
July 2022

If You Build It, They will Take It: Institutional Theft of the Academic Work of Black Faculty

DeJuanna Parker
Independent, dejuanna.parker@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://openriver.winona.edu/jaep>



Part of the [Adult and Continuing Education Commons](#), [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), [Educational Leadership Commons](#), [Online and Distance Education Commons](#), and the [Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Parker, D. (2022). If You Build It, They will Take It: Institutional Theft of the Academic Work of Black Faculty. *The Journal of Advancing Education Practice*, 3(2). <https://openriver.winona.edu/jaep/vol3/iss2/3>

This Reflection Paper is brought to you for free and open access by OpenRiver. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Journal of Advancing Education Practice by an authorized editor of OpenRiver. For more information, please contact klarson@winona.edu.

If You Build It, They will Take It: Institutional Theft of the Academic Work of Black Faculty

Dr. DeJuanna Parker

Dr. Barbara D. Holmes

Introduction

Being a Black Academic at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) is fraught with challenges as you try to negotiate and survive an unfamiliar culture (Wingfield, 2015). In many instances, faculty of color are presumed to be less capable and productive than their White counterparts. Yet, when Black faculty produce work and develop programs that White faculty do not have the capacity to deliver, this work is stolen, taken, and misappropriated after the heavy lifting is done. It should come as no surprise. Scott and Lyons (2021) warn that no matter how good and credentialed the Black faculty member is, the university forces will come after you and consciously undermine your effectiveness. Blackshear and Hollis (2021) conclude that you simply cannot escape the confluence of gender and race that exists in PWIs and how Black faculty remain vulnerable.

History attests to the fact that the work of Black people in this country suffers from generational theft. Compensation for labor of enslaved peoples was stolen to enrich the slave holders who bought them for a price. White people with power embezzled property and profits from land bought and enriched by black landowners (Newkirk, 2019). Black people who devised witty inventions and created entire music and art forms were robbed of proper recognition, so much so that the American psyche attributes many of these accomplishments to White people (Cherid, 2021; Johnson, 2017; Underwood, 2018). Underwood (2018) posits “this adaptation of western art forms gives Whiteness the opinion that Black art and music belong in some way to them”. No stone is left unturned, as this theft continues in the hallowed halls of academia, a place where Black stakeholders, under the guise of diversity, expect intellect and academic excellence to be exercised, recognized, applauded, and credited (Clair, 2019). Conversely, the scholarly work of the Black Academician is subject to appropriation by those who sit back and watch the work being done, who overtake the product, erase the names of creators, take credit, and often pejorate the work, making it unrecognizable (Dutt-Ballerstadt, 2020).

The Harm Principle and Academic Theft

Steel (2008) speaks to the harm caused by theft. The overarching consequence is that theft is a violation of the emotional psyche and is fundamentally dishonest. When the academic work of Black faculty is stolen, it represents a blatant act of academic disrespect and dishonest representation of who developed the work. Black faculty are harmed and discredited when their work is stolen and given to lesser qualified individuals. This theft is nonconsensual and

leads to a significant breach of trust. It also violates the contractual obligations of the dean to support and guide all faculty regardless of color, creed, or religion. We believe that the stealing of the academic work of Black faculty rises to the level of criminal behavior.

Black academics come into the Academy for the same reasons that White academics join: to conduct research, contribute to the literature that advances knowledge of the profession, and to help emerging scholars to become members of the Academy we revere. We do not enter the academy to be evaluated by lesser equipped administrators as inadequate and unfit to create and deliver quality courses and programs, and to have our work stolen and attributed to those who were never involved in the process. When this occurs, the assault is academically and psychologically traumatizing, as it is perpetrated by those who, by virtue of their position and stature at the university, are charged to support all faculty.

Black faculty, especially those of us trained at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), have excellence instilled as a foundational prerequisite. We understand that we must be twice as good to receive half the opportunity. As such, the rigor with which we are taught in our PhD programs is more stringent, more academically challenging, and more purposeful in preparing graduate students for future possibilities and pitfalls than at Predominately White Institutions (PWIs). Because of these experiences, many Black faculty members who teach at PWIs, understand they cannot be their authentic selves. We expect the institution that hired us will be a place where our work is valued, and where we are viewed as equals for the intellect and academic skills we bring to the table; however, the opposite is true. Black academics must understand the system of stealing the work of Black faculty is simply an extension of the theft that has existed for more than four hundred years.

