

Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

Rising from the Roots: A Call for Radical Reimagining

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Dear Higher Education,

You lied to me, but I have only myself to blame. I took you at your word when you said that you were committed to change. But why would I believe anything you had to say when your words and actions are so far off from each other, like the Earth is from the sun? In the words of trauma therapist Kobe Campbell (2025),

I've never seen anyone shamed into transformation...mocked into transformation...never seen anyone harmed into transformation but I have seen someone shamed and mocked and harmed into change; there is a difference between change and transformation; change is an outward adjustment to the context that you are in but transformation is an inward fundamental change that takes much more time.

This realization didn't come easily. It emerged from years of watching your promises of inclusion ring hollow, of seeing equity initiatives become performative gestures, of witnessing diversity statements gather dust while systemic barriers remain firmly in place.

As a mother/scholar, I have witnessed the profound disconnect between your stated values and lived realities. Each day, I navigate spaces where traditional academic expectations collide with the rich, complex knowledge systems that emerge from lived experience. This letter is not just a critique but a vision of what could be — must be — if we are brave enough to imagine and act.

Your transformation requires more than surface-level diversity initiatives or carefully worded mission statements. As Osagyefo Sekou (2014) observes, "While breaking the back of various discriminations is crucial, it is insufficient in the face of global capital's incorporation of historically othered persons who aspire to neoliberalism into the imperial project." The system is not merely broken. It is, as Sekou notes, "ontologically flawed and working just fine." As Audre Lorde (1984) articulates, "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house." The tools we need come from deeper sources: ancestral wisdom, community knowledge, the intersections where theory meets lived experience.

The paths to transformation lie in places you have long overlooked. They lie in the wisdom of those who mother and mentor while theorizing. When Patricia Hill Collins (2000) speaks of "motherwork," she describes intellectual labor that transcends traditional academic boundaries, creating "spheres of influence" that nurture both ideas and people. This way of knowing challenges the artificial separation between personal and academic knowledge that your structures enforce.

Within our classrooms, transformation emerges when we create spaces that honor multiple ways of knowing. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) reminds us that "decolonizing methodologies requires a radical reimagining of knowledge production." This means validating indigenous knowledge systems, oral histories, and community

wisdom alongside traditional academic sources. Each time we acknowledge these alternative epistemologies, we crack the foundations of academic hegemony.

The transformation I envision begins with questioning every structure that claims to be natural or inevitable. Why do we persist with evaluation systems that privilege individual achievement over collective knowledge-making? bell hooks (1984) challenges us to consider that “The classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy.” In my own classroom, I’ve witnessed the power of collaborative learning spaces where students teach each other, where grading becomes a dialogue rather than a judgment, where knowledge flows in multiple directions.

We must acknowledge and center knowledge systems that have been historically marginalized. This means not just “including” diverse perspectives but fundamentally restructuring what counts as knowledge. When my students bring their lived experiences into dialogue with academic theories, new understandings emerge that neither source alone could provide.

We need evaluation methods that recognize diverse forms of scholarship and community engagement. The current metrics of success — publications in prestigious journals, grants from major foundations — reflect and reinforce existing power structures. We need metrics that value the slow, deep work of community building, of mentoring, of creating spaces where transformation becomes possible.

Our path forward requires building collaborative rather than competitive models of knowledge production. The myth of the solitary scholar has always been just that — a myth. Knowledge emerges from dialogue, from community, from the spaces between us. As Shawn Wilson (2008) teaches us, “research is ceremony,” a collective process of meaning-making that honors relationships.

This transformation is already happening in small but significant ways. When we bring our whole selves into academic spaces, refusing to fragment our identities for institutional comfort, we create microcosms of what higher education could become. Each time we validate a student’s community knowledge, each time we challenge the narrow definitions of “rigor” or “excellence,” we plant seeds of transformation.

I see this in the faces of my students when they realize their stories matter, when they understand that their communities’ ways of knowing have value in academic spaces. I feel it in the energy of colleagues who dare to teach differently, to write differently, to imagine differently.

The fear that would paralyze us — fear of professional consequences, fear of institutional resistance, fear of failure — meets something stronger: the necessity of change. Every day, I choose to act — because inaction has become impossible. Every small act of transformation creates ripples that connect with others, building momentum toward larger change.

To implement this vision, we need concrete structural changes in our institutions. We must establish faculty learning communities that explicitly value diverse epistemologies, and create cross-disciplinary initiatives that center marginalized knowledge systems. We need to reform tenure and promotion criteria to recognize community-engaged scholarship and develop evaluation metrics that honor mentoring and “motherwork” as valuable academic contributions.

Our classrooms require transformation through dialogical assessment methods and projects that connect students’ community knowledge with academic learning. Institutionally, we need advisory councils with authentic decision-making power, positions for community scholars-in-residence with faculty status, and hiring practices that value lived experience alongside traditional credentials. Professional development must focus on teaching faculty to recognize diverse knowledge systems, creating mentoring programs for mother/scholars, and developing communities of practice centered on decolonizing pedagogies.

We transform not because we are certain of success, but because we must transform. Our children, our students, our communities deserve nothing less than our full commitment to reimagining what education can be. This is not a hope born of naivety, but a commitment born of necessity.

The question is not whether transformation will come — it is already here, rising from the roots we tend with our daily choices and actions. The question is whether you, Higher Education, will actively participate in your own transformation, or whether you will be transformed by the unstoppable tide of change rising around you.

*With determined vision and unwavering commitment,
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