


# Chapter 12

## Footsteps: Wisdom and Insight Into Navigational Capital for New Black Women Diversity Officers

**Toby S. Jenkins**

*University of South Carolina, USA*

**Coretta Jenerette**

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9851-4768>

*University of South Carolina, USA*

**Michelle L. Bryan**

*University of South Carolina, USA*

**Shirley S. Carter**

*University of South Carolina, USA*

### ABSTRACT

*This chapter is a collaboration between four Black women (Toby, Coretta, Michelle, and Shirley) who currently serve as diversity officers in higher education. Each author has worked in higher education for over 20 years. The authors reflect on and critically assess this lived experience for essential strategies, perspectives, and practices that might be valuable to professionals who are new to the work. The purpose of this chapter is to curate a collection of reflective insights and wisdom derived from the field—from the authors' professional experiences as Black women diversity officers at predominantly White institutions. The chapter serves as a strategic map to help new Black women diversity officers navigate the challenging landscape of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work in higher education. Each author shares a personal story along with key lessons learned. A list of suggested professional resources is also provided.*

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-6684-3564-9.ch012

## INTRODUCTION

In the popular allegorical poem, “Footprints in the Sand” (Stevenson, n.d.), a person dreams that they are walking on the beach, reflecting on critical moments in their life. As each life event flashes before their eyes, the person notices two sets of footprints in the sand. One set is their own, and the other set of footprints belongs to a higher, spiritual power. The poem suggests that a spiritual guide is walking with them throughout life, and in the most dire moments, when only one set of footprints is visible, the higher power is actually carrying them. The poem, essentially, speaks to the power and importance of not walking alone in life. For many, within the context of a career, walking with “spiritual support” might involve leaning on a higher power. For others, a “spiritual support” might come in the form of colleagues, mentors, supervisors, friends, peers, or through the work of esteemed (but not personally known) scholars—anyone whose insights give them perspective, wisdom, energy, and the will to keep walking. The purpose of this chapter is to lay those proverbial footprints in the sand for Black women diversity practitioners. Throughout this chapter, we, the authors, provide a collection of reflective insights and wisdom, derived from our experiences as Black women officers at predominantly White institutions (PWI).

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS

Our critical reflection is conceptually framed through Tara Yosso’s (2005) concept of community cultural wealth and Patricia Hill-Collins’ (1993, 2002) concept of Black Feminist Thought. First, we use community cultural wealth to document the learned strategies, insights, and wisdom gained from the lived experience of Black women as valuable, assets-professional forms of wealth. We then use Black Feminist Thought as the foundation for constructing knowledge and social consciousness from these lived experiences. Our life stories are not only valuable cultural assets but also critical forms of professional knowledge.

In her work, Yosso (2005) centered the idea of community cultural wealth in “the experiences of people of color in critical historical context [that] reveals accumulated assets and resources in the histories and lives of communities of color” (p. 77). She identifies six forms of “cultural capital” possessed by communities of color that have been essential for their survival (Yosso, 2005). Because of our explicit purpose to help new Black women diversity officers successfully navigate their careers in a culturally meaningful way, we situate this chapter within the realm of navigational capital. Navigational capital represents the skills and abilities to navigate social institutions, particularly organizations not created for communities of color (Yosso, 2005).

Banks-Wallace (2000) asserted that across multiple disciplines, research, scholarship, and practice, aimed at serving Black women, must include more than simply sharing information and facts. Instead, she suggested that “providing a space for renewal or ‘breathing fire and life into ourselves’ is crucial to improving the health of African American women” (p. 34). For our work, we consider the word “health” to pertain to the totality of a woman’s life, including physical health, mental health, the health of a woman’s career, or the healthiness of her work environment. Black Feminism scholar, Patricia Hill-Collins (1989) explained:

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