

Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

Lessons From a Lifetime in Higher Education

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Dear Higher Ed,

Including my 4.5 years as a doctoral student, this is my 34th year as a member of the academy. Both of my parents are college graduates and emphasized the importance of obtaining a quality education. My father was a medical doctor, and my mother a registered nurse. My parents stressed to my seven brothers and me that “education is the one thing no one can take away from you.” As I have aged, had my own family, and served as a professor and administrator, the message of this adage and its meaning remain continually reinforced.

Even though my brothers and I attended private school, my parents chose to live in a Black community that had no nearby private schools. My parents consciously chose to live in a Black community even though they could afford to live elsewhere because we were middle class. Because of where I was raised, many of my friends were poor. My parents’ insistence that my brothers and I earned a quality education gave us an advantage in the world. But my brothers and I also realize and understand that the world is not fair (and perhaps never will be), which is why I am willing to share some personal experiences in the hope that collectively we can improve the world for everyone.

In this letter, I want to discuss my experiences and insights as a both a Black student studying accounting at several predominantly white institutions (PWIs) and as a Black accounting faculty member serving at two PWIs for 28 years. The decision to organize my reflections and analysis were prompted by a special “Diversity, Equity and Social Justice in Accounting Education” issue of *Issues in Accounting Education* calling for an examination of the experiences of minoritized faculty within higher education institutions. My article “Life Experiences of a Black Accounting Student and Faculty Member,” was included in the February 2023 issue of the journal.

Reflecting and documenting my lived experiences in higher education has led to the following observations about the categories of career obstacles I’ve encountered—and other Black faculty have likely encountered as well. These obstacles are lack of access to networks; hostility or indifference to diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts; and unfair standards, treatment, or expectations. Let me share some of my experiences, beginning with my undergraduate years, and the implications of these career obstacles—not only on me, but on talented Black students and scholars who aspire to work in higher education as professors and administrators.

When I was an undergraduate at Georgia Tech, I was enrolled in a speech class that required each student to give a series of speeches and be anonymously graded by our peers. I was the only Black student in the class, and a majority student gave me the lowest score on all my speeches for the quarter. The low scores caused me to receive a B rather than an A grade. Because I did not believe all my speeches warranted the score given, I expressed my concern to the professor about biased grading from this student. The professor agreed that it likely was biased grading (the handwriting was identical on each score sheet), yet he said he was not going to change my grade because covert and overt bias or discrimination was a reality of the world I would be entering upon graduation. His decision reaffirmed the message that life is not fair or equal for many Blacks, and we cannot let biased or discriminatory incidents or behaviors hold us back.

In my MBA cohort at UF, I once again was the only Black student. I realized after the first statistics examination that I was an “outsider” when I heard some students in the class discussing how the sample examination they obtained closely mirrored the actual exam. I was shocked that the professor did not distribute a sample examination to everyone. Fortunately, I eventually befriended two majority MBA students who shared “insider” materials with me. But this experience paled in comparison to what occurred during the second year of my MBA program when a Fortune 500 manufacturing company scheduled MBA interviews on campus. My interview was immediately after a Black female student from the new cohort, and I saw her crying as she exited her interview early. I asked her why she was crying, and she explained that the recruiter had asked her very inappropriate questions: What was a Black female doing at UF? Why was she in the MBA program? Why was she not at home having babies? And so forth. The pattern and intent of the questions were apparent.

I consoled my classmate and encouraged her to report this incident immediately to the MBA Director, which she did. Later that day, the five Black MBA students met with the MBA Director (a faculty member) who made excuses for the company and said perhaps it was a stress interview and indicated he/she planned to take no action. We were furious that the MBA Program Director decided not to do anything that day and planned to say nothing to the company recruiters after they finished interviewing on campus. When I was invited to a follow-up interview a few days later, I declined. I asked the representative if they were aware of what occurred on campus during the interviews. They weren't. The MBA Program Director had taken no action, and so I explained what occurred. The representative was horrified and immediately contacted UF to discuss the incident. Others heard about what happened, including some majority students, generating substantial tension among students in the MBA program about this incident, and the non-responsiveness of the MBA Director.

