Dear Higher Education
LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

An Alternative Curriculum

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Dear Higher Education,

I'm angry. Let me be specific. I am angry with you. You sometimes feel like a bad dream, a nightmare. And sometimes, you feel like my best friend. I have a love-hate relationship with you. I have all these ideas and ideals about what and who you should be, many of which are antithetical in much of the current reality. But I need you. This is a relationship I can't get away from. I can't disown you. I can't walk away. I, however, must tell you how I feel and why.

The value of higher education was almost genetically instilled in me. My father was born in Freetown, Sierra Leone, and after his initial education in Freetown and in Durham, England, came to the United States in 1961. Starting at Hampton University, a small historically Black college, he graduated with his bachelor's degree in physics in 1963. He then obtained his master's degree (1965) and PhD in physics from Carnegie Mellon University in 1968. Three years after beginning a tenure-track faculty journey at Illinois State University, he came face-to-face with the concrete wall of America's racism. His contract was not renewed; he never taught again; he never researched again; and he never published again, though he had twelve international publications. The same institution of higher education that transformed Dr. Theodore Pratt's life from a child abandoned by his father, raised in poverty, to having a chance to cultivate his brilliance, was the same institution that sabotage his life's goals and ambitions at the age of 37.

My mother, Dr. Mildred Pratt, was one of eight children, raised largely by a single mother with only a 6th grade education in rural Texas during the Great Depression. Against the odds of racism, sexism, legalized segregation, and poverty, she managed to get her bachelor's degree at a small historically Black college, Jarvis Christian College in the 1950s, and two master's degrees: one in religion at Butler University and one in Social Work at the University of Indiana. In 1969, she got her doctorate in social work at the University of Pittsburgh. She began her tenure-track journey at Illinois State University, and again, against the same odds as my father, she became tenured and promoted to full professor in the 1970s when less than one percent of full professors were Black women. Education was the institution that helped my mother rise out of generations of enslavement and sharecropping to transform not only her life, but also future generations.

My parents' life outcomes and opportunities were significantly changed because of education. Likewise, my outcomes and opportunities were significantly changed because of education. The University of Iowa was my first stop, with a bachelor's degree, majoring in English, minoring in philosophy and African American Studies in the late 1980s. Two years later, I got a master's degree in Literary Studies. Transitioning to the field of social justice, I began studying law and sociology, achieving a master's degree and a law degree from Vanderbilt by the mid-1990s. In 1997, I graduated with a doctorate in sociology from Vanderbilt. During my time at Vanderbilt, I also started teaching at Fisk University and at the men's and women's minimum- and maximum-security prison through American Baptist College. The prison experience afforded me the opportunity to work with brilliant minds behind bars. It was an experience that has remained with me my entire life.

After a federal clerkship and a short stint a private law firm, I returned to my alma mater as the University Compliance Officer, Assistant Secretary of the University, and University Attorney. Nine years later, I moved to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign to lead the Office for Equal Opportunity and Access, becoming the Associate Chancellor for Strategic Affairs and Associate Provost for Diversity. I also became a tenured professor. Eight years ago, I joined Virginia Tech as a tenured full professor and Vice President of Strategic Affairs and Diversity.

I see myself as a scholar-activist and academic-advocate. I am a scholar of education and a practitioner of educational equity. My dissertation was on single-sex schools and explored issues of race, class, gender, and nationalism. It was an integration of sociology and law, using critical race theory, critical race feminism, and Black feminist thought to explore contentious issues impacting Black communities, and Black women and girls in particular. Subsequent scholarship included a co-edited volume on women of color and their higher education leadership journeys into presidencies. The humiliating experience of the former President of Harvard, Claudine Gay, epitomizes in some way, the challenges of racism and sexism for women of color in higher education. I also co-edited a volume on race, class, and culture in Cuba based on the experiences of Chief Diversity Officers during a ten-day visit in 2016.

I currently work as a Chief Diversity Officer (CDO) and have worked in this role for almost 20 years. I have seen the evolution of this role and its critical positionality in managing issues of social justice and equity on college campuses. Many CDOs are from historically marginalized, minimized, and minoritized identities. They have faced and experienced racism, sexism, and homophobia. They know what it means to be ignored, marginalized, and overlooked for promotions. They know what it means to be paid less than others. They know what it means to experience microaggressions and macroaggressions. They know what is like to be the only – the only person of color, the only individual with a disability, the only queer person in a room, and sometimes representing more than one of these identities. They know what it feels like to not be included or wanted in a room. They know what it feels like to be excluded and to not belong.

