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Opinion Editorial: When Will *Our* Lives Matter?

Jamar Ragland

When will *our* lives matter? That is the question I ask after the not too distant non-indictments and acquittals of officers or citizens who have killed Black men. In addition, victims and witnesses who are also Black have been discredited in each instance as if they did not matter. As paradoxical as it is, these Black men and boys were innocent and guilty at the same time. Innocent in the sense that their actions were and should not have led to them losing their lives, yet guilty, *only* in the sense that they were Black men and boys. Being a Black man is often the only thing needed to evoke certain negative emotions, perceptions and physical responses.

I was racially profiled on two separate occasions while pursuing my undergraduate degree, and in both instances, I was discredited. They made it seem as if I was overreacting about being stopped and questioned by an officer about my whereabouts even after the officer did not believe me even after I presented evidence that I belonged. Again, I cannot help but wonder if and when I matter. If I do matter, why is it that in many of my classes at both the undergraduate and graduate level, I am often the only Black man or male of color in the classroom? This is not to say that my peers should not be there and that I do not learn from them, but it is an isolating experience. If I do matter, why are there not any Black men in top, executive-level positions at my institution? This is not to say that the administrators are not doing a good job, but when is my perspective or lived-experience represented at that level?

In addition to the aforementioned, imagine the impact that constant dismissals and absences of top, executive-level administrators in professional environments have on preparing student affairs and higher education professionals that look like me. As I am set to graduate, regardless of my excitement, I know that my professional journey will entail unique experiences because of my lived experiences as a Black man. Sometimes I am afraid that at any moment my growth or professional advancement can be denied simply because I do not matter in the eyes of those in positions of authority or influence because I am a Black man. However, I am hopeful these feelings will soon change for me and other Black men who may share these feelings.

To help with this problem, some would suggest intense cultural competence classes and trainings—I agree. However, I first encourage people—especially those in top, executive-level positions and those who work on college and university campuses—to listen attentively and try to empathize with the experiences of Black men. Often people respond by being dismissive, defensive, or asserting that their intention was not to cause the feelings that we have. However, our feelings are often shaped by experiences that have occurred or constantly occur and evoke such emotions. So to move forward, there must be affirmation and acknowledgment of our experiences as Black men.

After affirmation and acknowledge has transpired, one must commit to internal reflection, asking, “Why were my actions considered racist or prejudice?” Cultural competence classes and trainings can assist in these internal reflections. Once people begin reflecting at individual, internal levels, it will lead to organizational level changes, particularly on college and university campuses, and eventually shape larger societal changes. This is the society I want to live in—a society where I matter.

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