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From Black Studies to Multiculturalism

The Evolution of the Bolinga Black Cultural Resources Center at Wright State University, 1971–2018

Opolot Okia

With the growth of Black studies departments and programs across the United States in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the field developed with a prominent multidisciplinary focus and a mission to affect meaningful social change.1 Much of the literature on the Black studies movement has focused on the academic programs and departments established during this formative period.2 Outside of Ohio State University and Kent State University, little has been published on the development of Black studies in Ohio.3 Moving beyond academic programs, there is also very little research on Black cultural centers.4 Compounding this problem, the research on Black cultural centers has not analyzed them in terms of historical change.5

This essay seeks to fill this gap by exploring the historical development of the Bolinga Black Cultural Resources Center at Wright State University in Dayton. Initially, when the center was dedicated in January 1971, it was called the Black Cultural Resources Center but went through a name change to the Bolinga Black Cultural Resources Center by April of that year. Despite the name change, the center was, usually, referred to as the Bolinga Center. In keeping with this usage, we will use the shorter moniker throughout this essay.

In general, Black studies programs are more common at elite research institutions and liberal arts schools than at regional institutions.6 The emergence of the Bolinga Center highlights the distinctiveness of the Black studies experience at Wright State University, a regional tier II research institution. In addition to being one of the earliest Black cultural centers in the nation, the Bolinga Center was also, essentially, the first in Dayton.7

Traditionally, Black cultural centers on predominantly white campuses have served as safe places for minority students, in addition to providing cultural, social and academic resources and programming.8 The center began with a vision rooted in the discipline of Black studies as a resource center for an academic program. However, as it became more institutionalized in the administration as an
identity center, its original goals transformed due to the impact of bureaucrati-
ization, budget constraints, and the advent of multiculturalism. Providing social
and academic resources to students shifted to the forefront.

The Bolinga Center experience lies between that of the Black cultural cen-
ters that came into being and failed, as at San Francisco State University, or
were later reorganized into multicultural centers, like the Multicultural Center at
Texas A&M University, and centers that have thrived, like the Frank Hale Black
Cultural Center at Ohio State University. While Its history is similar to that of
other institutions, it also offers some important distinctions.

The Bolinga Center opened at Wright State in 1971 during what William
Exum called the formative era of Black studies, which spanned the years 1968
to 1971. It was also student-driven around a set of fundamental grievances. The
students who agitated for its formation were also organized, had clearly defined
goals, and shared a set of core beliefs reflective of the Black Power movement. 9

As with many Black cultural centers, since its founding the Bolinga Center
has faced a lot of problems regarding funding and its mission. The growth of
multiculturalism in the 1980s resulted in the pressure to create multicultural
centers that served other ethnic groups. This led to a questioning of the need for
Black cultural centers or the utility of funding them apart from multicultural
centers. David Hefner argues that this had the effect of eroding the unique iden­
tity of Black cultural centers.10

In the case of the Bolinga Center, though originally construed more narrowly
as a resource center for African American history and culture, there was also a
vision that it would eventually serve as the bedrock of an academic program. This
did not happen. Gradually, it settled into its role as a multicultural center but
struggled to define an academic identity on campus.

Conversely, the movement toward multiculturalism further legitimized and
institutionalized the center. It was the first and most important multicultural
center on the Wright State campus. For many years, it had the largest budget and
staff of any of the multicultural centers. Based on a metric of success for Black
cultural centers at predominantly white institutions articulated by Demetrius
Richmond, the Bolinga Center has been successful.11

In 2016, the Bolinga Center began to experience severe funding problems
that have been, in essence, a microcosm of the overall growing pains of Black
studies programs, departments, and centers nationwide.12 The budgetary con­
straints imposed by reduced funding have further modified the center's mission
to more emphasis on academic retention and social services.

In terms of differences, the impact of Wright State student protests in 1970
did not lead to the creation of an academic department but, instead, it resulted
in the establishment of a Black Cultural Resources Center (BCRC). The institu­
tion's Black studies program came into being in 2000, as the African and African
American Studies Program.13

Second, while black student activism drove the Black studies movement,
the bureaucracy within the various university institutions shaped the fate of the
movement.14 Students were catalysts, but they were inexperienced in maneuver­
ing around a large bureaucracy like a university. The development of the Bolinga
Center reflected the critical importance of administrators in shaping the cen­
ter's trajectory and institutionalizing it within the campus. The administration
at Wright State was open to acceding to some student demands while it coopted
others. As a result, some of the initial student goals regarding the center became
less revolutionary in light of the national political climate.

