



**Department of Afro-American Studies**

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**An Open Letter to the Students of Color of the University of Wisconsin-Madison  
From The Faculty and Staff of the Department of Afro-American Studies**

The faculty and staff of the Department of Afro-American Studies is thinking about you and keeping you in our hearts at this time of extreme stress and tension. Your anger is justified, your fear understandable. The disruption of Professor Almiron's class, and the arrest of your fellow student, King Shabazz, while important in itself, is only the most recent in a series of events that has been steadily escalating in recent months and weeks. What so many of you are experiencing isn't a sign of individual weakness. It's a version of post-traumatic stress syndrome, a mental health crisis as serious as those following campus shootings or natural disasters. We admire the way many of you are holding up but we understand what a strain this represents.

In recognition of that fact, we call on faculty across the campus to respond to the crisis in a spirit of care and generosity as we near the end of the semester. Further, we ask the administration to affirm that call, as well as to offer public assurances that these events will not interfere with King's plans to graduate at the end of the semester. Further, we ask that emergency mental health support be made available to all students affected by recent events.

The most important part of our message to you is simple: do your best to keep your eyes on the prize, and know that we're there to support you as you walk a difficult path. We know you're feeling torn between the demands of your studies and your desire to take an active role in responding to what's happening. Let some of the burden be shifted to our shoulders. Your first job is to be a student: to succeed in your classes, earn your degree, and go on to live a full life. We know that for many of you, that life will be one that helps create a world in which your children won't have to deal with what you're dealing with now. And remember that everyone in the communities you're working for knows how important it is that you place your studies first.

Our purpose in writing this letter isn't simply to offer encouragement and support, and certainly not to add to the barrage of empty words since the Tony Robinson shooting. Rather, we're making a public statement of our individual and collective commitment to pressuring UW to take concrete actions on your behalf. Part of that is pledging ourselves to listen even more carefully, whether to specific suggestions or individual concerns. Our doors are open and we'll meet regularly as a faculty to figure out how to move ahead. Changing the University's culture isn't your job, it's ours. But we know the deepest insights and most fruitful ideas will come from you as you bring your intelligence, creativity and courage to bear on the larger world.

With these principles in mind, the Department and our allies including faculty from other Ethnic and Indigenous Studies programs, have begun discussions with the administration, including the Provost, Chancellor, Dean of Students and the Chief of University Police, who offered a sincere apology to Professor Almiron. That's a start, but it means little if not supported by action on multiple fronts. During that conversation, we advanced several specific ideas:

- 1) That UW makes a firm commitment, supported by resource allocation, to meeting the mental health needs of students of color. This means providing extra access to support services

during this time of crisis and following through on the Chancellor's recent promise to hire two counselors with primary training in race and diversity;

2) That the administration operates with transparency and consistency in dealing with issues of student discipline. This means taking incidents of verbal, physical and sexual harassment seriously and responding in ways that actively address the underlying issues and problems.

3) That the University commits to making the Ethnic Studies Requirement meaningful. This means requiring the ESR to be fulfilled within the first two years on campus through courses that focus on diversity in the United States and involve face-to-face contact with instructional staff and other students. We understand clearly that this will entail a significant shift of resources, and we know that the budget is tight for everyone. But the fact is that faculty and instructional staff in Afro-American Studies, Asian American Studies, Chican@ and Latin@ Studies, and American Indian Studies at UW are experts in this area and know how to teach courses that make a difference. UW needs to move beyond rhetoric and demonstrate that its commitment is real.

Our concern is with you, although we believe, and have seen, that many white students have the potential to become allies. We love you, value you, and trust that you'll survive as your parents survived the malevolent neglect of the 1980s, your grandparents survived Jim Crow, your ancestors kept faith when it seemed impossible. You are the bright and morning star of their fondest hopes and we are proud of you.

Our offices and classes are spaces dedicated to thoughtful, searching and engaged discussions about what's at stake for students of color, and all students: the need to deal w racism as an environmental toxin, an atmosphere we all breathe that students of color, at times, are made to feel that they face alone. If we should have learned anything in the 20th century, it's that these are things that no one faces alone.

You'll make it. We're with you and we promise to do everything we can to help.