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Navigating the Unknown: A Black Faculty Member's Journey in the Predominantly White University

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Introduction

Faculty of Color are motivated to teach in higher education to share expertise, become role models and offer new knowledge to the profession. We believe that we can make a difference in supporting student learning and development and perhaps provide new perspectives or issues facing organizational growth. Higher education on the other hand actively recruits faculty of color to the academy to demonstrate its commitment to equity and inclusive excellence. Madyun et al. (2013) suggest that faculty of color are essential in higher education to help students achieve intercultural competence. So, our purpose is clear, and we are here to stay.

The twenty-year journey

Almost twenty years ago, I was hired in a university with little diversity among its faculty. I was the only African American in my department and only one of two in the college. Unfortunately, much has not changed in the makeup of diversity sense then. At my early arrival, it was surprising to have my first two graduate assistants to be graduates from historical black colleges and universities (HBCUs) who were recruited by the Office of Institutional Diversity. Through this connection, the word got around quickly that there was an African American faculty recently hired. Equally important, I was a faculty who was a product of an HBCU just like they were. Black students quickly congregated in my office – whether just to see me, introduce themselves to me, ask for advice, get help, or just kick it. While I enjoyed the interactions, I saw students who were starving to be cared for – academically, socially, and mentally.

Watching these students be successful because of some impact I might have had on them was gratifying for me. However, the university having so few African Americans around the work that many of us do at predominately white universities (PWUs) is overwhelming, exhausting, and depressing to put it mildly. Equally important, I had some of my own needs to be met. I was constantly navigating issues in my head on how to deal with various situations. Often tired and concerned with my future, I had no support whom I felt were trustworthy. I recognized this quickly when I tried to share my personal experience as an African American female faculty with a white female faculty (and one who professed to be a humanitarian, feminist, and woke), and her response was “Why did you come here”. What saddened me was the lack of empathy, the lack of knowledge, on her behalf, that anywhere I go throughout the country, in academia, this is my reality at PWUs. There was no suggestion on her part on how to navigate or solve the problem.

Navigating the Workspace

Over the years, navigating my workspace was a challenge – worried about fulfilling my obligations with teaching, scholarship, student growth, professional development, university committee work, and community outreach, not to mention the experiences of office politics, microaggressions, and mobbing. Talking about a conundrum! Determining where I would go for help or the right person to tell my dilemma was a task. The other African American female faculty on campus had some of their own difficult issues to navigate, one of which had been denied promotion nine times. Even in her own struggles, she found time to make me feel at home, the sense of belonging that many faculty of color long to have at PWUs; she was truly a gift to me, and I will never forget it. Unfortunately, she passed about five years after my arrival, and this is another issue. Because of the lack of diversity in the community and among businesses, there was no one to prepare an African American body – the most pressing issue was hair and makeup. As a friend, I stepped up to help prepare her body for the funeral, not to mention the fact I was present when she expired. To add to the stress, I had to continue fulfilling my responsibilities to my faculty contract (e.g., teaching, scholarship, professional development, growth of students, and university and community contributions). Furthermore, I had a family to nurture. To be honest, I am surprised I am still standing strong.

My late-night conversations with my mother were my saving grace. Her words of wisdom always did the trick. For my mother, she was an educator who experienced the transition from a segregated secondary school system to an integrated school system in the state of Virginia, and she was admitted into graduate school in the University of Virginia in 1967 which was before they officially accepted African Americans. Yes, my mother was a trailblazer! Believe me, the experience she speaks of is not in the history books; she always had a story to share followed by the African American spiritual – *How I Got Over*, and the question: “what you going to do about it”. It was the question that I had heard since I was twelve years of age whenever I met life challenges. In sum, my tenure in academia has led me to believe that the university in its work, operates through a Eurocentric lens that leads to neglecting the needs and mistreatment of African American faculty, particularly African American women.