Third, through the years, the Bolinga Center maintained continuity, which
has adversely affected the survival of many Black Studies programs.15 As the years
progressed, some of the original students who were instrumental in founding
the center continued to participate in its growth and maturation, even in formal
leadership roles. Precisely because of their continued participation, the Bolinga
Center periodically reaffirmed its engagement with the black community in the
West Dayton area.
The Development of Black Studies

The academic discipline of Black studies has its roots in the early-twentieth-century pioneering efforts of African American scholars who wrote histories, organized conferences, and formed organizations to promote knowledge about African American history. The output of the luminary scholars W. E. B. Du Bois and Carter G. Woodson represented the inchoate phase in the establishment of Black studies. Building on this intellectual foundation, in the 1960s nonacademically trained scholars, like Harold Cruse, Lerone Bennett Jr., Malcolm X (El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz), and Angela Davis made important contributions to the field’s development.16

In the wake of the 1954 Brown vs. the Board of Education decision and the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964, African American student enrollment increased at predominantly white institutions.17 Across campuses in the United States, African American students became the dynamic force pushing for the creation of Black studies courses, programs, and departments.18 Although African Americans made up only 6 percent of the university student population in late 1969, they were involved in 36 percent of the student protests from 1970 to 1971.19

The push for the creation of Black studies departments and programs was part of the broad civil rights movement. The Vietnam War ideologically bolstered student protests, as did African decolonization in the 1960s and the equally nascent activism associated with the groups like the Afro-American Association, the Revolutionary Action Movement, the Black Panther Party, and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee.20

African American student unrest began in 1964 at the University of California, Berkeley. By 1965, students formed Black student unions at Columbia University, Harvard University, and Cornell University. Although student protests calling for the creation of Black studies programs occurred earlier at some historically Black colleges and universities in 1966, San Francisco State College, later San Francisco State University, was one of the earliest institutions to create a Black studies department, in 1969.21

At roughly the same time, Ohio State University followed suit with the creation of a Black studies academic division in July 1969 and a formal Department of African American and African Studies in 1972. In Ohio, Cleveland State University formed a Black studies program in 1969, but only with a minor, and the University of Cincinnati formed its Department of African and African American Studies (now Africana Studies) in 1970.22 Schools in the state are among the nation’s leaders in degree-granting African American or Black studies programs.23

The call for the creation of Black studies departments and programs was usually one of a myriad of student demands. Students also put pressure on administrations to increase the number of black faculty and staff members and to create Black dormitories. From 1968 on, universities and colleges also
established Black cultural centers, which played vital roles in creating cohesive physical spaces, or safe places, for students of color in addition to helping to recruit and retain them on campus. They also implemented programming to support the academic, social, and professional goals of the students who frequented the centers. Early Black cultural centers included the Paul Robeson Cultural Center at Penn State University (1969); the J. D. O’Bryant African American Institute at Northeastern University (1969); the Afro-American Cultural Center at Cleveland State University (1970); the Nyumburu House at the University of Maryland–College Park (1971); the Institute of Black Culture at the University of Florida (1972); and the Black Cultural Center at the University of Tennessee (1975).24

In Ohio, Ohio University established its Center for Afro-American Studies in 1969. The following year, Cleveland State University opened its Afro-American Cultural Center and Kent State opened its Center for Pan-African Culture.25 And, of course, Wright State University opened the Bolinga Center in 1971.

**Bolinga Means Love**
Under the glimmering halo of the Black Power movement, the creation of the BCRC in 1971 marked the birth of Black studies at Wright State University. Student action led to the center's creation. Wright State University was still in its infancy when the Bolinga Center was established. With a fledgling student population of 3203, it began in 1964 as a branch campus for both Ohio State University and Miami University.26 When the student population reached 5,000 in 1967, the embryonic satellite campus achieved full university status and became Wright State University on October 1.

Within a year of the university's founding, African American students organized and began to press for social and academic changes. They were concerned about the campus environment, which they believed fostered various racial slights, which now would be characterized as microaggressions. African American students also felt invisible on campus. For example, in 1971 there were approximately 490 African American students enrolled on campus, and by 1972 African American enrollment
was approximately 600 students, out of a total population of 11,212. In 1973, an internal study showed that there was low morale among students, which also reflected a gulf between the university and the primarily African American West Dayton community.27

As a reflection of the need for more visibility on campus, the student newspaper, the *Guardian*, created a weekly page, “Black News,” which was devoted to news about, and of interest to, the African American student population on campus. In a display of youthful openness, the newspaper’s student editors pleaded, “We need Blacks to write it. Keep the page full of news. Join our staff.”28

As it did across many campuses, the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. on April 4, 1968, sparked Black studies momentum on the Wright State campus. In the aftermath of King’s murder, a group of African American students formed the Committee for the Advancement of Negro Education (CANE).29 The students saw the new organization as a vehicle for articulating their demands, which, though not cohesive, pointed toward breaking down academic and social isolation on campus. The formation of CANE was pivotal, because it provided the organizational framework that would shape collective action for the students at a time when there was no other African American student organization on campus. CANE held its meetings at the houses of various members, including some staff.