Ironically, it is precisely because of these experiences that they are asked to lead organizational change. Yet, it is an almost impossible job to expect the CDO to work towards eliminating institutional systemic discrimination and oppression within the concrete structures of higher education. The CDO position is a nearly impossible job, particularly in terms of the skillset required to be successful in a complex climate. A 2019 Russell Reynolds report on CDOs in higher education listed a set of skills needed for a CDO: "In addition to foundational competencies such as setting strategy, executing for results, leading teams and building relationships, best-in class CDOs are defined by a track record and expertise in the following areas: strategic leadership and change management; persuasion and influence; data savvy-storytelling; external engagement; personal motivation and resilience; domain expertise and understanding of higher ed culture."

When I read this list, I thought to myself, “this list is incomplete.” This is what is missing: has learned how to not "go off" in meetings, while yet and still suffering indignities of marginalization, invisibility, and hyper-invisibility; is able to shoulder unrealistic expectations from White leadership and also from minority communities; is able to facilitate difficult conversations; is able to juggle unceasing and unrelenting requests for individual meetings; must be able to beg the data team repeatedly for disaggregated data to engage in truth-telling about the actual numbers and percentages in the data; must be able to process requests to “just help me process my pain and guilt with you” from majority community members; must be available to support students on the verge of dropping out from carrying the weight of the institution on their backs with the absence of sufficient financial resources; must help manage the exhaustion of faculty of color trying to support students and themselves; must support women who are serving on every single diversity and search committee, while male colleagues often have access to the budget, personnel committees, and other ad-hoc committees with “decision-making authority” as my mom referenced in her letter to the president fighting for her promotion to tenure; must also conduct climate surveys that never result in action plans; and must be able to conduct Title IX and equal employment

opportunity investigations that rarely result in disciplinary actions. These expectations must be met or exceeded, often under circumstances that involve under-resourced offices; under-staffed offices; and inconsistently expressed commitments to the work and values of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Yet, if there is going to be systemic and institutional change from an equity lens, the CDO role and their offices are critical to that transformation. That is perhaps why these offices are called offices of transformation in South Africa.

South Africa was one of five countries I visited during the 2023-2024 academic year as part of an American Council on Education (ACE) fellowship. The fellowship is an opportunity to step away from the routine of your home institution, and step into the routines of a host institution. It is a time to be both an insider and outsider, benefitting from the outsider status that sometimes provides a unique diverse perspective, while at the same time being situated within that new culture, and learning its climate, protocols, politics, policies, and ways of being.

The fellowship is a professional development opportunity to think about leadership, education, and one's own personal and professional journey. As an ACE fellow, I wanted to use my fellowship, in part, to step out of the American education bubble, and to see education and the experiences of women and girls from a different lens. ACE encourages campus visits—visits to other campuses where you can continue to explore the culture and structure of higher education and leadership. I wanted to step out of the pristine, idyllic, small-town community in rural southwest Virginia in the mountains of Blacksburg, Virginia, where Virginia Tech's main campus is located and explore the education environment from a global lens.

During the fellowship year, I visited universities in Ethiopia, Benin, Senegal, India, and South Africa. Each country taught me many lessons and I think, Higher Education, you should know some of the lessons I learned. In Senegal, I participated in a faculty study abroad program with Rose Pan African Education. Rose Pan African Education offers staff tailored creative, academic, and service-learning opportunities to university students, artists, scholars, and academics. These specialized programs supplement traditional, dominant, and hegemonic Eurocentric pedagogies by providing deeper engagement with African histories, cultures, and perspectives. The visionary Dr. Nicole Richards founded Rose Pan to focus on decolonizing education, after she noted that only 6.2% of study abroad programs are in Africa and out of that number, only 3.9% are in Sub Saharan and just 2.3% are in the Middle East and North Africa.

The ten-day experience in Senegal included profound interviews with two female students at Cheik Diop University who were studying English and American Studies. I asked both students to share their advice for women and girls. One student shared:

> Women should not underestimate themselves. I think a woman who is able to share, communicate, and advise children, mainly girls, is a social danger. And I think that we women should not silence ourselves. We should voice our mind and reveal our thoughts. I think we should not underestimate ourselves; we should be proud of ourselves; we should not be caring for a man; we should believe our dreams, and things will come true.

