

Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

From Margins to Microphones: How I Reclaimed My Voice Outside the System

ESTHER C. LAWRENCE

Dear Higher Ed,

Leadership & Insecurity

Why do we struggle so badly at following best practices? While pursuing my doctorate in organizational leadership, I kept hearing from instructors that anyone can become a leader and that they can lead from any position within an organization. It's true that anyone can become a leader, but the second part about leading from any position...that option is not always available to individuals from marginalized groups. Much of what I learned from my doctoral program was that what has been included in case studies and articles was not the practice being followed in higher education.

At some point, administrators went rogue and started creating their own practices and policies to suit their own situations and circumstances. Imagine my disdain when I witnessed the complete opposite in terms of leadership style, procedures, protocol...just a sheer lack of integrity and emotional intelligence.

I've spent many years attempting to assert my leadership from a middle management position to only receive unfair treatment from individuals I thought of as colleagues. It took me a while to figure out the real issue behind having my ideas being shut down or the outright marginalization. It finally dawned on me that the behavior and mistreatment I witnessed and experienced was a result of insecurity and the need to maintain a status of superiority and control.

I admit, I was very naïve. I had such high hopes for higher ed but then realized that I had to snap out of it. I observed that there are two types of leaders, those who compete for their positions (through traditional interviews and search processes) and those who are appointed. My issues came mostly from the appointed leaders. The privilege and poor morale that abounds within higher education is enough to make any leader check out and withdraw from it all. As for me, I've learned to keep my eyes on the prize. If others want to downplay my accomplishments and my worth, so be it...it's their loss.

For years, I spent a significant amount of time censoring myself and shrinking to survive the toxic workplace in fear that, if I spoke up on an issue, I would suddenly be marched out to the parking lot. Thank goodness that the culture has shifted since then. What I learned in the meantime was to leverage my gifts, talents, intellectual capital, cultural capital, and, most importantly, my voice.

I know that I've been called for a certain purpose, and I believe that it's to uplift and educate my community. I've learned that my impact is not confined to a role or an institution. Therefore, despite what others think, I will not allow my voice to be silenced. Whether that's through public speaking, motivational speaking, writing, or even

content creation, my voice, research, and expertise are valuable. It's only natural that, as a Black woman, I would be forced to create my own table, my own outlet where I have the autonomy and authority to amplify my voice.

My Future Self Has Goals

I've been pinched by my future self to recognize and respect the authority and anointing that I bring to the table. I'm now fixed and focused on legacy goals. Goals are not for the future of any institution but for my future and that of my tribe. I encourage everyone in this industry to think very carefully about their future working in these institutions. Yes, do your job and do it well. However, is the ROI at your institution mutually beneficial? Start reevaluating your goals for the future. Can some of those goals be accomplished within your institution? For example, completing a degree, teaching a course, publishing articles, getting a certificate/micro credential, taking advantage of professional development opportunities, even making sure to maximize your healthcare benefits and retirement investments — all of these things add to your ROI. Take advantage of every opportunity and seek external opportunities. Consider entrepreneurship a viable option.

Entrepreneurship & Impact

Consulting, writing, and public speaking have allowed me to honor my voice and my expertise in multiple markets and in ways that I didn't anticipate. It's hard to fully use your voice in unsafe cultures within organizations. If you must constantly censor what you say, it's time to use your voice externally. The impact that you will make with communities and entities that see your value is something that can bring immense reward. There are people depending on the results of your untapped talent or expertise. Don't let yourself get caught up in the mundane 9 to 5. Recognize that there are always options. We just have to learn to turn the obstacles into opportunities. Keep daydreaming, hoping, and pursuing your goals. Nothing is off the table.

Time to Pivot?

I urge you to start thinking about whether it's time to pivot. You don't have to leave your full-time career, but having your own small business or side hustle gives you a level of autonomy and freedom that a 9-to-5 job never could. Consider your transferable skills and how you can use your voice to pivot. It might be freelance writing, social media content creation, educational consulting, teaching as an adjunct instructor, editing dissertations, tutoring, college admissions coaching, grant writing, online course creation, career coaching /resume writing, academic coaching, presenting at national conferences, or public speaking. Whatever you choose to do, please, take care of you.

Respectfully,
Esther C. Lawrence, Ed.D.

Works Cited

- Hargreaves, A., & Shirley, D. (2020). Leading from the middle: Its Nature, origins and Importance." *Journal of Professional Capital and Community*, 5(1), 92–114, <https://doi.org/10.1108/JPC-06-2019-0013>
- Spector, N. D., Catalanotti, J. S., Brady, D. W., Law, K., & Simpson, D. (2025). Leading from the middle empowers GME leaders. *Journal of Graduate Medical Education*, 17(1), 101–102.
-

St. Martin-Lowry, G. (2024, February 23). A guide for new middle managers." *Harvard*

Business Review. <https://hbr.org/2024/02/a-guide-for-new-middle-managers>

Stephan, U. (2018). Entrepreneurs' mental health and well-being: A review and research agenda. *Academy of Management Perspectives*, 32(3), 290-322. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amp.2017.0001>.

Therthani, S., Balkin, R. S., Perepiczka, M., Silva, S., Hunter, Q., & Juhnke, G. A. (2022). Assessing personality traits, life balance domains, and work addiction among entrepreneurs. *The Career Development Quarterly*, 70(3), 190-201. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cdq.12296>

About the author

Dr. Esther Lawrence has two decades of professional experience in higher education. Born in Brooklyn, New York, and raised with deep Caribbean roots, she proudly represents the federation of St. Kitts and Nevis, embracing her Kittitian heritage as a cornerstone of her personal values and professional success. As a first-generation college graduate, Dr. Lawrence holds a doctorate in organizational leadership, an MA in media studies, and a BA in English writing arts. She is a dedicated scholar-practitioner and qualitative researcher, with a focus on amplifying the diverse narratives and lived experiences of the Black diaspora in the US, particularly Afro-Caribbean culture.