, it works its way into how the brain assesses situations, creating a boy who cried wolf situation. The implementation of this into the thought process is unavoidable, McLeod said.

"When we hear about false alarm, false alarm, false alarm, it changes our culture and our ability to or how we think about our own public safety systems and the ways they need to respond," McLeod said. "We've come through a cycle."

> "We can't afford not to take them seriously. The one you ignored is going to be the one that's the real deal."
>
> NATE TARVER, OUPD CHIEF

The frequency of swatting calls can leave community members questioning whether all calls are legitimate or not. This questioning can lead to risks, given the claims of swatting calls.

"Because of the nature of those calls and the risk that's involved, seconds literally matter," McLeod said. "You do that enough, and then we have situations, scenarios, where we respond slower than we should, or in ways that aren't as effective as they could be. And then people can lose their lives."

In the name of safety for the campus community, Tarver said the department is required to send RAVE alerts by the U.S. Department of Education through the Clery Act. Signed in 1990, the Clery Act requires colleges and universities to report campus crime data, publicly outline safety policies and procedures and send timely warning and emergency notifications.

The act requires crimes including robbery, assault, burglary, homicide, sexual assault, hate crimes, motor vehicle theft and arson to be reported to campus communities.

In January, fines for violating the Clery Act were raised to just under $70,000 per violation. In March, the U.S. Department of Education fined Liberty University $14 million due to several violations of the Clery Act, including the failure to notify campus security authorities of crime statistics and their obligations. Tarver said on the night of April 7, the notifications sent were within the requirements of the Clery Act, adding that some people felt uninformed while sheltering from a potential shooter. The U.S. Department of Education requires messages to be sent every 15 to 20 minutes, according to Tarver.

"We didn't get the messages out as timely as we should have … because my dispatchers are having to deal with a plethora of phone calls," Tarver said.

Since the swatting, OU changed its practices. During a false alarm at Gaylord Hall on Feb. 16, RAVE alerts were sent more frequently than the night of the swatting.

Post-swatting, Tarver said there was a lot of support for the department coming from the OU community, leaving Tarver confident in OUPD's response on April 7.

Tarver said as far as the department is concerned, officers will continue their duty to respond to all calls. He pointed to the panic alarms around the OU Health Science Center campus in Oklahoma City, saying they go off quite often.

On Feb. 9, OUHSC had a false alarm scare through those panic buttons when one was triggered inside the College of Dentistry. There was a police presence on the campus that afternoon as a result.

"We can't afford not to take them seriously," Tarver said. "The one you ignored is going to be the one that's the real deal."

As departments begin to adapt to the reality of swatting calls, Klinger said swatters will begin to look for new ways to target communities. According to Klinger, the future of campus security, and its possible threats, leave departments in a position where they must be aware of all ways people could target campus.

"Swatting, the way that we've seen it, is going to be replaced with something else. It's going to be replaced with some other threat or some other way to try to traumatize folks," Klinger said. "That's why the work of safety is so important to be ongoing because you have to continue to adapt, you have to continue to look at trends and see what's happening and try to stay a step ahead."

# WORRY FREE WATERS

## how to stay safe at the lake this summer

Oklahoma is one-of-a-kind in the summertime. One of the best ways to unwind and appreciate our state's beauty is on the water. Whether you're boating, swimming or chilling on the beach, there are plenty of options to unwind from the semester.

**However**, mixing alcohol, water and sun together may make the summer a bit trickier.

**45%**

of drowning deaths are related to recreational swimming accidents in Oklahoma's lakes and rivers over the last five years

Though swimming while drinking may sound like a fun time, it may put you at even more risk. According to the NIAAA, alcohol impairs judgment, coordination and reaction time, increasing the risk of drowning while swimming under the influence.

"Sun drunk" refers to drinking in excessive heat. This can cause rapid dehydration, weakness, more intense sunburns and risk of skin cancer. This is because alcohol causes blood vessels to expand while disrupting sweating, causing you to absorb more heat than usual.

Swimming makes this effect even stronger, since drinking inhibits decision making and can lead you to be overconfident in your ability to swim.

## Safety Tips

### Stay Hydrated and Cool:

Alternate alcoholic drinks with water and stay in the shade to keep safe throughout the day.

### Designate a Sober Boat Operator:

Having a DD is crucial for ensuring the safe navigation of the vessel and the well-being of everyone on board.

### Know and Follow Boating Laws:

Familiarize yourself with local regulations, including rules regarding open containers and allowable blood alcohol concentration (BAC) levels for boat operators.

### Stay Alert and Aware:

Keep an eye out for other vessels, swimmers and other obstacles. Be prepared to ask for help if needed.

### Limit Alcohol Consumption:

Drinking alcohol in moderation is essential for maintaining clear judgment and reaction time while boating and swimming.