Of the five Black MBA students, I was the only one invited for a follow-up interview. After the incident exploded within the MBA Program and among the students, the company then invited the remaining four Black students for a follow-up interview. I advised them to reject the interview offers because I believed the company was now using them to attempt to protect its reputation as a good employer in the MBA Program. Three of the Black students nonetheless accepted the follow-up interview; as expected, none received an internship offer.

I worked in industry for two years before returning to the academy to complete my Ph.D. at FSU. As a graduate teaching assistant, a majority undergraduate publicly stated in class that the students should vote concerning a decision I made with respect to the class. I was over 30 years old when this incident occurred, and despite my youthful appearance, it was unclear to me if this was an age-related or race-related incident. I advised the class that anyone with questions or concerns was welcome to share them with the department chair or dean. The student did not follow this advice and later that week apologized for her classroom behavior and inappropriate request. Based on my discussions with other Black faculty, these challenges to authority are common microaggressions intended to undermine our authority as faculty in the classroom.

Throughout my career, I experienced the “Diversity Tax” --those additional responsibilities placed on nonwhite faculty because of our ethno-racial backgrounds (Padilla 24-7, Joseph and Hirshfield 121-41). At my first institution as a professor, I served on approximately 20 search committees at both the college and university level, and at least 60 faculty panels that presented to prospective incoming students and attended and spoke at many other recruiting events targeted to Black and/or majority students. The time committed to these service activities was sometimes acknowledged but usually received little credit during annual merit reviews. I was also sought out by Black and other diverse students for professional and personal counsel. I was committed to assisting these students as much as possible because the social and cultural environment at PWIs is often lacking in support for minoritized students. Yet I was told by a senior accounting faculty member that I needed to spend more time assisting majority students in the college, even though there were at least 15 majority faculty who could do so. This same feedback appeared in my annual evaluation, most likely attributed to this faculty member.

I am very passionate about and committed to DEI, and I volunteered extensively to attempt to diversify my institution's student population. Unfortunately, despite significant efforts from many Black faculty, the percentage of Black undergraduate students at the school remained around 7-8% for the entire 21 years I was there, despite the state being over 30 percent Black. I ultimately concluded that the institution was not genuinely committed to diversifying its student population beyond offering token DEI programs, events, and initiatives.

I also helped to recruit another Black faculty to join the College of Business in 1995 in another department. Unfortunately, this department chose not to recruit the candidate, and so the College of Business not only lost out on hiring another Black faculty, but ultimately lost one of the three Black faculty it had since the candidate and his partner, also an academic, later married and accepted faculty positions at another elite business school. I am still surprised when I recall the department deciding not to recruit the potential Black faculty who was graduating from an elite business school, all but ensuring we would lose the existing Black faculty once they married.

In another situation, I was contacted by a faculty colleague outside the business school who expressed an interest in pursuing a joint hire of a Black faculty with a business PhD from an elite business school who had at least two elite publications in her first two years after completion of her PhD. I approached the College of Business department chair to inform him about this potential hiring opportunity and was told by the chair that I could not tell the department whom to hire, which I was not attempting to do. After the opportunity to make this hire passed, and the Black faculty accepted a position in a large city over an hour away, I had a discussion with a faculty member in the relevant department who was shocked that the department passed on the opportunity, and even more shocked that the department chair (to their knowledge) never discussed the hiring opportunity with the departmental faculty. The outcome may have been different had the department chair discussed the hiring opportunity with the faculty in the department rather than deciding unilaterally not to recruit this person. I also recall two situations where College of Business departments (Accounting and Finance) actively recruited Black faculty but were unsuccessful in making a hire, and so some departments in the College of Business were willing to recruit Black faculty and make job offers to Black candidates.

In 2004, Dean George Benson favorably regarded my DEI work and appointed me as the College's first Director of Diversity Relations and Recruitment. The appointment came with a course release. At the time, I was teaching four classes during the academic year (two each fall and spring), whereas new assistant professors had a three-class teaching load. My department chair asked me if I really wanted the course release even though I was already teaching more classes than others in the department. Accepting the course release merely put me on equal footing with newly hired assistant professors. When I was appointed as the Associate Dean for Academic Programs overseeing the undergraduate and master's programs in 2008, my course load was finally reduced to two classes. I wonder if the department chair would ask a majority faculty if they really wanted a course release to which they were entitled.