CANE organized a Black Exposition in February 1969, which included a panel of speakers from various civil rights and Black Power groups, like the NMCP and the New Africa Organization. Anticipating one of the Bolinga Center’s core functions, CANE also developed an academic enrichment tutorial program for high school students, to better prepare them for college. A CANE request to the Department of History eventually resulted in the offering of the first courses on Black and African history at Wright State. CANE was short-lived, however; in March 1969, it changed its name to the Committee for the Advancement of Black Unity (CABU) to symbolize a more aggressive agency that the new organization planned to take in the future. Echoing these sentiments, a member of the newly formed organization stated, “CABU does not intend to Uncle-Tom Black support or allow it to be abused without scolding repercussions.”30

The CABU name drew inspiration from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Members of CABU had grown up in the civil rights era, which greatly influenced their activism and vision for the BCRC. More specifically, the wider student protests at college campuses and the Black Power movement also shaped the activist horizons for CABU members. Larry Crowe, one of the group’s founding members, recalled that he was inspired by the student protests at Cornell University and Antioch University in nearby Yellow Springs. Members of the organization also regularly contributed editorials to the various student newspapers on campus that discussed Black nationalism or Black nationalist organizations like the Black Panther Party. Membership
in the organization consisted of around twenty African American students, with Crowe, Linda Moody Gillespie, and Leila Shephard serving as officers. The former CANE director, Selmon White, was chairman.

African American faculty member Al Smith, along with Anne Shearer, the assistant dean of students for special services, served as advisers. Smith, a professor in the Department of Mathematics, had been at Wright State since 1964. He was one of two African American faculty members hired that year and later served as the Affirmative Action director, among other university posts. Shearer had only recently come to Wright State but would occupy several administrative positions in academic affairs during a long and highly successful tenure. She would also play a significant role in the BCRC's administrative development.

Due to the small number of African American students on campus, African American faculty and staff were able to forge strong social bonds with students during these early years. Carolyn Wright, one of the CABU members, recalled that Shearer hosted CABU meetings in her home, while staff member Betty Thomas assisted the students with research as they attempted to construct their vision for the BCRC.

According to Fabio Rojas, the size of its African American student population does not significantly determine whether a school will develop a Black studies program. More important is the degree to which activist students are organized and willing to mobilize and pressure the administration into creating Black studies programs. The CABU students' initiative reflected the effectiveness of their organization and agency.

On May 15, 1970, another senseless killing of African Americans provided the spark to further protest and action. After the shooting of two unarmed student protesters at Jackson State University in Jackson, Mississippi, frustration boiled over, and, in a show of solidarity, CABU organized a rally to commemorate the slain student protesters. Following the rally, CABU presented the university administration with a list of ten demands, one of which called for creating a BCRC. In pushing for this, CABU members wanted to create an "awareness" area on campus that would improve the visibility of African American students and provide students and faculty more information about black history, music, literature, dance, art, drama, and culture.

From their list of demands, it is clear that they were not calling for the creation of an autonomous "Black University." For example, as a counterpoint, students at neighboring Antioch University had briefly created an Afro-American Studies Institute in a racially exclusive Black dormitory in 1968. Instead, CABU sought more inclusion, or recognition, of the paltry African American presence on campus. Although one of their demands called for an increase in the number of Black students and faculty on campus, they did not press the administration for more concrete measures toward this change.
In presenting these requests, the students were following a script that had already been employed successfully at San Francisco State University; University of California, Berkeley; Ohio State University; and Cornell University; among others. Closer to home, Black students at Antioch University, Wittenberg University, and the University of Dayton had already protested and presented demands before their school administrations.37

The timing of the CABU demands was, perhaps, fortuitous. Student protests led to four student fatalities at Kent State University on May 4, 1970. In the wake of the Kent State killings, the Wright State faculty passed a petition calling on President Brage Golding not to allow the National Guard on campus. In addition, students pressured Golding to close the campus as part of a show of solidarity with the student protesters at Kent State. A series of telephoned bomb threats on campus added to the tense atmosphere and led to a special faculty meeting to discuss campus security.38

However, unlike Black student activism at Ohio State University, Wittenberg University, Wilberforce University, and Central State University, direct physical confrontation by CABU was unnecessary at Wright State.39 The Wright State University administration did not wish to see campus protests result in violence. As Exum has noted, universities are primarily normative organizations that try to achieve compliance without resort to naked coercion. Golding was also supportive of some of the student demands and agreed to the creation of the BCRC. As he later stated, in a speech during the opening ceremony of the Bolinga Center, "I view the founding of this center as part of our obligation to the community."40 The BCRC would also be centrally located in Millett Hall, adjacent to the library at the time, as it would occupy a former study space.

The dean of students, Robert Lyon, articulated the administration’s rationale for agreeing to create the center as a “recognition that the Black student faces special problems and needs on a virtually all-White campus.” In addition, the administration explained, “Better communication and understanding between races and opportunity for cultural identity among blacks are two expected positive results.” In June 1971, Golding reaffirmed this commitment with the creation of the Office of Affirmative Action at Wright State. Borrowing from critical race theory, in this sense, there was an interest convergence on the part of the administration and CABU.41 Another factor to consider is that by agreeing to the BCRC, the administration was able to evade other demands that would have been more difficult to implement quickly, like increasing the number of African American students and faculty.

The Wright State administration could also look at the responses of some university administrations, like the University of Virginia, New York University, Fordham University, and the University of Notre Dame, that established precedents of accommodation to student demands, thereby, avoiding escalation.
Moreover, in October 1970 Cleveland State University opened its Afro-American Cultural Center. Several CABU members and, more importantly, Ann Shearer attended the inauguration event for Cleveland State University’s Afro-American Cultural Center.