### Wear a Life Jacket

U.S. Coast Guard-approved life jackets can significantly increase your chances of survival in the event of an accident or emergency.

the RED CUP Q&A

separating alcohol fact from fiction

ADEN CHOATE/OU DAILY

OU President Joseph Harroz Jr. during the Board of Regents meeting on March 12.

# HOW, WHY OF DEAN SEARCHES

## *OU seeks to rectify turnover that leaves 6 positions open*

**BY KAROLINE LEONARD • KAROLINELEONARD@OU.EDU**

In the 45 years he's been in Norman, Paul Bell has watched OU transition through six permanent presidents and four interim ones.

Over the years, he's seen OU's administration weather various controversies: Richard L. Van Horn's tenure that was marked by audits and poorly handled investigations; David L. Boren's administration that transformed the university's ambitions before being marred by sexual misconduct allegations and financial mismanagement; and former President James Gallogly's budget-focused tenure, which ended after just over 10 months.

Now Bell, dean emeritus of the Dodge Family College of Arts and Sciences, is observing the university undergo another significant transition as current President Joseph Harroz Jr. leads OU through a historic move to the Southeastern Conference, pursuit of membership in one of academia's elite echelons and an attempt to build its status as a premier research institution. All that coincides with OU entering the second half of a $2 billion fundraising campaign as the United States reaches an inflection point about the value of higher education.

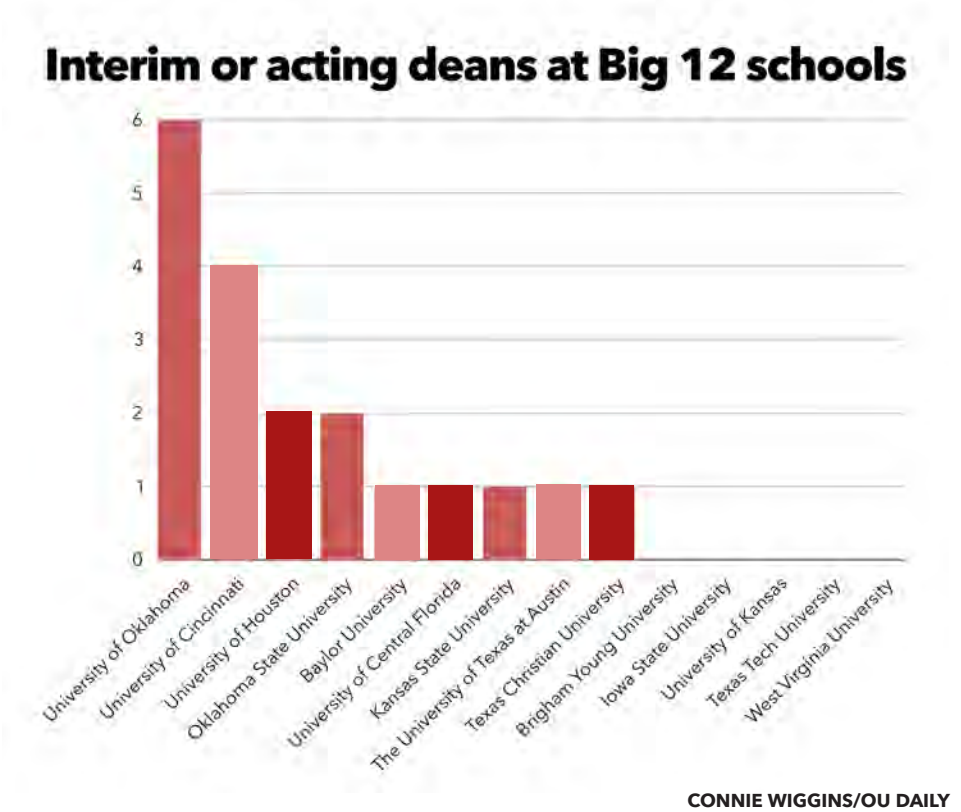
This is a season of change on campus, with numerous administrative leadership transitions, leaving OU with more open academic dean positions than its collegiate peers. As this semester winds down, OU is poised to have six of its 16 Norman deans be interim or acting leaders of their colleges — a problem Bell says inhibits the broader progress of the institution beyond Evans Hall.

The university has three ongoing dean searches: Gaylord College of Journalism and Mass Communication, College of Law and Honors College, the latter of which has been without a dean for nearly seven years. OU is also restructuring and renaming its University College, which hasn't had a permanent dean since August 2022.

"The fact that there's so many, that's a bit of a shock," Bell said about the open dean positions.

When Bell became dean in 1997, there were roughly 11 dean positions on OU's Norman campus, with the Honors College forming that same year. Over his 16 years as dean, Bell saw the formation or renaming of Mewbourne College of Earth and Energy, David L. Boren College of International Studies, Gaylord College of Journalism and Mass Communication and the College of Atmospheric and Geographic Sciences.