Building an Accredited Inaugural Education Doctorate Program

Getting the call from my colleague, who had also been my dissertation chair, asking me if I wanted to take part in building an education doctorate program at her university in Minnesota made my jaw drop. Firstly, I was honored to be thought of as worthy to be on a team to engage in the development of an inaugural doctoral program. Secondly, I was overwhelmed thinking about the impact of a program such as this. Lastly, I became a bit nervous, as I could only imagine the kind of work required for this type of endeavor. But I remembered that we are Black Ph.D. faculty preparing Ed.D students, so we were fully cognizant of our ability to make this program work and to help these students become worthy to be members of The Academy.

I knew I was equipped for the work. I have an earned Ph.D. in Education Management, so I understand the literature and the practical application of the research regarding doctoral student persistence, organizational management, and scholarly writing. I have been an educator for more than 25 years. I have depth of content knowledge. I can do this. Each of the Black scholars recruited to develop this program had the requisite skills and knowledge, and we were open to learning anything about program and course design and development that we did not already know.

We learned how to design entire courses, using road maps and D2L technology. The technology department helped us to learn how to load courses onto the platform and make them available. This was no easy feat, but we were driven by the vision of the creator/director to make this program one of excellence, and nothing that the university had ever seen. We designed in-person and online residency courses to acclimate new doctoral students. We planned all activities and course materials, including a program manual to guide students through the process. We worked as members of our doctoral candidate dissertation committees. We taught our students how to write, which was a weakness we discovered early on. We did it all. Our classes were engaging, and we taught our students how to be doctoral students. We taught them how to become researchers in courses such as Action Research, Program Evaluation, Education Policy, Qualitative Research Methods, and the Dissertation Process.

And just like the Ole Massa of the 8th, and 19th centuries (Gilbert, 1969), no one from the college (the Big House), including the dean, touched this program in any way; they let the Black folks do the heavy lifting, recruit the inaugural classes, and build a reputation for the program. We enjoyed it because we are trained in our doctoral upbringing that we are charged to continue to research and add new knowledge to the literature in our field, as well as to reach back and help others with the same aspirations we had-to become holders of a terminal degree. We graduated the first four students from the historic inaugural cohort, again without input of any input from the education faculty or the dean. Program faculty also created a commemorative booklet for the inaugural graduates as a memento of their experiences and accomplishments. We had a sense of great accomplishment and believed that our efforts would be at least recognized, even if we received no accolades. A simple “thank you” would have been a minimal gesture to show a scintilla of appreciation. But that “thank you” never came. Something very different ensued.

Here Comes Ole Massa: The Theft of the Program

As life goes on the plantation, the Massa sends others to do his “dirty work”. Seeing that the Education Doctorate program was successful, the dean employed others in the department to communicate with the program director that he had a “new vision” for the program, however, no communication was provided to explicate this new vision. When asked about his doctoral education experience, the dean responded that the dissertations he chaired were covered by a “nondisclosure agreement”. Loosely translated this means that the dean had no experience-Just the power of office to seek and destroy.

Where we developed substantive assignments and activities for the residency portion of the doctoral program. The focus of the Black program faculty was scholarly writing, and the students spent the two-week residency deeply entrenched in writing. The emerging scholars produced a newsletter, and academic articles, some of which were accepted for presentation at an international education conference. The new dean brought in a storyteller, magician, and mind reader to present ideas about communication, engagement, and body language. No

scholarly writing activities (which every student needed) were scheduled. The new dean was averse to rigorous scholarly practices. Additionally, as a show of contention, the new dean appointed a lesser qualified white man, who had been fired from two superintendent positions, and embroiled in controversy over harassment allegations in another school system, as director of the education doctorate program. The dean then acted to remove all Black faculty from the program and give the program a White face in his own image. Those same Black faculty who helped to develop the program were no longer permitted to teach in the program. Black faculty were replaced by faculty that had never been interested in any aspect of the program, contributed nothing to its development, had no knowledge of the courses, had not chaired any dissertation committees, and had not published in any scholarly journals for twenty years or more. A number of the faculty placed into the program were not education faculty, rather faculty imported from the Nursing and English programs. All of this to get the Black folks out of the way because the dean operated on the principle that he had “power of the office of the dean” to do whatever he wanted. This academic trauma borders on criminal behavior akin to kidnapping or larceny. To have something that you created stolen from you is reminiscent of Black babies who were torn from their mothers’ arms to be sold to another person who would perpetuate the same traumatic pattern.