After Golding agreed to the BCRC, the university formed a search committee, which also included Shearer, for the director position. The committee eventually hired Yvonne Reed Chappelle to be the center’s first director, as well as a part-time French instructor in the Department of Modern Languages. She would report to the provost, Dr. Andrew Spiegel, who was in charge of Academic Affairs. Chappelle, later known as Dr. Yvonne Seon after completing her doctorate in 1974, had worked as the Coordinator of Student Life at neighboring Wilberforce University before coming to Wright State. She also worked, from 1961 to 1963, for the postcolonial government of the Republic of the Congo and served in the Department of State as a foreign affairs officer after leaving the Congo. Chappelle’s hiring would prove important, as she was a very active director and developed strong relationships with students. In her analysis of the Black cultural center at the University of Florida, Lori Patton found that center staff frequently helped to create a positive experience for students on the college campus. Chappelle had a similar effect upon many of the students who frequented the center, including the CABU members. This helped to ingrain continuity when they later interacted with the Bolinga Center as alumni or assumed leadership positions in the center.
The university formally dedicated the BCRC on 15–17 January 1971 through a ceremony, an art exhibit, and several lectures by various luminary speakers. The event date was to coincide with the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King. Some members of the Wright State faculty effusively welcomed the opening of the center. Willis Stoesz, an associate professor of comparative religion, stated, “The American Black experience, with its African roots, has a cultural and emotional richness and an ability to produce committed and responsible young people... the majority of us want this heritage to strengthen our University and our culture...the Bolinga Center gives us a unique opportunity to do this.”

The administration envisioned the BCRC as a facility that would collect and display information about Black studies, including books, periodical, tapes, films, and artwork. It also hoped that the center would eventually become “the resource-research center on black materials in this region.” In this regard, in an early pamphlet, the center listed its purposes:

a. To promote an understanding of the culture and heritage of Black Americans;
b. To make easily accessible, by housing in one central location, a variety of resource materials which could be useful in Black studies;
c. To encourage research which would increase knowledge about Black people or aid in the resolution of problems which have resulted from racial discrimination, prejudice, and slavery;
d. To work for the advancement of the Black creative arts.

Shearer created the first budget for the center and worked out the logistics of its location and the materials and furniture that went into it. Functioning as a resources center, the BCRC was open Monday through Friday from 9 A.M. to 7 P.M., with limited hours on the weekends.

During Chappelle’s tenure as director, the scope of the BCRC would reinforce its legitimacy as a viable resource center on campus for Black culture and history and forge connections with the local African American community. To improve the visibility of the BCRC, Chappelle promoted the center’s activities through interviews on TV and in print and wrote articles about the center in the Guardian. Due to the center’s inchoate and tenuous nature, Chappelle believed public relations activities were vital to its success.

Chappelle also embarked on what she called a “personal diplomacy” campaign to strengthen acceptance of the Bolinga Center on campus by visiting classrooms and discussing its activities and goals with students. Chappelle believed there was skepticism on campus about the center. For example, a letter to the editor in one issue of the Guardian questioned whether the center was necessary, since it would take away study space for students in Millett Hall.

In projecting the broader implications of Black studies acceptance on campus, students eventually opted to modify the BCRC’s name to link the center
ideologically with Africa and, more significantly, to reemphasize its openness and inclusiveness. The BCRC became the Bolinga Black Cultural Resources Center. Reflecting Chappelle’s experience in the Congo, bolingo was the noun for love in the Lingala language spoken in the Congo, while the verb kolinga was the infinitive. Enhancing the Pan-African profile of the Bolinga Center, Chappelle traveled to Senegal, the Congo, and other African countries.

At this early juncture, the BCRC’s raison d’être was promoting Black history and culture. To achieve this objective, it also hosted lectures and seminars and provided a meeting place for groups and individuals interested in Black studies. For example, CABU began to hold its organizational meetings in the center. Through the intervening years, the center invited select luminaries for lectures, including the “Father of the Negritude Movement,” Leon Damas; noted historian Chancellor Williams; Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Toure); and the writer Alex Haley.

Consistent with the desires of the administration, Chappelle believed that the center could become a repository for books on Black culture and history serving the entire Dayton area. Shearer completed an initial bibliography of book that the center was to house. With the initial support of its director, James Dodson, the library loaned the Bolinga Center some books that dealt with the African American experience. The center gradually acquired a growing library of books and audiovisual resources to augment its meager holdings and eventually hired a library specialist to oversee student loans. Students could check out the materials for up to two weeks.

In addition to books and periodicals, the center eventually acquired a menagerie of African and African American art. Through the years, various African American artists displayed their work in the center, including Jacob Lawrence, Charles White, and, most notably, Willis “Bing” Davis of Dayton, Ohio. The BCRC also hosted gospel choirs and African dance troupes.