The other student shared similar advice: "As a female student, it is too difficult, because men become rude, and you have to be a strong woman to face them. You have to be proud of yourself and fight." Her advice for women and girls: "focus on yourself; stay strong and know that in this life, nothing is easy, but you can make it." This student is amazing: she owns her own business; she just got her driver's license; and she speaks seven languages.

She shared one of her frustrations with her experience in American Studies. She said most of the curriculum is about European Americans in America, and includes very little about Native Americans, Black Americans, and Asians. In addition, most of the required reading is the "traditional" hegemonic cannon, like *The Old Man and the Sea*. She has learned about Black feminism because of her work with the director of the women's center, and not through her curricular experiences.

The context for the interview reflected a tense national political climate. It occurred during the December holiday break. Political protests in the spring of 2023 led to the destruction of some properties on campus, resulting in classes being suspended, and the university being shut down. Although the university remained closed in the fall, students were required to return in December to take their spring exams. The president of the country appointed a new president of the university and the political appointment was raising concerns about the intersection of politics and education. I immediately thought about the similarities to the United States, and the appointment and influence of governors and legislators on university presidential appointments.

The faculty study-abroad program in Senegal was an opportunity to interrogate the question "What does it mean to decolonize education?" I started to find the answer to that question on the Island of Shells during a tour of the fishing and farming village. The village was majority Christian, in contrast to the largely Muslim country. Throughout the village, there were several statutes with Christian iconography. In an all-black Senegalese African community, despite understanding the colonial history, I had hoped, perhaps, that the representation of Jesus would be different. When I asked the guide about the images, he told me that the representation doesn't matter, only the message. I, of course, told him that the image matters, too. He repeated his assertation that the message matters. I just bit my tongue, because image does matter. Representation matters. The message and curriculum matters, too.

Universities in South Africa are grappling with the same reality related to the message and to images – curriculum and representation. When I visited the University of Pretoria, the University of Johannesburg, and the University of Cape Town in South Africa, I learned about the very real challenge of access and transformation. There are only 26 public universities in South Africa. The demand for access and representation is exponential. The University of Johannesburg gets 600,000 applications for 10,000 seats. The University of Cape Town receives 100,000 applications for 4500 seats.

Not only are these universities thinking about access, they are also struggling with the message. The University of Cape Town (UCT) does an inclusivity survey every three years and it is clear that Black students do not fit in, and that the university feels much like an "old boys' club." UCT is exploring the importance of systemic change and its historical legacy, adopting an anti-racism policy to address institutional racism in 2021. It is asking questions about what decolonizing the curriculum looks like. I remember one conversation during our visit about decolonizing math and learning that faculty members are thinking about what examples are used in story problems. They are asking themselves about what examples are used from around the world in their curriculums. They are asking the question, "What do universities owe democracy?" Their Office of Transformation is thinking about ideological issues, as well as the role of the university in redistribution of economic wealth and power.

Similarly, the University of Johannesburg's Office of Transformation efforts are also focused on Black economic empowerment, structural inequalities, and access for more representation of the country. They, too, are thinking about what it means to decolonize education, understanding that some of the examples, even as seemingly basic and simple as a garage are not concepts that some of the Black students can even identify with. In addition, they are trying to address financial literacy, sustainable development, as well as issues related to AI, rankings, infrastructure, energy management, and electricity challenges that only allow for six to eight hours a day of access. The "global south" not only struggles with decolonizing education, it also struggles with very real infrastructure challenges.

India was a fascinating experience, as I had the opportunity to visit and speak at three all-women's colleges that are part of the University of New Delhi. The commitment to women's empowerment and feminism on the campuses, even in the midst of a political climate that is very patriarchal, was inspiring. The role and implications of caste continue to have a profound impact, as India, too, has a concept of affirmative action embedded in its constitution to address the historical experiences of "backward classes."

This year, I have been wrestling with question of "who gets to decide what is taught by whom to whom?" It is the question of the cannon, the question of hegemony, the question of power, the question of what is important, and the question of who gets to ask what questions about society, structures, and systems: Who and how should a president of a university be selected? What is the role that politics can and should play in education? What should be the role of governing boards? How should they be selected? Who and how should curriculum be determined?