Bell said new leadership can drive change




CONNIE WIGGINS/OU DAILY

OU's six interim deans include College of Law and do not include University College. OU and Texas will exit the Big 12 Conference in the summer of 2024.

and innovation, but this many open positions could also mean potential trouble for OU's administration among the rank and file of the university.

"It could mean there's a general lack of confidence in what's going on at the university and people are abandoning the ship," Bell said. "I just retired after 44 years at OU. I know of other people who are retiring, who probably could stay on longer. I know a lot of people who are leaving and finding other jobs because, for one reason or another, they're not happy being at OU right now.

"That much turnover, just objectively, that much turnover is usually not a good sign."

**'Red tape'**

OU's six open dean positions are the most among its current Big 12 Conference and future SEC peers.

As of March, University of Cincinnati had the second most open dean positions in the Big 12 with four, the median number of open dean positions being one.

For the SEC, the median was 1.5 open dean positions, with Texas A&M University having five open positions.

Of SEC presidents with fewer than five years in the job, Harroz, who was named interim president in 2019 and permanent president in 2020, has more dean openings than his peers, with Texas A&M University, whose president was inaugurated in 2023, having one less than OU.

University of Florida also inaugurated a new president in 2023, and seven other SEC schools have had new presidents or chancellors since 2019.

College of Law Dean Katheleen Guzman announced in October her intent to step down at the end of the academic year. The OU Board of Regents approved a search committee to find her successor in November.

Former Gaylord Dean Ed Kelley retired at the end of June, citing a need for younger leadership to oversee Generation Z students. Five candidates visited campus in March, and three finalists have been sent to Harroz in recent days, an anonymous source told OU Daily.

Scott Fritzen, former dean of the College of International Studies stepped down in June to take a job as president of Fulbright University Vietnam. His duties were split between Jonathan Stalling, who serves as the college's interim dean, and Rebecca Cruise, who serves as interim associate provost for global engagement.

Mike Stice stepped down as dean of the College of Earth and Energy in November 2022, according to OU Board of Regents meeting minutes. John Antonio serves as interim dean of the college.

Nicole Campbell stepped down as dean of University College in August 2022 to focus on teaching and scholarship. Ken Petersen has been overseeing the college, which OU announced in February would be reorganized under the provost's office and no longer be a standing college.

University College was one of the first in the nation to specifically cater to first-year students. In its current form, the college includes academic advising, the assessment center, first-year learning and engagement programs, first-year foundations courses, University College seminars and the Student Learning Center. With this change, first-year students will now be enrolled directly into their college of choice.

OU's Honors College has had three interim deans since its former Dean David Ray left the university in 2017: Doug Gaffin, who served from 2017 to 2020; Rich Hamerla, who served from 2020 to 2023; and Kelvin White, who replaced Hamerla in October.

Regents approved a new search committee for the Honors College dean in January. The university previously conducted a search and interviewed candidates during the COVID-19 pandemic, though no hires were made.

Martha Banz stepped down as dean of the College of Professional and Continuing Studies in December 2022. Gregg Garn now serves as interim dean and vice president of online learning at OU.

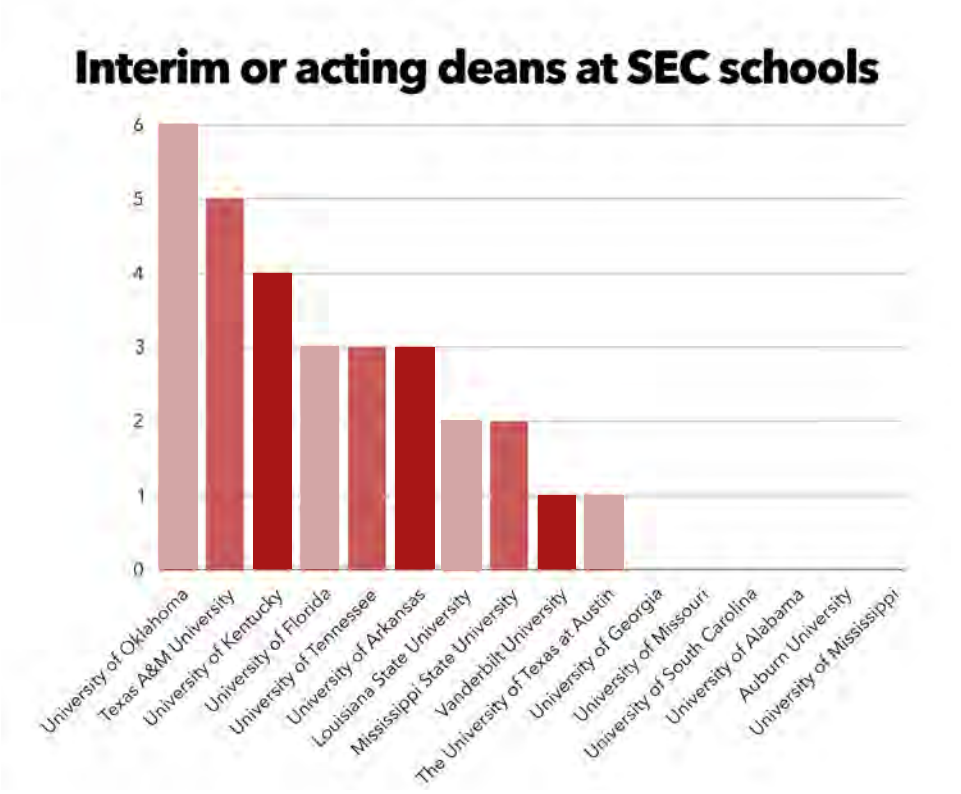
There have been no updates on potential search committees for the professional and continuing studies, earth and energy or international studies dean positions.