Chappelle broadened the center’s goals with two new objectives, which involved “service to the community around the university” and changing the “image of Wright State within the Black community of Dayton.” As part of this broader social service initiative, the Bolinga Center attempted to strengthen community outreach in the Dayton community through its partnership in the
Black Coalition of the Dayton Miami Valley Consortium. The Black Coalition was a committee of several representatives from various colleges and universities in the Miami Valley region who worked to promote Black culture. The center also hosted rap sessions where members of local civil rights or nationalist organizations, like the Republic of New Africa and Nkrumahist United Front, would come on campus and talk to the students.53

Even though the Bolinga Center was supposed to function as an academic resource center, there was uncertainty about the shape it would eventually assume. Students in CABU envisioned the Bolinga Center as a starting point for an eventual academic program on African American studies. As Carolyn Wright stated, “we wanted to establish the Bolinga Black Cultural Resources Center as part of the academic program.” There was actually a precedent at Ohio University: its African Americans Studies Institute gave birth to the Department of African American Studies in 1970.54 Starting with Chappelle, various Bolinga Center directors offered various courses that delved into the Black experience, but these were never part of a formal academic Black studies program.55

Although the center began with much fanfare, Chappelle thought the university community, particularly staff, was not very welcoming of the initiative. She suspected that the center’s creation was “greeted with skepticism from all parts of the university community, including even black student and administrators . . . nobody expected the Center to succeed.” Only a year into her tenure, Chappelle said, “Many people have shown mistrust and apprehension toward visiting the Center.”56

A case in point was a front-page Guardian article in October 1971 that proclaimed, “Bolinga Center Stirs Controversy.” In this instance, the center became involved in a dispute with a group of white students over the right to use the center as a thoroughfare. The center’s initial location in Millett Hall abutted a rear exit that led to a parking lot. After the Bolinga Center inhabited the building space, students still followed habit and continued to walk through the space, which was now the Bolinga Center, on their way to the parking lot. The center staff found this intrusion disruptive and asked them to desist, which led to complaints, not formally lodged, that the center denied access to white students. Chappelle emphatically rebutted this notion in print by stating, “No one has been denied access to the Bolinga Center . . . whether they’re black, white, brown or green.”57 In anticipation of these reactions, some of the center’s early brochures broadcast in bold print: “Bolinga Is for Everyone” and “Bolinga Means Love.”

Although this turned out to be a spurious objection, the complaint was indicative of the mood on the campus. A Guardian editorial got to the point by declaring that the Bolinga Center’s creation “fostered a segregationist attitude on campus.” The editorialist believed the center was disruptive because it created a segregated space for black students. They also complained that the Bolinga Center’s budget was too large for an organization that catered only to Black students.
Despite some controversy, the Bolinga Center became a safe space for African American Students. Wright State University, Special Collections and Archives, Dayton, Ohio.

Even the center’s ephemeral library, which facilitated its mission as a resource center, eventually became a point of contention. A dispute arose with the university library over the location of books related to African American studies. The library had initially agreed to allow the Bolinga Center to house approximately 130 books on the African American experience but then later reneged on this. \(^5\)

The disagreement over books reflected the BCRC’s financial picture. The center had an initial total budget of approximately $25,000, with approximately half of it going toward salaries. \(^6\) After staff salaries and benefits, a little over $7,000 went to improving the building office space, acquiring equipment and furniture. This left a book budget of $2,500, which Chappelle saw as “very limited.” \(^7\) Though the original vision of the proposed library did not take shape, the center acquired a small collection of books.

Another problem was peripheral to the center but connected to it because it reflected the general racial climate on campus and also the influence of administrators. In July 1971, the first black administrator hired by the university, Betty Thomas, was let go after her contract was not renewed. \(^8\) Hired in 1969, Thomas was a graduate of Wright State and, as mentioned, helped CABU members by allowing them to have meetings at her house.

Before the nonrenewal of her contract, Thomas was overlooked for promotion from staff assistant to assistant director in the Financial Aid Office. She subsequently filed a grievance, alleging that the individual hired as director, Steve Scovic, had less experience than she did. Later, a committee of inquiry commissioned by the university agreed with her. Although Golding decided that Thomas’s grievance was justified, he refused to renew her contract, due to what
he deemed to be unprofessional conduct on her part, as she had publicly aired her complaints on campus. This kicked off student protests and unrest over charges of discrimination. The front page of the Dayton Urban Express boldly proclaimed, “Dr. Brage Golding, WSU President, Charged with Discrimination.”

As the newly hired director, Chappelle was forced to walk a fine line, along with other black administrators, in trying to quell the controversy among African American students and prevent it from erupting into more strident protests. Afterward, she reflected that she and other black administrators had borne the brunt of student frustrations. Chappelle’s frustrations also point to the influence that certain administrators exerted on the students’ revolutionary fervor. Reminiscing about her involvement with the Bolinga Center during this period, Shearer emphasized that the university climate at Wright State was not “subversive.”

Chappelle resigned as director in January 1973 and took up a position as an adviser on African affairs for Congressman Charles Diggs. Despite her exit, through her close relationships with some of the students, she was maintained a connection and influenced the growth of the Bolinga Center. Later, she returned to serve another short stint as director.

