May 5, 2015

Dr. Sherman Garnett, Dean
James Madison College
Michigan State University
East Lansing, MI

Dear Dr. Garnett:

The Madison experience is academically unparalleled. The benefits of combining an intimate liberal arts program within the larger research university are supposed to provide students with a unique and creative learning experience. While James Madison prides itself on being interdisciplinary and positions itself as both diverse and inclusive, the experiences of students of color paint a different picture. When trying to piece together the experiences and trials of Black Madisonians, the common narrative was invisibility. You do not see us and by not acknowledging our experiences, accomplishments, voices etc. you continually reinforce that we are not valued members of the Madison community and that we do not matter.

Our feelings of being devalued and tokenized are experienced both inside and outside of the classroom. Although Madison is a teaching college with a strong focus on integrating social science, political science, economics, literature, philosophy and history into the four majors, there is a lack of diversity in the interdisciplinary approach. Black students from ALL four majors have expressed that in their major core classes as well as MC 201 & 202, the use of ethnically and gender diverse political thought or narratives was non-existent. While the premise of Madison is to mold global thinking citizens, our coursework only reflects white western theories, histories and ideologies. This is problematic because it omits the contributions of non-white academics, political scientists, theorists etc., and it perpetuates that only white narratives, histories, theories etc. are worth studying. The MC 201 & 202 curriculum is also apologetic to colonialism and slavery and perpetuates the Northern propaganda that American racism is exclusive to the South.

Along with the content of the Madison classes, the structure and faculty engagement also needs attention. Several students of color have expressed that they feel marginalized and silenced by professors when they speak their truths and have “controversial” opinions. There is a lack of cultural competency amongst many professors that facilitate unsafe learning environments for many students of color. Madison professors have failed to thoughtfully engage and challenge white students and in turn foster a classroom environment that is conducive to micro-aggressions and micro-invalidations. When a white student dismisses systemic poverty and institutional racism by asserting, “race is simply a social construct”, it: 1) invalidates the experiences of students of ethnically/racially-marginalized groups, 2) omits that while most things are socially constructed they have very real/tangible effects, 3) encourages and perpetuates ignorance when left unchecked. Madison places a high value on excellent teaching and the professors should live up to that expectation.
In addition to our grievances inside the classroom, Black Madisonians have continually felt marginalized and tokenized outside of the classroom. The administration loves to use our faces for brochures in the name of diversity but often times do not acknowledge us in the hallways. The academic, social, and professional achievements of Black students both inside and outside of the college are omitted more often than not. There have been students to be recognized by Michigan State and nationally but ignored by Madison. Conversely, when a white student is awarded, or even nominated for a prestigious award they are recognized. The most recent and apparent example of this was the 2015 James Madison College (JMC) Parade of Honors. All white students that were recognized for achievement or nomination received biographies with their contributions, aspirations, achievements, research etc. Out of 15 Black students recognized that evening none received a biography. When Joel Arnold was a 2014 Truman Finalist he was thoroughly recognized. When two Black JMC students are finalists you only hear their names. This is the same case with university-wide and national awards, research awards, and study abroad/field experience. When a group of white students were recognized as honorable mentions for their research papers their titles and interests were announced, but when a Black student won 2nd Place in a University-wide research project competition, you only heard her name. That night provides a million and one examples alone. Nevertheless, the laziness, apathy, and omission of Black student achievements and contributions extend far beyond Parade of Honors. The Madison administration and faculty constantly show us that our worth is the sum of our photos used to advocate “diversity”.

Although the Black Madison experience has been disheartening for the majority of us, we cannot critique the college without praising and acknowledging the few faculties that make Madison survivable. Many of us have found refuge in Madison Academic Diversity Initiative (MADI) and with several professors that let us know that we matter. Our allies have made this hostile space a little less difficult to navigate, and for that we are eternally grateful.

Overall the lack of diversity and most importantly inclusivity has jaded our JMC experiences. Unfortunately, many of us are graduating with a sense of relief to be escaping what felt like an oppressive and disingenuous place. While the majority of Black Madisonians support divesting from the college and giving/donating money to other departments such as the College of Social Science or organizations such as Michigan State University Black Alumni (MSUBA), we still feel it is important to share our stories and speak our truths in the hopes that our struggles will make it better for the Black Madisonians that come after us. We would like to leave with some suggestions and look forward to sharing recommendations in the upcoming weeks.

Educationally,

Black Madisonians Class of 2015