I continue to wrestle with the purpose of higher education. I have realized that education is ultimately about the power to control thoughts, ideas, attitudes, and behaviors of a society. Because knowledge can open our minds, expose us to different ideas and thoughts and people, and ultimately transform societies, it has often been used as a tool to maintain ignorance and enable those with power to maintain it. Book bans, prohibitions on critical race theory, prohibitions about teaching "divisive concepts," by state legislators and local school boards are attempts to impact education and access to knowledge, and to ultimately maintain the status quo for those who currently hold political and economic power. As a descendant of a great-grandmother who was enslaved, I am very mindful of the legalized prohibitions that prohibited those who were enslaved from reading and writing. Maintaining ignorant masses allows injustice and inequity to continue.

In 2020, during COVID and its accompanying the quarantine, as well as the social justice movement inspired by the murder of George Floyd, I began thinking more deeply about education and its purpose. Since then, I have been exploring a concept I am calling "The Alternative Curriculum: A Revised Syllabus." Though COVID and the murder of George Floyd seemed to "come out of the blue," abruptly, startlingly, and suddenly, I believe that these energies were simmering just below the surface. It was a slow boil, as water does before it pops off the lid of a teapot. Something was happening in the universe. An odd energy associated with seemingly disconnected events: the massive accumulation of wealth for some; the stock market rising and its inevitable fall and continued fluctuation; the decimation of the environment, through an ongoing carelessness about the earth; rising migrations of people as refugees; accelerating hunger and poverty; tribal conflict across the globe; and a general disregard for the fragile universe.

Some wise sages tried to put us in check. Greta Thunberg was sounding an alarm. We thought it was just a little girl worried about the climate. She was, but it represented so much more. She felt it. The world was out of order. Native Americans were sounding the alarm. Their protests were getting louder. They understand the land and the environment. They cherish it and love it. Logging and pipelines were threatening not just their livelihood and lives, but the world's life. The forest fires happened in Australia and Canada. Drought happened in the west. Hurricanes happened in the Caribbean. Earthquakes happened in unexpected lands. Even the mountains were groaning. The vortex energy around Bell Rock, Sedona was sounding off like the pealing of bells.

Shifts were happening. We did not wake up. And the artists spoke, for they always speak, attuned to the shifts from the pulse of their souls -- the dancers, the painters, the poets, and the musicians. They speak in a language that most of us cannot hear, for we do not create the time and space needed to reflect on the message sent in a language we do not value. We continue to defund and discontinue art and music programs in schools, and so we stopped training our ears and spirits to listen. The cacophony of the world was so loud that we could not--did not--want to hear the silent whisper of the wind of change.

Yet, one day, this season will be part of a "once upon a time." Generations into the future will hear a "creation story" – a story about the time we all had to go inside to hear. Each culture, in their own traditions, will tell a similar tale of the day the world had to stop, when people had to go indoors, when planes ceased to fly, trains ceased to run on tracks, and buses and cars no longer polluted the highways and byways. They will tell the story of how children could not go to school, and of how some kind teachers and principals would drive into the neighborhoods of children to let them know they were not forgotten. They will tell the story of how parents who could not teach their own children and who often happily sent their often rude and misbehaving children to teachers suddenly gained new appreciation and compassion for the chaos their children were causing in school when they could not control them in their own homes or teach them. They will tell the story of how the poorest of the poor still had to go to work in the face of harm and how others could stay home and out of harm's way. It will be a story about those who were home with no money, no longer able to cook, to clean, or to barber and beauty others.

In this story, generations from now will talk about how schools sent students home to learn through a computer and to zoom, and that generation far into the future will wonder what zoom was, though zoom will be all this generation knows. And, that generation in the future will wonder why students were still expected to learn chemistry, physics, biology, humanity, arts, engineering, science, architecture, on their own, without labs, without brushes, without friends, and without conversations. They will wonder why we still spoke about quality and credits, when the teachers themselves did not know how to teach online. They will wonder, in the future, why from the little kids in kindergarten to the big kids in college, they weren't taught an alternative curriculum during their hiatus from the buildings. They will wonder – those of the future who are sharing the creation story –why we of the now didn't teach an alternative curriculum in this season.

It could be an alternative curriculum about life and what really matters. For many of us have had to face our lives in new and different ways. We have had to look at children we raised well or we didn't who were quarantining with us. We have had to look at mates that we once loved and laughed with and are no longer laughing or loving with. We had to look through windows at loved ones in nursing homes and assisted living facilities wondering how or when we could touch their hands and hug them. We have had to accept that loved ones were dying without funerals, surreptitiously buried or cremated without fanfare or ceremony, lives becoming dust without acknowledgment. We have had to birth our children alone, without our mothers or partners at our side, without a welcoming and embracing team of family members at the bedside. We have gotten married without an audience of a few or hundreds, celebrating our joy and the promise for a happily ever after. We have had to comfort children who missed proms, senior year trips, and graduations. We had to learn how to wear masks, even if we preferred not. We had to learn how to live and die differently, or did we?