"Generally, when you have that many deans leaving all at once, it usually is a sign that there may be issues involving somebody or some situation," Bell said. "What people tell me over and over and over again is that it's becoming increasingly difficult at OU to get anything done because the red tape is getting thicker and thicker and thicker."

Since the pandemic, changes have roiled offices like Marketing and Communications, Student Affairs and Native American Studies, to name a few. The university has conducted campus climate surveys amid escalating employee insurance rates, shifting payroll cycles and imposing curved caps on review processes, making it harder and less likely for employees to earn raises. All while the trash is taken out less frequently across campus and various landscaping and construction jobs on campus are slowed.

Such red tape, Bell said, takes away from deans and faculty's other jobs, such as scholarship, research and teaching. Bell said just moving a staff member from one office to another within a department now requires committees, oversight from the OU Board of Regents and can take up significant time and resources.

The Honors College and Gaylord College search committees are each headed by a dean — Graduate College Dean Randall Hewes and Price College of Business Dean Corey Phelps,




CONNIE WIGGINS/OU DAILY

OU's six interim deans include College of Law and do not include University College. OU and Texas will join the SEC in the summer of 2024.

respectively — and the College of Law search committee is co-chaired by OU Vice President and General Counsel Armand Paliotta and College of Arts and Sciences Dean David Wrobel. The Honors College committee has seven members, the Gaylord College committee has 14 and the College of Law search committee has 13.

"That's crazy," Bell said of such bureaucracy in general. "That's the kind of red tape that just makes people tired. People don't take faculty jobs at universities to do red tape. They take faculty jobs to teach and do research. Anything that gets in the way of teaching and research is a burden on what people are really there for, which is to spend time with their students, teach classes and do their scholarship."

**Executive searches**

Ray M. Bowen, former Texas A&M University president and former Oklahoma State University interim president, led his university in joining the Association of American Universities, a prestigious group of research institutions in the U.S. that Harroz and some of his predecessors have aspired for OU to join.

Bowen told OU Daily he never saw more than five dean positions open at once when he was president, but he said it can happen due to several reasons, from administrative turmoil to the closing or reorganizing of specific programs.

"Sometimes it's age," Bowen said. "Sometimes it's a new president or a new provost who want his or her own people. It's a multidimensional issue."

Bowen said new university presidents and provosts can look to make changes in administrative personnel, just like a state governor or U.S. president would. Different presidents have different ideals for their leadership and many times it can lead to dean turnover.

Since taking office in 2019, Oklahoma Gov. Kevin Stitt has shifted the makeup of the OU Board of Regents, the university's governing body and Harroz's bosses. All but one member of the board was appointed by Stitt, the exception being former chair Natalie Shirley who was appointed by former Gov. Mary Fallin in 2018. Stitt's most recent appointment was Kenneth S. Waits, who still needs Senate approval before his term begins.

Harroz, who previously served as law dean, turned to a new face to lead the hiring of academic deans, André-Denis Wright. Wright joined the university in 2021 as senior vice president and provost of the Norman campus, succeeding Kyle Harper, who vacated the role in June 2020 after facing backlash following a sit-in organized by the Black Emergency Response Team that called for his resignation.

Since Wright took the role, six deans — Guzman, Kelley, Fritzen, Stice, Banz and Campbell — have stepped down.

Each administration runs searches differently, however, the national standard has switched to emphasize hiring search firms and creating search committees.

Executive search firms, however, cost thousands of dollars and take time, sometimes running as low as $25,000 and as high as over $160,000, according to Inside Higher Ed. On top of professional or base fees, universities pay indirect, client, candidate and additional consultant expenses that increase the price.

