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Racial Tension On Display: Engaging with Black Lives Matter and Negotiating Public Push-back

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Introduction

Black Lives Matter (BLM) is a non-violent international activist movement focusing on police accountability, racial profiling, police brutality, and institutionalized racism et al. Yet, in the media and in other fora, there has been confusion about BLM’s goals, name, structure, and strategy.

James Madison University (JMU) is a predominantly white institution, with less than 5% of the student body identifying as African American or Black. While many campuses experienced student marches and protests during the 2015-2016 academic year, the response at JMU was more muted.

With the support of administration and the LET Diversity Council, JMU Libraries produced a book display in the fall entitled “Understanding Black Lives Matter,” to educate students on the BLM movement and the historical context for the movement’s need to exist.

Vandalism Incident

Within 48 hours of the display going live, it was vandalized in one of the library locations. The perpetrator crossed out the word “Black” with a pen and replaced it with the word “ALL.” This was a disheartening event for many, because a) “All Lives Matter” has been a rhetorical response to BLM that distracts from BLM’s focus and derails important conversations, and b) the display preemptively addressed “All Lives Matter” with signage explaining why it was an inadequate response.

Our Response

Together with Kristen Shuyler, Director of Outreach and Partnerships, we acted quickly to move the signage about “All Lives Matter” closer to the vandalized sign and crafted messages, both on the display and in online promotion of the display, strongly discouraging any further vandalism.

As disturbing as this incident was, we did not want to remove or “paper over” the vandalized display. By preserving the defaced display and calling out its inappropriateness (citing University and ALA policy), we could acknowledge the emotional impact of the incident on our users who identify with BLM and draw a clear line between healthy free expression and unacceptable, hostile action. Preservation of the act, while protecting those impacted by the act, is a delicate balance.

What We Learned

We were able to take several lessons away from this experience. In selecting titles from our collection that covered the wide range of topics germane to BLM, we identified gaps in coverage – most direly among queer Black voices. Faculty in the History and English departments requested copies of the display bibliography, indicating that they were looking for ways to engage with the topic, but lacked an entry point/topic knowledge to draw their students to the literature.

With Kristen, we presented this information at JMU’s annual conference dedicated to Diversity topics. The session was very well-attended, including participation from many in administrative roles, as well as students. At the end of the session, we were gratified to learn how much our faculty, staff, and students, especially students of color, were paying attention to the events surrounding this display. They offered positive feedback to the library’s handling of events and new ideas to explore for future outreach activities.

The Diversity Council is looking forward to producing at least one book display every year, addressing a topical issue, with the intent to help build student awareness and engagement.