When the world opened up and we pretended that COVID was over, some in the United States decided that social justice was not needed, that DEI offices needed to be outlawed, that issues of equity, fairness, and justice were no longer necessary or important. Some, in America, decided that DEI meant only that Black Lives Matter, and that because institutions were having to wrestle with historical and systemic legacies of injustice, the powerful, and often White men, decided to exert their power and stifle noble progress, just as they did with Radical Reconstruction after the Civil war. And then, the Middle East exploded in 2023, and we were a world without words, without strategies, without the saavy and wisdom to address disputes and conflicts, not only in the Middle East, but around the world.

Because we cannot be a world without words and strategies and the saavy and the wisdom to manage disputes, now more than ever, we are in need of an alternative curriculum. It could be, perhaps, a curriculum about energy and how it manifests differently in the world. Not a physics class, per se, but a spirit class: a class about the spiritual energy in the world and its power; a class about the energy of emotions and how they work; a class

about the energy of love, sacrifice, and kindness contrasted against the energy of greed, hate, selfishness, and tribal loyalties. We could talk about the energy of the forest and the air and of fire and flowers. We could talk about life-giving energy of birth and renewal. We could talk about how to just breath. We could talk about seasons and times of change; of leaves changing in the fall, dying in the winter, and then being born again in the spring and dancing in the summer. We could teach about how caterpillars have to become silent to shift and transform to butterflies.

We could talk about how to get along with people who are very different than us, even in our own family. We could learn to talk about our emotions and feelings. We could perhaps teach our children that political parties, donkeys and elephants—don't really matter, because there are core values that we should always vote for and they never change: love, kindness, generosity of spirit, gentleness, loyalty, community, food for all, and housing for all. We could teach about how to hear in the whisper of the wind the tears of pain and sorrow and the subtlety of oppression. We could teach about the power of the touch of love, the embrace of a hug and the gentleness of a smile. Perhaps we could teach about how to listen, and breath in and out the humility and humbleness of humanity.

This alternative curriculum should be informed by the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals— "the blueprint for a more resilient and prosperous world and the roadmap out of current global crises"; a roadmap to "end poverty, protect the planet and leave no one behind." This alternative curriculum should address the subjugation and disempowerment of women and the feminine/female energy, for this energy is the energy of creation and birth; it is the energy of the earth and the ocean; and it is the energy of life.

To teach this new alternative curriculum, we would have to pause, again: pause from these lives of rushing, running, texting, emailing, technologing, Facebooking, Linking, Instagramming, and Snapping. Pause from these lives of exhaustion, trying to survive, trying to find the next meal for some, the next dollar, the next, the next, the next.

Dear *Higher Education,* I hope you can become a place that helps us pause; helps us to find time for curiosity; helps us to find time to nourish spirit, in addition to mind and body; helps us find time to develop, learn, and teach an alternative curriculum. After all, the Latin word *educare* means "to lead out." I hope that you can lead us to an alternative curriculum that plants the seeds for this world to be a place for the plant, animal, and human community to survive and thrive. After all, we are all interconnected and interdependent, requiring us to try to understand and practice the values and virtues of diversity, inclusion, equity, and belonging.

My dear *Higher Education*, I hope you are listening.

With love and hope,
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About the Author

Menah Pratt is a Nationally recognized as a leader, scholar, and author of four books on issues of race, class, gender, diversity, education, women's leadership, and critical race feminism, Dr. Menah Pratt is the Vice President for Strategic Affairs and Diversity and Professor of Education at Virginia Tech. She has received several national awards, including Women We Admire in Virginia, 2023; the 2023 Individual Winds of Change award by the Forum on Workplace Inclusion; the 2021 Inclusive Excellence Individual Leadership Award by the National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education; and the 2018 American Education Studies Association Critics' Choice Award for outstanding scholarship. She joined Virginia Tech in 2016 and she has almost 25 years of leadership experience in higher education, including serving as chief strategy officer, chief diversity officer, university compliance officer, assistant secretary of the university, university board member, and attorney. She is the founder of the Faculty Women of Color in the Academy National Conference (11th year) and the Black College Institute (6th year) at Virginia Tech. She has previously worked at the University of Illinois (Urbana-Champaign), Vanderbilt University, and Fisk University.