OU hired Greenwood Asher & Associates to conduct the search for Gaylord College's next dean. OU previously hired the firm for its senior vice president and provost, faculty director of gateway programs, law dean and OU Health Sciences Center's senior vice president and provost searches.

The firm advertises its services having led to the appointments of presidents at Auburn University, University of Arizona, University of Florida, University of Kentucky and West Virginia University, among others. The firm also helped appoint journalism or mass communication deans at Louisiana State University and at Florida A&M University.

The agreement between OU and Greenwood Asher & Associates, obtained by OU Daily through a public records request, states that professional fees for the search includes one third of the hire's first year estimated cash compensation or a minimum of $60,000, whichever is higher. If a candidate outside of Greenwood Asher & Associates' recommendations is hired, the firm charges a fee of 25% of the hire's first year compensation.

The firm also invoices other expenses such as indirect, consultant and client expenses to cover extra costs of the search. The contract read that the firm will assist in a second search if the candidate chosen from the first search is terminated within a year of their hiring.

As the Gaylord College dean search narrows, the law and honors dean searches have accelerated, Harroz told reporters at the March regents meeting, noting he hopes to see those three dean positions filled by July 1.

For prior administrations, for good or for bad, dean searches weren't always run with executive search firms.

Boren asked Suzette Grillot, dean of international studies from 2012 until 2019, to step in as interim dean as its previous dean left to take a university presidency role. After a few months of working as interim dean, Boren named Grillot the next dean of the college, she told OU Daily.

"He just announced that I was the permanent dean," Grillot said. "So we'd never really discussed it, he kept saying that he was pleased with my work. … I was working really, really hard and he didn't have any other female deans at the time. … My gender probably played a role, but also I worked really, really, really hard."

A few months later, Boren appointed

Campbell as interim dean and later permanent dean of University College without a search, according to regents minutes.

Grillot said she was prepared to apply and compete against other dean candidates, but Boren went ahead and hired her instead of spending money on a search.

"He said, 'Why spend money on a search when I know I have the person that I want,'" Grillot said.

Boren also didn't run a search before naming Kelley to Gaylord's top job a year after he initially joined faculty in a then-newly created role focused on internship opportunities within the college. Kelley became interim dean following Joe Foote's retirement and was later named permanent dean.

Bell chaired several search committees under Boren, including the law dean search that resulted in the hiring of Harroz. Bell said when he became dean, he underwent a national search.

In every case, Bell said, he met with Boren to discuss goals for the dean. After the search committee met with candidates and narrowed down a list, the committee would forward a ranking of three finalists to the president, who would make the final decision.

"In every case for the three searches that I was on, the number one candidate from the search committee was the one the president selected to be the dean," Bell said. "But it doesn't have to be that way. The president has full discretion as to who he or she chooses to be the dean. And they can choose to ignore the results of the search committee.

"In my experience, that never happened."

The policies for dean searches, as spelled out by the regents, read that executive search committees should have faculty, student and staff representation, and the president makes all appointments and recommendations to regents.

Gaffin, who served for 10 years as dean of University College and almost three years as interim dean of the Honors College, told OU Daily that those colleges function very differently compared to other academic colleges, an element that can make some searches take longer than others.

However, he said for the Honors College, it is vital the university finds a dean soon.

"It's necessary," Gaffin said. "Interims can do a lot, but in the end, when you think about things like fundraising, collaborating with development and connecting with your board of visitors, your ability to get things to happen might be limited. So that's something a new dean, a true dean, would be able to pull those levers and make a difference. It's absolutely necessary."

When Gaffin was asked to oversee the Honors College after Ray departed, he said he was excited but had no idea how long he'd sign on for. An interim dean can do a lot to keep a college running, however, there are a lot of pieces they cannot control.

"My mindset was just to get in there and keep things running. I started to pick certain battles," Gaffin said. "There were some things that I thought I could do in a short time. There are other things you just have to resign yourself to. You're not the permanent person, so you have to take that for what it is."

Following the January OU Board of Regents meeting, Harroz told reporters that, in his time, the delay for the Honors College dean searches has come from within the university, as Wright reexamines the college's structure, and created a committee to research best practices in honors colleges across the country.

"We all know academic searches just take some time. It's just the nature of the process," Harroz said. "You've seen the size of the committees. … So they just take, unfortunately, longer than we'd like."

**Becoming a premier research university**

Harroz has stated several times in recent years that he wants OU to join the ranks of the Association of American Universities.

Bowen said the process for Texas A&M started nearly 15 years before the university became a member in 2001. Bowen served as president of the university from 1994 to 2002.

Membership is by invitation and governed by AAU's board of directors, however, Bowen said it is all about who you know.

"A&M always had a good relationship with Rice University and the University of Texas, except for in football," Bowen said. "But the relationships are good. So when we became competitive for AAU membership based on our research funding and scholarly activities, the Rice president and University of Texas president are sitting around the table and they would comment about the quality research they saw at Texas A&M."

