

Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

Developing the Institutional History Narrative

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Dear Higher Education,

I revere you, but I am so mad at you. As a first-generation college student, my educational experiences have opened worlds previously unknown to me. I have learned about student development, teaching theory, and counseling techniques. I even spent an extended time abroad soaking up the beauty of European art and learning about its history. You gave me — a farm kid from the middle-of-nowhere Virginia — opportunities that I could not even imagine as a young person. My opportunities are boundless because I took that first step of applying to a community college and ultimately completed a PhD in higher education. My life's work is studying you — that's how much you mean to me.

I believe in the power of education as a public good, as an avenue to creating new knowledge, and a means to making society a better place for all humans. I am angry, Higher Education, because you equivocate — a fancy word I learned while reading Shakespeare's *Macbeth* in your halls. The history of the actual building of the physical spaces in which we learn, the history of who could and could not attend college, and the history of how universities were funded has not been completely or sincerely shared. Only part of that history is conveyed — the whitened and polished version. Everyone should have access to education and the opportunities it provides, but we cannot begin to make higher education a welcoming and open space for all people until the foundational stories are told as completely as possible. I call these foundational stories institutional history narratives.

After completing an associate's degree at community college, I transferred to a mid-size public university and completed a bachelor's degree and then a master's degree. I also worked at this university for well over a decade. This physical place has such deep meaning for me. It set me on the path to studying the ways in which colleges and universities tell their histories. As in many universities in the south, there was a statue of a confederate soldier on one end of campus. At the other end sits a museum dedicated to the story of the civil rights movement. In 1959, the county in which my university is located closed its schools rather than integrate as demanded by the federal landmark case *Brown v. Board of Education*. The schools were closed for five years. Some students, mostly white students, were able to attend private schools. Others, mostly Black students, attended home schools, went to live with relatives in other places, or had no educational options at all. This history is important to interrogate for numerous reasons but, to remain within the scope of this letter, I will focus on the importance of the university's commitment to educating people in a welcoming, inclusive, and respectful environment.

Using a critical Whiteness theoretical foundation, I developed a framework to determine how colleges and universities were telling the stories of Black and African American people within the history of the institution (Wilkinson, 2022). The framework uplifts instances of centering narratives of Black and African American people, of confronting racist ideologies, and of centering Black and African American history. It also examines the use of White ascendancy and White blindness, both of which are theoretical elements of White Institutional Presence (Gusa, 2010), within the institutional history narrative. White Institutional Presence examines the pervasiveness of majorities within an organizational system that has existed since its origin. The policies, procedures, and

structures of a university first formed in the early 1900s to educate White men, for instance, may have not been fully examined since its doors opened to people of color and women of all races in the 1970s.

Counternarratives uplift the experiences of underrepresented and underserved people — in this instance Black and African American people — within higher education (Goessling, 2018; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Centering the unheard voices imbalances systems of oppression and provides an opportunity for equity to take root. Examples of counternarratives include the shared stories and experiences, in their own words, of the first group of Black students to attend a particular university.

Within the theory of White Institutional Presence, there is a tenet that uplifts the belief that racism does not exist (Gusa, 2010). This is evidenced by the lack or exclusion of Black and African American history shared within institutional history narratives. Examples of confronting racist ideology include acknowledgement of a plantation history or stating in the narrative that the university only admitted White students until a particular year. While there is far more work to do to confront racist ideologies within histories, approaches like this can serve as a starting place.

White ascendancy refers to behaviors within an organizational system that demonstrate that the majority culture is the standard by which other cultures should be measured (Gusa, 2010). The system assumes a majority view of history and omits other perspectives. Examples of this include recent conversations around statues and monuments celebrating confederate leaders and members of hate groups.

White blindness is the practice of disregarding race in decision making (Gusa, 2010). An example includes an organization that does not allow employees to wear natural Black hairstyles and beards. A policy such as this protects majoritism.

I am hopeful, Higher Education, that change is on the horizon. More and more universities are interrogating their histories, engaging in truth telling, and working towards repair. Whether it is through a historical celebration such as a bicentennial event, a presidential initiative, or an examination of building names on campus, many universities are using these opportunities to share a more complete and accurate portrayal of history. I encourage you to be open to this, even when it is difficult. Engage the White folks in the room to examine their racial identity, to uplift the silenced voices, and to be curious about the purposefully hidden histories. Having colleges and universities become places where all students feel they belong and are valued is a necessary step on the journey to equality. I do not yet have all the answers, but I intend to keep pushing forward on this journey of reconciliation and of uplifting hidden histories.

Sincerely,
Stacey Wilkerson, Ph.D.

Works Cited

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About the author

Stacey Wilkerson studies university histories and how universities tell their histories relative to minoritized and underserved people. She holds a BA in English from Longwood College, an MS in counseling from Longwood University, and a PhD in higher education administration from Virginia Tech. When she's not working, Stacey enjoys spending time in her garden and with her dog.