Massa is Gone: Chaos in the Wreckage

In the dismantling of this inaugural program, the Black adjunct faculty were asked to give their courses, course syllabi, and other materials they had developed, such as the Doctoral Program Manual, to the newly selected White faculty. The founding director explained, in no uncertain terms, that the scholarly work developed by Black faculty was not community property, and that we had every right to decline to share our work, rather sharecropping our work to White faculty was not supported. As the dean had a new direction, we determined that he along with his White faculty, should be able to develop their own materials. Rigor disappeared from the program. Where Black faculty focused heavily on scholarly writing practices in order for doctoral students to develop dissertations of which to be proud, the new iteration of the program removed the scholarly aspect of student writing, perhaps due to the fact that the new White faculty are not scholarly writers themselves. After an extended hiatus, the new dean is no longer at the university. What is perhaps the most telling is the resignation letter that the dean sent to the faculty explaining why he was leaving after three years:

“I feel that strategic decisions and plans put forward by myself over the last few years, all focused on positioning the College to be the regional and national leader it can be, while overcoming budget challenges and the disruption caused by COVID, have not been fully supported. In this regard, I have not been able to meet or make progress toward the goals I set out, and which I measure myself against. From my perspective, I am not achieving and leading in the way I feel the College deserves.

I thrive in challenging leadership roles, seeking new and innovative ways to overcome problems, leading from the front, and working across stakeholder groups to meet agreed

goals and to improve the student experience. I have spent three years forging strong and positive relationships within the College and externally, and the colleagues I have worked with are some of the most committed I have had the pleasure to work alongside. For me, however, the role has become too management-focused and moved away from leading to coping. This is not how I want to spend my professional life". Unfortunately, during my time leading the College there have been too many chances to change squandered, leading to a weaker institution and a dearth in morale among the very colleagues needed to drive change.

Black faculty see redemption in this resignation as the dean was not leading and achieving for all faculty, nor working with all stakeholder groups as he proclaims. We became a weaker college and the documented dearth in morale was palpable. As grandma says, "the chickens had come home to roost" and the dean now experienced what it is like to not be supported. Massa is gone.

At present, no director for the doctoral program is listed on the institution's website, but the White man referred to earlier who had issues with harassment and racism charges in his former employment is the official contact person for the program. In the wake of these events, a great program that had enormous potential to move the university into a place of respect and acclaim in the Minnesota University System to compete with other Ed.D. programs in the state has been laid waste and is no longer recognizable. New students will have no historical knowledge of who developed the program or its conceptual foundation.

The persistence of this type of theft is rampant in academe. These actions continue because the perpetrators are never held into account; they move from university to university wrecking the academic lives of the Black faculty they encounter. Sadly, universities allow this to continue. Black faculty, adjunct and full-time, must document these crimes. Academic thieves will deny their guilt, but a comprehensive paper trail is the best evidence. As a final note, we leave the reader with a word of wisdom: if you are Black faculty in academia, this will happen to you if you dare to create anything of value. We must develop an academic underground railroad for our work to get to safety. The hymn that supports the academic underground comes from Mary Mary in their song Can't give up now:

*There will be mountains
That I will have to climb
And there will be battles
That I will have to fight
But victory or defeat
It's up to me to decide
But how can I expect to win
If I never try*

*I just can't give up now
I've come too far from where
I started from
Nobody told me
The road would be easy
And I don't believe He's brought me this far
To leave me*

Black scholars are urged to remain ever vigilant as you deploy your talent, expertise, skills, and knowledge to create and develop work that exemplifies the excellence of your craft. There is joy that emanates from our cultural gifts, and it is in the sharing of our gifts that we create a legacy for those who follow behind us. Stand tall as a Black Academic; Keep your eyes open and courageously defend your work. This is how we overcome.

References

- Blackshear, T. and Hollis, L. T. (2021). Despite the place, can't escape gender and race: Black women's faculty experiences at PWIs and HBCUs. *Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education*.
- Burrell, C. (1979). Just can't give up now [Song adapted by Mary Mary]. On *Thankful*. Columbia.
- Cherid, M. I. (2021) Ain't got enough money to pay me respect: Blackfishing, cultural appropriation, and commodification of blackness. *Cultural Studies: Critical Methodologies*. Sage.
- Clair, M. (2019). Diversity is no panacea. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.
- Dutt-Ballerstadt, R. (2020). In our own words: Institutional betrayals. *Inside Higher Ed*.
- Gilbert, O. (1969). *Puttin' On Ole Massa: The Slave Narratives of Henry Bibb, William Wells Brown, and Solomon Northup*. Harper Torchbooks.
- Johnson, S. (February 2017). America's always had black inventors – even when the patent system explicitly excluded them. *The Conversation*.
- Newkirk, V. R. (September 2019). The great land robbery. *The Atlantic*.
- Scott, I., and Lyons, J. (2021). Black women are largely shut out of coveted tenure-track positions at Mass. colleges and universities. *The Boston Globe*.
- Reel, A. (2008). The harms and wrongs of stealing: The harm principle and dishonesty in theft. Research Gate.

Underwood, S. (2018). The long history of creative theft in black music and arts. Cassius. Cassiuslife.com

Wingfield, A. H. (2015) The plight of the black academic. The Atlantic.