

Story Slug (Nickname): The Black Experience at JMU

For most Black students on campus, an education at James Madison University goes beyond typical college experiences. Minority students at predominantly white institutions face inherently different struggles from their white peers.

“Growing up in an area that’s either predominantly Black or a lot more diverse, I don’t feel like I’m just living in my skin...I don’t feel like I’m purely Black,” says Tashana “TJ” Jackson, a senior psychology and sociology major from Alexandria, Virginia. “But here, it’s emphasized. JMU makes it part of your daily life.”

Jackson isn’t alone. At a university with white enrollment making up 76.7% of the student body, many minority students report similar feelings, with no direct action from the university to make campus more inclusive.

“Even now as a junior, I sometimes struggle knowing I’m at a place where not everyone is going to understand my background, understand my adversity, or understand where I’m coming from,” states Chelsea Kumah, a nursing major from Woodbridge, Virginia.

Jackson and Kumah recount bouts of loneliness and “otherness,” an intensified feeling for many marginalized students. Exclusion is often manifested as being picked last for group projects (unless there was another Black student in class), cautiously making friends because of underlying beliefs, “code-switching” in conversations to sound more “professional” and feeling like no one on campus can relate to their experiences.

Many minorities feel like JMU uses their diversity as a selling point, featuring them in promotional videos or pamphlets. However, when it comes to actually promoting inclusivity and providing resources for Black students, it’s always a delayed reaction, if at all.

Jackson recalls a town hall that took place in July, hosted by D.E.E.P. (Diversity Education Empowerment Program) Impact. While Jackson was sharing her experiences as a

Black woman, a student interrupted her and called her the N-word. Although JMU said they were working hard to hold that student accountable, nothing was accomplished.

After “Black Lives Matter” and “No Justice, No Peace” were written on the Spirit Rock early fall semester, a JMU staple inherent to inclusivity, and then consequently defaced with paint and the chipping away of “Black” in “Black Lives Matter,” Kumah and Jackson recall how disappointed they were with JMU’s response, but not surprised.

“I don’t know if those people were ever found. I don’t know if those people were ever reprimanded,” Kumah says. “As a Black person on campus, how is that supposed to make me feel?”

Kumah describes how defeating it is to know as a Black woman, she can’t talk to another Black woman at the JMU Counseling Center, simply because they don’t have one. Jackson recounts the disappointment she felt when she first toured JMU and saw the Center for Multicultural Student Services (CMSS).

“I’m not saying CMSS doesn’t do big things on campus, but when you walk in there and see how small the room is compared to other resources, you’re just like ‘Oh okay, they don’t care.’”

Despite the lack of response from JMU, minority students are working to lead change on campus. Jackson, a D.E.E.P. Diversity Educator, conducts programs that promote inclusion at JMU. She also volunteers her time giving campus tours with Student Ambassadors, an organization with very little Black representation.

Norman Jones, a senior Public Policy and Administration major from Manassas, Virginia created the Black Leadership Coalition following the murder of George Floyd this summer.

Through this coalition, Jones and 25 other Black leaders on campus have developed an opportunity to promote expansive change and have their demands heard.

“I remember realizing that suddenly there was going to be a lot of movement happening, not only protests, but ideally a window for change,” says Jones. “We had an opportunity like no other to finally be listened to.”

Over the last nine months, the Black Leadership Coalition has created substantial progress within JMU’s diversity initiatives, developing culture competency training for all employees, changing the names of three buildings originally named for confederate soldiers, and updating the university’s zero tolerance policy. The coalition is currently working on adjusting JMU’s admission process and developing a “revolutionary” way to approach a new general education course on diversity, education and inclusion specifically as it pertains to race.

While there is a strong desire to promote change and strengthen the Black community on campus, most minority students don’t credit this to JMU, but rather to the students working to build a connection on their own accord.

“As far as creating genuine change, speaking of that separate from their willingness to work with us, a willingness to change is not as strong,” Jones says. “This is a university steeped in a lot of tradition...we have never had a conversation where we have been turned away, but when it comes to keeping up the urgency behind change, that is where the challenge is.”