In my last year as the Associate Dean for Academic Programs, I realized my annual salary was \$40,000-\$50,000 below the annual salary of the Associate Deans at two other R1 schools in the state. I brought this salary discrepancy to the attention of the Dean and was ultimately removed from the Associate Dean position. Interestingly, the person who replaced me, a majority faculty member, received the \$40,000-\$50,000 salary adjustment I had requested. He was a full professor, and I was an associate professor, but I do not believe faculty rank is relevant with respect to compensation for an administrative position (i.e., universities hire based on a faculty member's ability to successfully do the work required).

I was hired as Dean of the College of Business at a different institution in 2015 to turn around enrollment since graduate and undergraduate enrollment declined 35% and 18%, respectively, from 2008-2014. Since a graduate credit hour generates four times the revenue of an undergraduate credit hour, I focused on growing graduate enrollment and stabilizing the decline in undergraduate enrollment. With strategic planning and execution, graduate enrollment increased 70% during my 5-year tenure as Dean, and undergraduate enrollment declined 2%.

Based on these results, I was one of two deans asked to present at the 2020 AACSB Dean's Conference in February to discuss how the College of Business grew its enrollments when many business schools had experienced graduate enrollment decreases of 10-20% during a similar timeframe.

During my five year tenure as Dean, I worked with the College of Business faculty and staff to start the following new initiatives and programs: 1) raised funds and opened a Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation in February 2019, 2) approved and started a Master of Science in Management Program in Fall 2016, 3) approved and started a Masters in Logistics and Supply Chain Management Program in Fall 2019, 4) approved a Masters in Data Analytics Program that started in August 2021, 5) approved a BBA Program in Business Intelligence that started in August 2021, 6) approved separating the Global MBA Program from the MBA Program, and 7) approved converting the Economics degree into an Applied Economics degree that qualifies as a STEM degree. The institution hired a new President in June 2018 and a new Provost in July 2019, both White. Whereas the previous President (also White) had two Hispanics and three Blacks on the President's Leadership Team, the new President's first year replaced these people with majority men. The Hispanic leaders left the institution, and one of the Black leaders was demoted to a director-level position.

In April 2019, members of the institution's Commission on Diversity & Inclusion (of which I was chair) noted the decreasing diversity on the new President's Leadership Team and asked me as chair to present the data to the President and ask him about a timeline for hiring a Chief Diversity Officer (CDO). Since the new President met with Deans less frequently than the former President, I asked the Interim Provost and CFO to present the CDO issue to the new President since they regularly met with the new President. After waiting two weeks and receiving no response from the Interim Provost and CFO, I met with the Interim Provost, and she instructed me to present the CDO issue to the new President when he met with the Deans the following week. I compiled a list of questions for the new President from all the Deans, and I emailed this list of questions to the new President and his assistant two days before the meeting. The CDO issue was question one on the list.

After verbally attacking me in the Deans' meeting for raising the issue of School B hiring a CDO, the new President said that the institution did not need a CDO and he had no plans to hire one, nor did he have any idea when a CDO would be warranted. The Interim Provost who instructed me to present the CDO issue to the new President at the Deans' meeting was sitting between the new President and me, and even though I acted on her advice, she did not speak up during or after the verbal attack. She emailed me later and said the verbal attack was "very uncomfortable," and two other deans and a senior administrator who witnessed the verbal attack later described it as "ugly." I filed a complaint with School B's Equal Opportunity and Inclusion Office (EOI) and expected the Director to hire an external investigator since my complaint involved the new President and posed a conflict of interest for her, yet she did not recuse herself, and her investigation cleared the new President. The irony here is the Interim Provost was going to remove me as Dean over an allegation I yelled at a department chair, yet EOI cleared the new President for verbally attacking me in the Deans' meeting when the verbal attack was described by the Interim Provost as "very uncomfortable" and by two other deans and a senior administrator as "ugly."

One-year after the new President verbally attacked me in the Deans' meeting, George Floyd was murdered. The new President quickly appointed a VP for Diversity & Inclusion. In August 2020, the institution's Provost because of medical issues unexpectedly resigned after serving one year, and the new President in September 2020 appointed as Interim Provost the Black faculty administrator he had previously demoted and removed from the President's Leadership Team. The new President eventually appointed her as Provost in April 2021. This sequence of events taught me that the "right" decision may not happen when we want it to happen or when it should happen. However, as Martin Luther King, Jr. reminded us, "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." Blacks and allies must be vigilant in seeking representation in administration at colleges and universities.

