Chapter 10

Black, White, and Everything in Between:
Trials of a Black DEI Professional in PWIs

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ABSTRACT

With this chapter, the author sheds light on the experiences of a Black woman hired to create, administer, and manage the day-to-day needs of diversity offices at two small, white private liberal arts universities. The chapter will include insights on the very racism and implicit bias the author experienced, reported, and helped diminish. The chapter also describes the seemingly impossible task of managing change and transformation on private institutions rooted in white supremacist traditions and built upon a history of exclusion. To do this, the author shares personal narratives from colleagues collected via online surveys. The author describes the personal angst experienced while collecting, reporting, and managing the many micro-aggressions, experiences with racism, transphobia, and other reported biases. The author considers the mental gymnastics necessary to serve the needs of the institution and attempt to protect personal integrity and sanity.

INTRODUCTION

"An educator in a system of oppression is either a revolutionary, or an oppressor." – Lerone Bennett, Jr.

This quote explicitly expresses what I experienced and struggled to name during my career, as a Black woman who leads diversity, equity and inclusion efforts in higher education. It is not, however, how I felt when I began my career. Starting a career in higher education (HE) as a young, Black professional at a large, Division 1, predominantly White institution (PWI) was exhilarating for me. As a proud alumna of a historically Black college/university (HBCU) with a master's degree in higher education, working at a flagship PWI was an intentional decision. I wanted to serve students of color (SOC) and first-generation

students who "missed out" on the supportive and loving environment offered at an HBCU. While I worked in an unrelated role, I was asked to assist with diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives.

I worked collaboratively with other departments on university DEI initiatives, which is how I gained experience in diversity work in higher education. As a young, Black woman and new professional, I felt marginalized as an employee of the institution. Research suggests that Black faculty and staff "...discuss disparate treatment in workloads, in expectations regarding how they express themselves, and in the need to establish their position as a part of the team" (Turner & Grauerholz, 2017, p. 217). However, young professionals who seek a sense of community can often foster it when working with Black faculty and staff members, as well as when serving SOC through volunteer DEI experiences.

Nonetheless, after serving at an institution with few Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) administrative leaders for mentorship and support, a young, Black professional might experience waning motivation. In my professional journey as a Black woman DEI administrator, unfortunately, I often resigned from positions shortly after my motivation decreased while in the role. Thereafter, my decisions to resign were accompanied by feelings of guilt, which I learned was a feeling often shared with other Black higher education professionals, after discussions regarding their trepidations about leaving roles.

One of my sentiments frequently expressed in conversations with other Black higher education professionals was regarding leaving the Black students I, so intently, cared to serve and support. Therefore, I contemplated continuing my career at an HBCU, instead, given the consideration that HBCUs, reportedly, have a strong sense of community infused into the culture of the campus, to ensure student success. There is a presumption that working at an HBCU is more manageable for BIPOC HE professionals than working at a PWI. There has also been research to suggest that Black women, who work on HBCU campuses, have more support among colleagues (Becks-Moody, 2004). In a study of African American women administrators in higher education, Becks-Moody (2004) stated, "[t]he women at the HBCUs did not experience racism from their counterparts. However, they reported being treated differently by counterparts from other universities and the governing board" (p. 267). Black women DEI professionals in HE are likely unable to find reprieve if they seek new work on an HBCU campus. Perhaps they would simply be trading one set of challenges for another if they sought new work on HBCU campuses.

Another sentiment expressed in my debates and discussions with other Black HE professionals, and more specifically, with other Black women DEI administrators, was the sentiment expressed in the opening quote. In his dissertation research on racial socialization and anti-Blackness in post-secondary educators, Damon Lamont Dees, Jr. (2019) referred to Lerone Bennett, Jr.'s famous quote, "An educator in a system of oppression is either a revolutionary, or an oppressor" (p. 4). Dees, Jr.'s dissertation, like the sentiments expressed in this quote, discussed the dichotomous feelings of Black educators in higher education when faced with the racism that is prevalent in higher education.

One common, all too frequent student incident report, I often handled as a DEI professional, was the pejorative use of racial epithets, most frequently from student to another student. Greta Anderson (2020) described one such case in an article titled *The Emotional Toll of Racism*. Anderson (2020) summarized the incident and said,

Lofton, who is Black, asked her macroeconomics professor a question during class and heard someone sitting behind her say, 'I guess n****rs don't understand.' Lofton, 'completely shocked' to hear a racial slur used so casually, said nothing, and neither did her professor, who Lofton said paused and appeared to have heard the comment (p. 15).

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