Bowen said the University of California schools were able to advocate for one another for membership, and regional and conference relationships OU is able to build could help it possibly become a member.

The University of Kansas and University of Texas at Austin are the only current Big 12 schools that are AAU members, however Arizona State University, University of Arizona, University of Utah and the University of Colorado Boulder, which are all joining the conference this summer, are members. SEC schools that are AAU members include Vanderbilt University, Texas A&M University, University of Florida and the University of Missouri-Columbia.

Bowen said who universities hire doesn't directly lead to them becoming AAU members, but it can have an indirect relationship, as the more researchers or connections to current members a university has can help the university's chances.

"If you hire a dean and it comes from an AAU school, they will have had the experience of managing large research programs," Bowen said. "They can be a voice, a call, for the university to invest in research and to invest in facilities that are necessary to support the research. So that experience is valuable, but it may not pay off during the life of that dean."

Harroz told OU Daily following the October Board of Regents meeting that faculty and staff are the drivers of excellence at OU, so the hiring of deans factors into obtaining AAU status for the university.

Wright came to OU from Washington State University, which is not an AAU member, however, he previously worked as a professor and director at the University of Arizona. Tomás Díaz de la Rubia, vice president for research and partnerships at OU, previously worked at Purdue University, which is an AAU institution.

"It's indirectly related to the people you hire because they're the ones with the knowledge and the ability to be competitive in this world of universal research," Bowen said. "A&M spent many, many years hiring the best people they could find (ahead of joining AAU)."

OU is set to have a historic year with its transition to the SEC and the university on pace to welcome another large freshman class – straining campus housing's limits – after last year's broke university records for both total number of students and class diversity.

In roughly four months, OU's class of 2028 will descend on campus, now under their respective colleges rather than University College as in years past. As they enter colleges, such as journalism, law, honors, international studies and earth and energy, they will be led by either a brand new dean or an interim, which Gaffin told OU Daily: "You just have to hope you have good people" to run the colleges.

While the SEC brings chances for more research opportunities, more competitive athletics and more national exposure, OU's academic leadership is among the areas increasingly feeling the growing pains.

Ever optimistic, Harroz is steadfast that AAU is the goal, and he is prepared to do what it takes to get there — including a strategic plan refresh to take place over the summer.

If Harroz and Wright successfully find deans this summer for the journalism, law and honors colleges, there will still be open positions for earth and energy, international studies and professional and continuing studies.

"We're making really good progress toward being able to apply, but we haven't set a (timeline)," Harroz said. "We're doing a strategic plan refresh this summer and fall, and a big part of that will be, are we on our path to being able to apply for AAU status? It's top of mind."


KALY PHAN/OU DAILY

OU Asian American Student Association President Amelia Torrevillas-Brown speaks at an AASA general body meeting on April 3.

# ‘IT’S KIND OF AT A STANDSTILL’

## *Multicultural orgs criticize university’s unclear DEI response*

**BY KALY PHAN • KALY.N.PHAN-1@OU.EDU**

Following Gov. Kevin Stitt’s December executive order calling for a review of diversity, equity and inclusion in higher education, OU multicultural organizations were left wondering where they stand at the university.

According to the website OU created to clarify the university’s guidelines for the implementation of the executive order, offices focused on “African American, Hispanic, or LGBTQ+ students likely violate the Executive Order” since they are departments and programs that are not protected under it.

The website goes on to state that offices solely dedicated to these students will need to be restructured and programs supporting these communities may be incorporated into a framework that will broadly support more student success.

Amelia Torrevillas-Brown, president of the OU Asian American Student Association, told OU Daily she has been reassured that AASA and other Student Life multicultural programs are protected as they are departmental student organizations.

However, she said the future for these organizations is still unclear.

“(The Student Life organizations) may not directly be impacted in (that) we don’t have to rename, but the way we might get funding could drastically change and we don’t know what that’s going to look like in the future,” Torrevillas-Brown said.

She said despite AASA’s protection, she’s seen a lack of clarity from the university, creating anxiety among members.

“We keep asking, ‘When’s everything going to be mapped out? Where is it going to change?’ And we don’t have that map yet,” Torrevillas-Brown said. “I remember thinking, ‘Shoot, where and how do we go from here?’ … This lack of clarity … creates fear and creates uncertainty, and the way the university reacts could truly be better.”

### Initial and continued frustrations

Torrevillas-Brown said she has sensed frustration among leadership of other multicultural organizations, which includes the Black Student Association, Hispanic American Student Association and American Indian Student Association, at the lack of transparency from the university’s administration.

In January, a meeting with student leaders at the Vice President’s Advisory Council shed some light on the situation from top OU leadership, including Vice President for Student Affairs and Dean of Students David Surratt and

OU President Joseph Harroz Jr.