**From Black Culture to Multiculture**

From 1973 to 2018, the Bolinga Center went through several alterations, including multiple changes in directors. One of the more significant was the move from the division of Academic Affairs to Student Affairs. Although the center’s goals evolved, there was a continuity of vision with many of the directors, which helped manage its direction. Although the center did not become the anchor of a formal academic program, improving African American academic retention became a core goal. Its scope also gradually shifted to a focus on multiculturalism and providing social services for students, though the celebration of Black culture remained one of the foundations. In recognition of its evolving responsibilities, the center grew to incorporate more administrative positions as it became the largest multicultural center on campus. However, many of these positions were later eradicated, and certain programs were curtailed due to a budget crisis.

![Even as the Bolinga Center transitioned, it retained a focus on Black Culture. The Bolinga Center welcomed Black Power activist Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Toure) in 1973. Wright State University Library, Special collections and Archives, Dayton, Ohio.](image)
Under the first two directors after Chappelle’s departure, Arthur Thomas and Carolyn Wright, the goal of creating an academic program was still a moving target. Thomas attempted to strengthen the Bolinga Center’s academic foundation by adding new courses to the university curriculum that focused more specifically on Black studies, such as Contemporary Problems in Black America. Thomas also worked to deepen the relationship between the Bolinga Center and the Dayton community through diversity training workshops and collaborations with the Montgomery County Department of Job and Family Services, the Urban League, the Dayton Public Schools, and the NAACP.

Thomas’s successful run as Bolinga Center director launched his career in higher education. In 1977, he resigned to become vice president for academic affairs, and eventual president, at Central State University, in neighboring Wilberforce, Ohio. Following Thomas, Carolyn Wright took over as director of the Bolinga Center in 1978. The former CABU member had served as the center’s assistant director under Thomas. Under Wright’s leadership, the Bolinga Center attempted to broaden its academic stature by fostering links with Black studies programs in the state of Ohio and working with various departments in the university to increase the number of courses that dealt with Black history and culture. The center also established a scholarship program to recognize student leadership within the Wright State community.

Wright’s tenure as the director was the embodiment of one of the important factors in the center’s success. Through the ensuing years, several other former CABU members, including Larry Crowe, served as staff within and continued to maintain relationships with the various directors while participating in some of the activities hosted at the center long after graduation. During Wright’s time as director, students created a Black Student Union, which was also called Umoja Weusi, or black unity in Kiswahili. The Black Student Union became the successor to CABU. This formally reinforced the link with the generation of students who founded CABU.

Wright stepped down in 1981. With her departure, the goal of making the Bolinga Center the hub of an academic program faded into the background. However, the center maintained a focus on promoting Black culture and history and strengthening connections with the Dayton community.

Following Wright, the Bolinga Center had a series of acting directors, until Frank Dobson, a lecturer and later professor in the Department of English, assumed its directorship from 1984 to 1990 and again from 1994 to 2004, when he returned to the university after a brief departure. During Dobson’s second tenure, Provost Perry Moore boldly proclaimed a renewed vision for the Bolinga Center, which would see it “return to its roots as an academic and intellectual anchor within the university system.” Although this did not occur, Moore’s statement reflected one of the original student goals that had not been fulfilled. Under
Dobson, providing programming activities to help improve academic retention and graduation received greater priority. This shift reflected the anemic African American enrollment and retention at Wright State University.

During Dobson’s tenure, the multicultural landscape on the Wright State campus changed. The creation of the Women’s Center in 1993 and the Asian, Hispanic and Native American Center in 1997 led to a push to align all of the centers more cohesively as multicultural administrative units. In 1999, the associate provost for academic affairs, Lillie Howard, sought to move the Bolinga Center into the new division of the Office of Multicultural and Gender Affairs.

Although the administrative realignment did not materialize, Dobson felt it necessary to reinsert the word “black” into the title of the Bolinga Center to reflect its original mandate. Reflecting this sentiment, in 2000 Dobson stated that “with the creation of the Women’s Center in 1993 and the Asian/Hispanic/ Native American Center in 1997...it is time to return to the center’s roots of promoting and supporting black culture and student success.” It is instructive that Dobson did not mention becoming the hub of an academic program. By this point, the formal academic program in African American Studies was on the horizon, and the Wright State University Board of Regents would approve it in Fall 2000. As it had for Arthur Thomas, the Bolinga Center position launched Dobson’s career in higher education. He left in 2004 to become the director of the Bishop Johnson Black Cultural Center at Vanderbilt University.

In 2008, after a series of interim directors, including the brief return of the first director, Yvonne Seon, the administration hired the Bolinga Center’s last two directors. Dana Patterson assumed its helm from 2008 until 2015, followed by Edward Tywman from 2015 to 2018. Patterson had previously worked as the director of the Coretta Scott King Center at Antioch University and was recommended by the first Bolinga Center director. During both of their tenures, Patterson and Tywman maintained continuity with the center’s traditional programming focus. The major changes were an administrative realignment and a serious financial crisis at Wright State that adversely affected the Bolinga Center.