Experiencing the classroom

According to the faculty contract, the classroom is a place where faculty can control curriculum, but faculty cannot always control the experiences with students. Personally, I was always confident in my ability to teach. Even when I interviewed, the dean acknowledged how faculty and students were impressed with my lecture. I see teaching in the classroom as an on-stage performance – it comes from those years of music and dance performance, which gave me the skills and confidence to stand in front of an audience. What can not be changed is the students’ experiences and worldviews before they reach your classroom. White students come with biases that reflect the power and privilege dynamics in society, which puts a heavy burden on African American faculty. Many of the students are impressed with my knowledge, but they

have also informed me they have never been taught by a faculty of color, particularly an African American.

With over twenty years of experience in academia, I have realized that when faculty of color have challenges in the classroom, their colleagues quickly side with students, giving no credibility to the faculty's perspective and sometimes the students are used to harm faculty of color, such as colleagues' pursuit of fictitious complaints, getting students to report matters that can be solved easily, and utilizing graduate students to do dirty work). For African American faculty, this behavior is detrimental and harmful because teaching evaluations are weighed heavily in the tenure and promotion process. Moreover, microaggressions (sometimes intentional aggressions) harm the mental and physical well-being of the faculty of color. In fact, one slip-up or disagreement with "a" student can turn the tide of your success in the classroom. Navigating this experience is challenging because the university evaluates teaching through a Eurocentric lens and there is nowhere to go for guidance.

Experiencing the outside looking in

While having a sense of belonging at a PWU is seen as mental health connection that faculty of color need to have, I also see it from the perspective of an outsider who is excluded from what is going on in the inside. In other words, it feels like you are on the outside of the building, looking in the window and watching how others that do not look like you are supported. For white faculty, academic engagement is substantial and beyond superficial. White faculty find each other to collaborate on scholarship, grants, and other opportunities. With these partnerships, you see their productivity in the sense that it makes a difference on their tenure and promotion. Many faculty of color do not have a sense of belonging. Rarely are we sought out for partnerships on scholarship, grants, and opportunities. We are often ignored or never nominated for administrative positions. Even if you have the most outstanding curriculum vita with publications, programming, leadership training, and previous practical administrative experience, African Americans are still ignored and excluded. This experience is exacerbated by dual identities. For me, it meant being African American and woman. Not only have I toiled with the issues of race on campus, but also being a woman in white women spaces, white male spaces, and black male spaces, and all of which have very different dynamics with challenges to navigate.

What to do about it?

Reminded of conversations with my mother, I return to my mother's question: "what are you going to do about it?" Meeting the needs of faculty of color must be addressed by the colleges and universities. To that aim, universities must develop a mentoring model that provides connections to colleagues who can help them understand how to navigate the various spaces in academia. For African Americans, the most appropriate model should align with collectivism. African Americans come from a collectivist culture, which means that their experience must be collaborative, communal, interdependent, and with harmony of their

African American community as they navigate academia. The faculty will align their personal goals with their department, college, and university goals. In this case, interdependence is the key, but it is a two-way relationship, providing a sense of belonging, while embracing the vision and mission of the department, college, and university without rejecting or disadvantaging values, norms, and beliefs of the faculty.

Conclusion

Throughout the challenges inherent in surviving the academic experience in PWUs, I remain joyful for my Blackness. Collins (2020) posits that *“one cannot fully understand Blackness and whatever successes Black people have earned in the U.S. without understanding the joy that Black people derive from being Black.”* While I recognize that this is my experience, I would argue that this experience is common throughout academia at predominantly white institutions in higher education. The success of colleges and universities requires all faculty to be successful, not just some of us. If we are to improve the outcomes of students, particularly students of color, we must ensure the success of faculty of color. These students must be able to connect with productive and healthy-minded faculty who are ready and able to nurture their academic experience. For faculty, it is hard to accomplish this goal when being overwhelmed with challenges to navigate themselves; an academic mentoring program is essential for a body of thriving and successful African American faculty. To answer mother’s question: What you going to do about it? my answer is simple, I am going to speak my truth, tell my story and be the building block for my faculty of color colleagues.

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