At the meeting, which was meant to brief student leaders on the executive order, Harroz told the group that nobody would lose their jobs and students would be protected. Even still, the meeting's remarks were vague in terms of protections for scholarships, funding for registered student organizations and various programming at the university.

Torrevillas-Brown said she wants to be the kind of leader people can depend on but felt more scared at her inability to assure herself and others because of the lack of answers from administration.

"In general, when the executive order was passed last semester, there was just a swarm of mixed emotions," Torrevillas-Brown said. "Being in a position that has the reputation that you know everything in a moment where you also personally feel scared as a person of color on campus, … it was tremendously scary to not have answers for other people."

She said she understands the concern surrounding the uncertainty of DEI programs and organizations, but said this uncertainty is something that has been consistently repeated to her and the other multicultural leaders by administration.

Torrevillas-Brown said she believes a lot of trust between the university and students of color has been lost in this situation surrounding the executive order.

She said the least the university could do is provide what she describes as the bare minimum, such as resources for students of color, like the website with the university's executive order guidelines, which she felt wasn't broadcasted well.

The university, she said, needs to continue to provide a safe space for students of color, which she feels the state is potentially putting in jeopardy.

"(OU) needs to provide the bare minimum and sometimes it feels like it's not even there, and it feels extremely lonely," Torrevillas-Brown said. "Wondering what's going to happen and not having those answers which directly provide it leaves a lot of students hanging, wondering how their identity is going to stand being at a university in a predominantly white state."

Following the initial release of the executive order, Harroz reassured the OU community that the university would remain a place of belonging and opportunity and that individuals who were employed in the division of DEI would not lose their jobs.

"We're going to find out what (the executive order) says and what it means," Harroz told student leaders at the Vice President's Advisory Council meeting. "And then we're going to find out what we're going to do to make sure we maintain ourselves as a place of true belonging. That's what we do."

Harroz restated this intention in a recent sit-down with OU Daily on April 2.

In August, OU welcomed its most diverse first-year class with an increased number of students from minority groups and first-generation students. Of the 5,212 students in the class of 2027, 39.4% are from underrepresented communities and 26% are first-generation students.

Torrevillas-Brown said while looking at student demographics like enrollment, it's important for OU to not forget these statistics as DEI programs and services continue to consolidate or disappear, causing an integral part of students' university experience to be uprooted from underneath them.

"Where's the Band-Aid for it? The antibody? The ointment?" Torrevillas-Brown said.

Harroz wrote in a December statement OU is unwavering in its values and principles and is disappointed in the governor's executive order. However, despite this disappointment, the statement read the university is still obligated to comply.

Regarding the university's compliance with the executive order, Harroz said figuring out OU's next step forward is a larger lens before administration can focus on any specific program.

"For all the discussion and emotion around this, one of the things we try to do and say, 'What are those things that are immovable for us? What are those values that we hold?'" Harroz said.

Torrevillas-Brown said she's aware of and grateful for the conversations happening in administration but continues to wish for more transparency between OU and the greater student population.

"That's where a lot of students of color feel very lost and alone and unsupported. … That's something I think (OU) can extremely improve on," Torrevillas-Brown said. "Things would be better by simply having these conversations and simply being communicated in a way that is very accessible, even if they don't have all the answers, instead of having this executive order pass and for us to not know what's going on (for) them to be silent for three months."

OU Daily has also reached out to representatives of the Hispanic American Student Association, Black Student Association and American Indian Student Association.

Ryan Lee, AISA adviser and American Indian Programs and Services coordinator, wrote in an email to OU Daily that the association would have to "decline the opportunity" to speak, citing a busy schedule. The other two have not responded by the time of publication.

**Multicultural events and ceremonies**

Torrevillas-Brown said multicultural welcoming events, such as Asian American and Pacific Islander Student Welcome Week and Welcome Black Weekend, are still up in the air as far as she was aware and was unsure if they would take place in fall.

She said although these events are held with the respective multicultural students they are designated for in mind, they are open for all and don't bar anyone from participating. However, she can see how these events could be seen or argued as "not necessary for compliance and accreditation and do not broadly support student and employee success," which would violate the executive order.

Torrevillas-Brown said she remembers a time when many students were afraid the university would eliminate The APIDA Leadership Conference, which is a conference for high schoolers of Asian, Pacific Islander and Desi-American descent in Oklahoma hosted by AASA.

Oklahoma students are not the only ones concerned about their state's review of DEI programs within higher education. Other flagship universities in states such as Tennessee, Florida and Texas, where anti-DEI legislation has also been passed, have taken steps towards renaming and rebranding, reorganizing or dispersing their DEI divisions in response.