Under Patterson and Tywman, one of the center’s important goals was to improve and support the academic retention of Black students. This included working with precollege programs, creating mentoring programs, and developing curriculum. In essence, this entailed creating social capital for students. The Bolinga Center also maintained a textbook lending library for various general education core courses. This vital service benefited low-income students and helped mitigate the cost of buying books. By this point, the center had also incorporated more administrative positions, including a faculty in residence, associate director, office services coordinator, and a graduate assistant.
A perusal of the Bolinga Center’s annual reports shows that in addition to academic retention, programming for the celebration of Black history was one of the center’s main strengths. During Patterson’s tenure, students appeared to be most satisfied with the Bolinga Center’s celebration of Kwanzaa, graduate recognition ceremonies, and the performance by a dance team. This focus was consistent with the observations of a faculty in residence member who noted that the Bolinga Center “is very good at celebrating student achievements.” Consistent with these findings, Lori Patton, noted scholar of Black cultural centers, argues that centers create a stronger sense of cultural identity for students. Under both Patterson and Tywman, the Bolinga Center continued its community engagement. This included supporting various pre-college programs and partnering with schools in the Dayton Public School System to provide service-learning opportunities for students.70

The most significant change in the scope of the Bolinga Center under Patterson and Twyman was the multicultural realignment that occurred in 2012. On most college campuses, Black cultural centers are part of the Division of Student Affairs. However, when Patterson took charge, the Bolinga Center was in the Division of Academic Affairs, and she reported to the associate vice president for academic affairs, Lillie Howard.71 This would change.

Howard had tried unsuccessfully to move the Bolinga Center into the Division of Multicultural and Gender Affairs over ten years earlier. In 2012, the administration transferred the center to the newly created Division of Multicultural Affairs and Community Engagement under Vice President Kimberley Barrett. Later in 2016, following another realignment, the Bolinga Center would become part of the Division of Student Affairs. Under the new multicultural administrative structure, it was now aligned more narrowly as a Culture and Identity Center, along with the Latino, Asian and Native American Affairs, and Women’s Centers. The new division’s broader goals were to facilitate the university’s work regarding multicultural issues and to promote greater collaborations with the Dayton community.72

Barrett envisioned the Bolinga Center as the spearhead for breaking down “institutional barriers to access to and success at Wright State for individuals who identify as black.” However, as a Culture and Identity Center, Bolinga now pivoted to a focus on promoting and celebrating campus diversity and delivering services and programs to the student population as well as the community. Patterson thought that the administrative realignment undermined the original academic goals of the center. Twyman disapproved of the move, as he believed the new reporting structure would lead to confusion about the Bolinga Center’s primary mission on campus, which he saw as promoting black history and culture.73 In addition, he was concerned that the move would negatively affect the center’s ability to maintain relationships and outreach with Dayton’s Black community by restricting the its focus to the university’s campus.
Compounding these administrative changes, in 2016 a financial crisis began at Wright State University. The Bolinga Center lost almost half of its budget, and all of its administrative positions were eliminated. The budget cuts forced the center to streamline limited resources on programming that celebrated black history and culture. The loss of the faculty in residence position also undermined the center’s capacity to carry out its various mentoring programs. In July 2018, Twyman was retrenched, and the director was eventually replaced with an intercultural specialist, who would report to a newly created position of vice president for inclusive excellence.  

The entrance to the Bolinga Center in 2021 reflects its shifting role on campus. Photograph by Opolot Okia.

Though diminished, the base structure of many of the Bolinga Center’s programming initiatives remained on campus. In essence, the director position became defunct, but the center did not. It became institutionalized as a multicultural center on campus. In 2018, it still thrived, with an average daily usage rate of approximately forty students. In addition, based on the criteria established by the Association of Black Cultural Centers, the Bolinga Center could be considered an exemplary Black cultural center.  

However, the Bolinga Center never became the foundation of an academic program. It is telling that Carolyn Wright came to view its maturation as a lost opportunity precisely because it ultimately never became part of an academic program. She stated, “As I have said earlier, I think we’ve lost a lot of ground and the space was there…. The only way for the Bolinga to survive and any other Black Studies program is for it to be part of the academic curriculum.”
Conclusion

William Nelson argues that Black studies programs created by student activism were the ones most likely to survive.7 They Bolinga Center was imagined by students in 1971, but was not fully formed. The center's history reflects the critical role that strategic relationships between the administration and students played in developing it and in determining its success as an organizational unit on campus. Moreover, after the initial cadre of students graduated, they still played a positive role in the center's growth and development. Although students envisioned the Bolinga Center as a Black cultural resource center, there was also a desire that it would become the eventual core of an academic program. This did not come to fruition, but the center evolved at Wright State and continued to play a vital role on campus, albeit with less of an academic focus and unique mission.

Historian Manning Marable saw African American studies in tandem with an emphasis on multiculturalism as a tool for democratizing higher education by breaking down racial, class, and gender inequality in the curriculums in universities.78 The institutionalization of the Bolinga Center on the Wright State campus has blurred the organization's original vision but ensured its survival and success.


