"Do Not Engage Y'all!" Training and Preparing Our Black Students for Battle

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As a Black male student on the campus of a predominately white university, I come with baggage. Yes, we—as human beings subject to emotions and years of built up issues—all come with baggage. My baggage is different, however, and it is time everyone acknowledges that. Unlike the invisible knapsack carried by my white counterparts, my baggage is ceaselessly evident. My baggage looks like over 400 years of oppression and matches the pain of 1,000 slaves. I have been torn, battered, removed, and locked away by teachers, leaders, strangers, and friends all before arriving to this campus—a campus where I am expected to behave according to your white, middle-class standards. I am forcing you to deal with it with the same tenacity that I have been forced to suppress it. So when I see people who look like me being tossed around and treated poorly at institutions very similar to mine, I cannot help but look around for the injustices and threats to humanity here.

As I sat and watched the unfolding of a movement at the University of Missouri (Mizzou), my blood began to boil. Initially it boiled in anger against the men and women who dared stand in front of my peers and lock their arms in counterprotest against us. I could see the hurt in the face of the white woman’s eyes. They called her Anna, and I wanted for the life of me to be there so I could scream to her, “Anna! Have some humanity and stand up to them. Be our ally and tell them no.” I could see she wanted so badly to do so. There was, however, hope for me in this video. At the half way point, the student behind the video camera, while capturing every moment of the incident, consistently yelled to my peers, “Do not engage, y’all! DO NOT ENGAGE!”

When I look back at events that shaped the 1960s, I recall pictures and videos of Black people linked and locked together as if they were trees planted by the earth. Solemn and silent as they had been trained to do in order to achieve the most impactful goal: change. They would demonstrate, chant, and protest, but they would never engage with the oppressive forces surrounding them. White men were facing them, ready for war, and armed to attack. In 2015, however, I would never have guessed that I would see my peers facing this exact same scenario on a college campus. Now, I understand that there is a certain method to handling issues of racism and race relations within a university system, but when these issues are continually being ignored by administrators who are in positions as powerful as former Mizzou President Tim Wolfe, there is a problem.

But what happens to the student who does not understand this very issue? What happens when Black students become so outraged with a situation that they can no longer control their actions or words? Furthermore, how do we handle the students who seek to make a change but do not have the training or know-how to effectively start the task? We, as the informed minority members of predominately white institutions, are doing our peers a disservice by not engaging with them to create effective “change mechanisms” that make a difference on our campuses in the same manner that Jonathan Butler and the students at Mizzou have done. Just as the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was founded in 1960 on the campus of what is now known as Shaw University, we must form a coalition in the same manner that serves to aid students in proper training and educating students on how to properly release emotion, effectively make a point, and collectively demand for change. We have gone too long without the proper guidance that they had in the 1960s, and I can no longer watch as students of color yell, scream, and fight against those who deem them unworthy to voice their opinions. Instead, I want to be the one to revise the revolution and be the one screaming, “DO NOT ENGAGE, Y’ALL! DO NOT ENGAGE!”

Furthermore, how do we handle the students who seek to make a change but do not have the training or know-how to effectively start the task?

"Do Not Engage, Y’All!": Training and Preparing Our Black Students For Battle

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