The University of Florida eliminated all DEI-related programs and terminated all positions within, and the University of Tennessee renamed its Division of Diversity and Engagement to the Division of Access and Engagement in November, according to an article by The Daily Beacon, the university's student newspaper.

The University of Texas at Austin has discontinued programs for "undocumented students," and closed the doors to its Multicultural Engagement Center and its Division of Campus and Community Engagement, according to The Daily Texan, the university newspaper.

The University of Texas at Austin also pulled funding for its multicultural graduations, end-of-year events that celebrate graduating students of specific cultural backgrounds, a tradition it shared with OU. The American Civil Liberties Union of Texas released a statement on X, formerly known as Twitter, telling Texas students their "identity is valued and you belong in our schools" after students expressed dismay over the loss of the celebrations on social media.

The alumni association of the University of Texas, or Texas Exes, will be hosting the multicultural graduations to keep the tradition alive despite pushback against DEI programs, according to an article by The Daily Texan.

In an email sent to OU Daily, Texas Exes Vice President of Communications Dorothy Guerrero confirmed the alumni association will be hosting four cultural graduation celebrations for Latino, Black, Asian and 2SLGBTQ+ students.

FILE/OU DAILY

OU international students present their national flags at a 2019 graduation ceremony at Lloyd Noble Center.

The University of Texas at Austin did not previously host a multicultural graduation celebration for Indigenous students, and Pacific Islander and South Asian American students are part of the Asian celebration.

"The Texas Exes looks forward to celebrating our 2024 graduates and welcoming them to the Alumni Center and the next chapter of their lives," the statement read.

OU still currently plans to host these events in May, according to an email sent by Director of Strategic Initiatives Kesha Keith.

"One highlight of our programming is academic achievement celebrations, which provides a unique opportunity for students to honor their accomplishments personally, professionally, and academically," Keith wrote. "These events are open to anyone interested in attending, regardless of background."

In these celebrations, students receive verbal recognition, a certificate and a cultural stole which symbolizes their connection to their cultural heritage and their achievements at OU. She wrote that the celebrations provide a space for community celebration and recognition, which complement OU's formal ceremonies.

"We remain committed to fostering an inclusive and supportive environment for all students and are proud to continue offering these important opportunities for our community," Keith wrote.

She also wrote it's important to remember that official graduation ceremonies at OU are celebrated in only two formats, commencement and convocations, and that these multicultural events are not and should not be considered graduations since academic degrees are not presented.

The first two celebrations this semester will be the Black Excellence Ceremony and the Lavender Celebration, held on April 27 and 28 respectively.

The Lavender Celebration is a way for 2SLGBTQ+ students to acknowledge their achievements and contributions to their university, according to the Human Rights Campaign. It has historically been named the Lavender Graduation as per a tradition started by the University of Michigan in 1995.

Torrevillas-Brown said she doesn't remember any AASA members being concerned about the fate of the multicultural graduations outright, but she can see where that kind of anxiety could easily grow.

"I can see how concern over DEI can be very much mirrored with our multicultural graduation stoles," Torrevillas-Brown said.

**Moving forward**

On Feb. 20, Harroz sent an email to the OU community announcing the university's initial steps into complying with Stitt's December executive order.

The initial changes included reworking the function of OU's Division of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion and renaming it to the Division of Access and Opportunity. The sign above the division's door was officially changed over spring break. On April 4, a sign was posted on the division's front doors stating that its offices were closed to the public.

Torrevillas-Brown said she believes a person's cultural and ethnic heritage are integral to their being, and for people of color, realizing their experience and the evolution of it is vital. She said it is how many recognize their culture, and it isn't at all a way to "force it" onto anybody else like some seem to believe.

People of color, she said, should be allowed to be proud of their accomplishments through the lens of their culture and what that represents.

"I don't want to say 'insane,' but it honestly is a little insane to think that (we're forcing our culture onto people)," Torrevillas-Brown said. "It's more of just a celebration of who you are and … what you've done for yourself and how you feel about that culturally because culture encompasses a lot more than the color of your skin."

Torrevillas-Brown said she wants it to be known that AASA, as well as the other Student Life organizations from her understanding, are built on advocacy, and they're hoping to create new safe spaces in a way that won't negatively impact the safe spaces they've established in their associations.

"It's kind of at a standstill," Torrevillas-Brown said. "I think that's a concern a lot of us have: 'How are we going to help support (other organizations) without getting a target on our back?'"

She said the Student Life multicultural associations are in constant conversation about how they can protect the other places on campus that advocate for their respective communities, but the path forward remains foggy.

"What our biggest fear is, 'We're protected, but how do we protect these (organizations) that provide a lot of advocacy for our people in our communities?'" Torrevillas-Brown said. "We don't know what that looks like, and I've asked so many questions to the administration and, like I said, they don't have answers for me."

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