7 Wittenberg University opened its Black Culture House in 1969, though it was an extension of the resident Student Union.


11 Demetrius Richmond, “Case Study of Two Exemplary Black Cultural Centers,” v. These metrics are leadership and legacy, building campus connections, remaining relevant, institutionalization, community engagement, student ownership, and alumni engagement.


15 Exum, Paradoxes of Protest, 16.


19 Exum, Paradoxes of Protest, 3.


21 Exum, Paradoxes of Protest, 3, 43; Rogers, “Black Campus Movement,” 22.
22 “About the Department,” Africana Studies, University of Cincinnati website, https://www.arisci.uc.edu/departments/africana-studies/about.html.


26 Wright State University Student Fact Book Fall 1994 (Dayton, OH: Wright State University, 1994).


33 Wright interview.

34 Rojas, From Black Power to Black Studies, 180–81.


36 Rojas, From Black Power to Black Studies, 32; Rogers, “Black Campus Movement,” 22; Rogers, Black Campus Movement, 31, 36. The Afro-American Studies Institute offered courses in Black studies, taught mostly by students. It was housed in a racially exclusive Black dormitory, the Afro-American Unity House.

37 Albright, Jeffries, and Goecke, “Backus on High Street,” 32; Bradley, Harlem and Columbia University, 114–15. In December 1968, a group of African American students at Wittenberg University calling themselves “Concerned Black Students” presented the administration with a list of demands related to the racial climate on campus, one of which was a call for the creation of an inchoate social and cultural facility for black students. The university opened the Black Culture House in 1969 as an extension of the Student Center. Melville Bacon, “The 1969 CBS Walkout: The Means Justified the End,” Wittenberg History Journal 23 (Spring 1994): 15–17. In 1969, a Black student group called Black Action Through Unity (BATU) at the University of Dayton presented a list of demands to the administration, one of which was the creation of a Black Studies Institute. Gabriel Gaiusbayode, BATU Timeline of Black History Milestones at UD, BATU website, University of Dayton, Feb. 2, 2019, https://1850.udayton.edu/batu/blog/batu-timeline-of-black-history-milestones-at-ud%2C2%4011310/.

38 Special Faculty Meeting Agenda and Minutes, June 3, 1970, Faculty Senate Minutes and Agendas, available at the
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42 Rogers, "Black Campus Movement," 32; Harold, "Of the
40 Exum, Report on the Activities of the Bolinga Black Cultural
46 Yvonne Chappelle to Dr. Brage Golding, Aug. 11, 1971.
44 Yvonne Chappelle to James Dodson, Nov. 12, 1970, box
45 Administrative memorandum, "Establishment of a Black Cultural Resources Center;"
42 Rogers, "Black Campus Movement," 32; Harold, "Of the Wings of Atlanta," 46; "CSU Center Now Open;"
45 Administrative memorandum, "Establishment of a Black Cultural Resources Center;" Administrative memo-
46 Yvonne Chappelle to Dr. Brage Golding, Aug. 11, 1971, box 1, file 44, BCC. At the time of her hiring, Chappelle had a master's degree in American Government from American University and a bachelor's degree from Allegheny College. In 1974, she completed a PhD in African and African American Humanities from Union Institute in Cincinnati, Ohio.
47 Report on the Activities of the Bolinga Black Cultural Resources Center, Fall Quarter, 1970-71.
49 Wright interview; Chappelle to Golding, Aug. 11, 1971.
50 Administrative memorandum, "Establishment of a Black Cultural Resources Center;"
51 Yvonne Chappelle to James Dodson, Nov. 12, 1970, box 1, file 42. BCC.
52 Bolinga Center 7th Anniversary. Office of the President, box 36, file 9, Fred A. White Papers, Bolinga Center, Wright State University.
55 For instance, Chappelle offered a course titled "Negritude and Beyond" in the Department of Foreign Languages.
56 Report on the Activities of the Bolinga Black Cultural Resources Center, Fall Quarter, 1970-71; "Bolinga Center Creates Disunion; Corrective Action Must Be Taken," Guardian, Oct. 20, 1971; Chappelle to Dodson, Nov. 12, 1970; Howard, email questionnaire.
58 "Bolinga Center Creates Disunion; Corrective Action Must Be Taken," Guardian, Oct. 20, 1971; Chappelle to Dodson, Nov. 12, 1970; Howard, email questionnaire.
59 Black Cultural Resources Center #3020, Dr. Golding, box 1, file 43, BCC. $13,343 went to salaries, with another $1,197 going to staff benefits.
60 Chappelle to Dodson, Nov. 12, 1970.
61 "Dr. Brage Golding, WSU President, Charged with Discrimination," 31 Dec.–7 Jan., Dayton Urban Express Weekly Vol. 7 (24).
Poor African American academic achievement and retention have been longstanding problems at Wright State. For example, from 2010 to 2015 African American second-year retention rates hovered around 47 percent, while the same rates for white students averaged 67 percent. Six-year graduation rate for African American students between 2005 and 2010 was a paltry 22 percent.


Dana Patterson, telephone interview with author, May 28, 2018, Dayton, OH.