During my five-year tenure as Dean, I had three majority department chairs who did not work in the office every day, and I could not get the administration to support me with respect to holding them accountable by requiring them to be in the office. They received a four-course release as department chairs presumably to be on campus daily to provide the student access and support the institution claims it provides. These department chairs eventually turned against me and in October 2018 alleged to the majority Interim Provost that I yelled at one of them during an Executive Committee meeting. Without ascertaining whether the allegation was true, and if true, whether there was any justification for the alleged yelling, the majority Interim Provost said she was going to remove me as Dean.

Neither the three majority department chairs, nor majority Interim Provost, expected the Dean's Office to have a full audio recording of the 90-minute meeting. At my insistence, the institution hired an external investigator who listened to the complete audio recording and determined that I did not yell at the majority department chair during the meeting. The Interim Provost listened to the complete audio recording and agreed with the external investigator. Nevertheless, the Interim Provost said *I must have done something during the meeting that led the three majority department chairs to perceive I had yelled at one of them, and she gave me a written reprimand even though I was cleared of the alleged yelling.* Moreover, the audio recording of the meeting revealed no evidence of anything I had "done" to cause anyone to perceive I had yelled.

And so even though the institution has a policy regarding false allegations, the Interim Provost refused to issue any reprimands to the three department chairs who made the false allegations against me because she said the false allegations were based on the majority department chairs' perceptions. To be clear, I received a written reprimand from the majority Interim Provost based on perceived false allegations from three majority department chairs, and the majority Interim Provost subsequently used the fact that the false allegations were based on perceptions to justify not reprimanding the three majority department chairs who made the false allegations against me. The irony of this double standard astounds me to this day.

As noted earlier, the new President and new Provost constructively discharged me as Dean, and they did so by changing the terms of my contract if I was reappointed for another term as Dean from my retaining 75% of my Dean salary when I returned to the faculty to my retaining only 50% of my Dean salary when I returned to the faculty. This 25% reduction was almost six figures, and so I returned to the faculty at the end of June 2020 when my five-year Dean contract ended and retained 75% of my Dean salary. Even though the Provost wrote in an email that the 50% return to faculty rate would apply to the next business school Dean, the new President and Provost hired a majority male to replace me as Dean, and his contract included an 81% return to faculty rate at the end of his term. Thus, the change in my contract from 75% to 50% was made only to constructively discharge me as the business school Dean so they could hire a majority male (consistent with most of the other executive level changes since the new President and Provost joined the institution in June 2018 and July 2019, respectively).

To defend its decision to remove me, the institution claimed there was a "non-collegial" environment in the College of Business. Evidence did not support this claim. Of the 89% of eligible faculty participated in the vote, 64% voted to reappoint me as Dean for another 5-year term. When the Interim Provost reported the results of the faculty vote to me in March 2019, she said it was a "great" result since these votes generally are 50/50 votes. Her Executive Assistant emailed me congratulations on the positive vote. A former College of Business Dean also congratulated me on the 64% faculty retention vote and agreed with the Interim Provost that it was a great result. Two months later the Interim Provost stated the institution was not renewing my Dean contract based on the claim that the environment in the College of Business was allegedly "non-collegial." Four months later, the new Provost offered me the one-year contract extension with a 25% cut in my return-to-faculty rate from 75% to 50%.

I was entitled to a one-semester sabbatical at the end of my five-year term as Dean. However, the one-semester sabbatical offered to me differed from the three-semester sabbatical received by another former majority Dean

whose term was four-years. The institution extended different length sabbaticals to the two (2) academic deans replaced by provosts during the tenure of the new President hired in June 2018.¹⁰ Considering sabbaticals received by all senior administrators since I joined the institution in 2015, the former majority Provost received a three-semester sabbatical when he stepped down as Provost after one year in 2020, the former majority Associate Provost received a three-semester sabbatical when he was replaced after three years in 2021, and another majority academic Dean received a three-semester sabbatical when she stepped down as Dean in 2016. When I reported this discrepancy to the provost, the initial response was that the sabbatical differential was justified and warranted. Fortunately, they reversed their decision, and in September 2021 my one-semester sabbatical was extended to three-semesters. However, I had to sign a settlement agreement forgoing my right to sue the institution regarding the sabbatical differentials to be treated the same as the majority former senior administrators who served less time in their administrative positions relative to me.

