

Black Menaces Want to Educate You

A group of Black students started a popular TikTok account where they ask their peers questions about race and identity. Now they're encouraging others to do the same at campuses across the country.

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A group of five Black students at Brigham Young University, who call themselves the Black Menaces, started a [TikTok account \(https://www.tiktok.com/@blackmenaces\)](https://www.tiktok.com/@blackmenaces) earlier this year where they post videos of themselves posing questions to their mostly white classmates about race and identity. Questions range from what Juneteenth commemorates to whether students have queer friends on campus and whether institutional racism exists. The answers range from thoughtful to painfully awkward.

What started as a project by a small group of friends in February has since garnered more than 724,000 followers and 28 million likes, and the Black Menaces are ready to grow further. They announced plans to expand their operation to campuses across the country in a [video \(https://www.tiktok.com/@blackmenaces/video/7130337327343521070?is_copy_url=1&is_from_webapp=v1\)](https://www.tiktok.com/@blackmenaces/video/7130337327343521070?is_copy_url=1&is_from_webapp=v1) this month. The goal is to have a chapter at every predominantly white university, where Black students use video interviews to similarly document their experiences and ask questions of their peers.

Sebastian Stewart-Johnson, a junior at Brigham Young and one of the founders of the Black Menaces, said the hope is to give students of color a platform to tell their own stories.

“For so long, non-BIPOC people have been speaking on behalf of BIPOC people,” he said. “And now we’re able to take the leadership aspect and role and have our own voices amplified about the things that directly are affecting us.”

He also hopes to create a national community of Black students.

“Together we can be a coalition of people who push for the betterment and empowerment of marginalized communities, where we are in every single state across the country, and if we need to, overnight, we can protest or rally or petition for something that is greater than any of us individually. To me, that is the most exciting thing.”

The group has already started 10 chapters since the announcement, and students from at least 70 campuses have expressed interest in starting chapters of their own.

Kylee Shepherd, a senior at Brigham Young and one of the founding members of the Black Menaces, said Stewart-Johnson jokingly calling his little brother a menace helped the group come up with its name.

“Everyone who has ever been anything, in the civil rights movement and all of that, was a menace to society,” she said.

Brigham Young University, founded and supported by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, is home to few students who look like the Black Menaces. Black students made up less than 1 percent (<https://www.byu.edu/facts-figures>) of the student body in fall 2021, according to data from the university. These demographics echo those of the LDS church, whose population was estimated to be 6 percent Black in 2018, the Associated Press (<https://apnews.com/article/north-america-us-news-ap-top-news-ut-state-wire-lifestyle-54e0b65e4af747e79a37c701f74267f0>) reported.

The university made national news (<https://www.npr.org/2022/08/28/1119848113/byu-duke-volleyball-racism-fan-banned>) last week when a fan at a volleyball game repeatedly yelled racial slurs at Black players from Duke University, the opposing team. Brigham Young Athletics released an apology (<https://twitter.com/BYUCougars/status/1563616547880329216>) to the Duke players the next day and banned the fan from future games.

Shepherd said she felt “so isolated” as a freshman with so few Black students on campus. She found her peers often stared at her, and some even avoided sitting next to her in class. She hopes the Black Menaces’ videos send a message to future Black students at her institution that they belong there.

“I want the little girl who was like me, or the little boy, or the person who wants to go to BYU for any reason to feel comfortable and to feel like they have a space there and that that space they’re taking up isn’t a burden on anyone,” she said.

But the Black Menaces are expanding because she knows Black students on other campuses share the same struggles.

“We wanted to really highlight that it was more than just BYU,” she said. “Yes, us being a church institution does play into it. But a lot of these issues are all over, regardless of what kind of [predominantly white institution] you go to.”

Starting New Chapters

Tanner Edwards, a junior at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, said he came across the Black Menaces’ videos on TikTok and started regularly reading the discussions playing out in the comments. He was eager to create a chapter of his own. As a Black student recently diagnosed with autism, his hope is to make students of color and neurodivergent students feel represented in his chapter’s videos.

“I think ignorance is really prevalent on campus on a wide array of social issues,” he said. “I really want to work toward dismantling that and in turn create a safe space for these marginalized communities. Our goal is to talk to as many students as possible.”

So far, students have given him relatively safe answers to his questions, despite a [history of racial tensions](https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2018/08/21/protesters-tear-down-confederate-statue-unc-chapel-hill) (<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2018/08/21/protesters-tear-down-confederate-statue-unc-chapel-hill>) on campus, but he hopes his peers start to open up.

“When people watch the videos, I want them to see growth,” he said. “I want them to be able to see an actual change over time in the atmosphere that we’re creating here on campus and see that there will be spaces where they can feel welcome and feel like they can exist authentically in.”

Adokor Swaniker, a senior at San Francisco State University, said she started a chapter on her campus to “start discussions in a positive, lighthearted way” about race and identity. She said she wants to create opportunities for classmates to see the gaps in their knowledge and learn, without feeling judged.

When she asks classmates questions on camera, “even if someone doesn’t know the answer, we’re able to just laugh it off, and most of the time, they’ll ask us and we can educate them on the topic,” she said.

She added that some of her peers believe the country’s racial inequities became “magically better” after the civil rights movement, “but we still face the most horrible microaggressions and discrimination ... and I think it’s important to remind people that we’ve come a long way, but we have so much farther to go for all races and Black students to feel comfortable in the spaces that they’re in.”

Simone Brown, a senior at San Francisco State and also a member of the new chapter, said that the public perception of her campus is that all the students are liberal and in lockstep on social justice issues, but the videos show that’s not necessarily the case.

“It’s definitely helped me step out of my comfort zone, having more deep discussions with people and dismantling stigmas,” she said.

Old Traditions, New Tools

Charles H. F. Davis, an assistant professor of higher education at the University of Michigan, said he sees the Black Menaces’ work as part of a broader history of Black activism, in which activists used the media platforms of their day to share experiences and raise concerns; while abolitionists turned to newspapers to advance their cause, today’s student organizers are taking to platforms like TikTok.

“Every generation of activists and organizers do things kind of in their own way that build on existing traditions and sort of chart new paths that most resonate or connect with their peers,” said Davis, who

studies student activist movements.

However, he sees social media as having some particular advantages for student activism, including “two-way communication,” students’ ability to almost instantly interact and engage with each other across campuses.

“The scale of it is so much more significant,” he said. “More people have access. More people are part of the conversation.”

He believes the expansion of the Black Menaces could have a “substantive” impact on campuses, not just because of the wide reach of social media but because of their call to white students to reflect on and address “racial illiteracies.”

“One thing we know for sure is the work of racial equity must include and has included white people,” he said. “Those who benefit from these systems of power and oppression have to be deeply involved in the dismantling of that.”

Allissa V. Richardson, an associate professor of journalism at the University of Southern California, said she sees the Black Menaces’ videos as form of journalism, as well. Her research focuses on how African American communities have used social media to document their experiences and produce news.

She noted that over the last decade, Black people have used smartphones to call attention to instances of police brutality and other forms of racism and discrimination, acting as citizen journalists and helping to inform professional media coverage.

“I think a lot of people, especially Black people, have become very familiar with using their smartphone to bypass the traditional gatekeepers of the press,” she said. Similarly, these students “have learned how to work the algorithms so that they’re owning the message ... and making sure that people can have a discussion that they can craft without asking permission.”

“These Black Menaces are doing a real public service by tapping into the conversations that college students are having now,” she added.

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