The final experience I will share is perhaps the most insidious and harmful since it relies on common stereotypes about Blacks. As discussed earlier, I was accused of yelling at a majority department chair in an Executive Committee meeting, and both the external investigator and majority Interim Provost concluded I did not yell after listening to an audio recording of the full 90-minute meeting. About six months after the external investigator submitted his report, I was discussing a research project with a colleague at another school when he informed me a colleague of his at another school who knew faculty members at my institution said I was being described by at least one majority faculty as an “angry Black male.” This is a pervasive stereotype that is often applied to Black men and women where the speaker knows that many recipients will believe it is true. Consequently, Black men and women choose not to speak up or ask difficult or challenging questions in meetings to avoid being labeled with this stereotype. Alternatively, Black men and women in positions of authority refrain from making difficult or challenging decisions to avoid being labeled with this stereotype. I am sure this false claim would surface were I to seek another Dean position and likely would cause some schools to avoid me as a potential candidate even though the claim is false.

Fortunately, I have achieved great work-life balance in my post-Dean life, and I am not interested in pursuing other business dean, Provost, or President positions. Other Black administrators who face similar false claims may not be as fortunate as me and may want to pursue administrative opportunities at other schools and will have to overcome such claims.

I share my life experiences as a Black student studying accounting at several predominantly white institutions (PWIs) and as a Black accounting faculty member serving at two predominantly white institutions (PWIs) for 28 years. I’ve included some personal thoughts, memories, experiences, life lessons learned, and several unpleasant and painful experiences. I felt compelled to write down these experiences after seeing videos and reading articles of several Blacks suffocated or fatally shot by police officers and civilians with the hope that my comments would better sensitize primarily majority accounting faculty to some of the actual or perceived realities of the world and, more specifically the academy, from the perspective of one Black accounting faculty member. I invite my colleagues in higher education to think about potential inequitable situations in the academic environment and commit to making efforts to reduce or eliminate the inequity. I also hope my comments provide some lessons and insights about the need for and benefits that may be derived from DEI training, initiatives, and programs that serve to guide our actions and behaviors as we educate the next generation of accounting students for lifelong careers after college as practitioners and society members. Even though the experiences discussed in this article are unique to me, I know they are not unique in general based on discussions with other Black accounting faculty.

I hope the experiences I have shared paint a clear picture of some of my life experiences as a Black student and faculty member. I am not complaining about my life or the life of my parents or family members because we realize we are extremely blessed and fortunate to have lived and experienced the lives we have enjoyed in the United States. I have discussed these experiences in this commentary only to highlight some difficulties we have

encountered along life's journey as Black persons in the US despite being educated and "qualified." Sadly, my experiences have been confirmed by multiple prominent and successful Black faculty at colleges and universities across the country. Further, I am aware that others have stories that are even more egregious than those noted in this article. My purpose in writing this letter is not to cast a negative light on my institutions, but to invite higher education to realize its highest aspirations.

Sincerely,
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About the author

Mark C. Dawkins is Professor of Accounting and former Dean and Distinguished Professor for Excellence in the Coggin College of Business at the University of North Florida (UNF). He served as President of the American Accounting Association in 2022-23. Prior to his UNF appointments, he was an Associate Professor of Accounting in the Terry College of Business at the University of Georgia (UGA), served as the Associate Dean for Academic Programs from 2008-2014, served as Director of Diversity Relations from 2004-2008, and served on the accounting faculty from 1994- 2015. He received his PhD in Accounting from Florida State University, MBA (finance) and MACC (auditing) degrees from the University of Florida, and a BS in Management from the Georgia Institute of Technology. Professor Dawkins's recent research focuses on declining enrollments in accounting, connecting academic research to business practice, evaluating alternative earnings metrics, and assessing faculty publications. Professor Dawkins is a member of the American Accounting Association, the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants, the National Association of Accountants, The PhD Project (www.phdproject.org), and the Accounting Doctoral Student Association.