

# Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

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## In Spite of It All: A Dear “Ed” Letter

DR. CHENELLE S. BOATSWAIN

*Dear (Higher) Ed,*

(Higher) Ed, **in spite of** your selective awareness of my presence, I, a Black woman higher education professional, am writing to you with some thoughts that will not let me rest.

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*(Higher) Ed, when will you position yourself to empower Black women to thrive in your institutions **because of** your institutional support, rather than forcing us to succeed **in spite of** your selective support and systemic inequities?*

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Black women professionals in higher education have sounded off **in spite of an ensemble** that sings its refrain in reaction to our not-so-warm welcome into your mainstream — historically White — institutions. The only criterion for joining this chorus is being a Black woman who has accomplished professional advancements and achievements in higher education **in spite of** the persistent opposition imposed by the systemic racism and sexism embedded in your institutions. The Black women staff, faculty, and administrators in the ensemble can be heard generation over generation echoing such statements as:

I achieved tenure **in spite of** biased tenure and promotion processes that question, undermine, and devalue the expertise of Black women scholars (e.g. Ward & Hall, 2022).

I accepted the promotion **in spite of** the pay disparities that leave Black women paid as disparately as 88¢ per \$1 paid to White men (CUPA-HR, n.d.).

I persevere as an equity advocate **in spite of** the lack of institutional protection for me against discrimination and harassment (Carroll, 2017).

I continue to be a mentor to students **in spite of** the invisibility of this labor and the ways in which it leaves me overtaxed and limits my capacity to complete my compensated responsibilities (Griffin, Bennet, Harris, 2011).

(Higher) Ed, your stance in the face of the political tidal wave that is actively dismantling diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives in American education will determine whether Black women press on as higher education professionals, abandon ship, or are tossed aside. You have given little reason for Black women to “press on.” Your wavering, hesitant, unreliable stances related to the protection of us, individuals who are members of the so-called “‘protected’ class,”<sup>1</sup> offers little incentive for Black women to stay the course.

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<sup>1</sup> “Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (or simply Title VII) is the most comprehensive law, protecting five of these classes: race, color, religion, sex, and national origin.” (Gutman, 2000, p. 1)  
[Special Issue in Response to the 2024 U.S. Presidential Election \(2025\)](#)

In the most recent five years, from 2020–2025, we have experienced whiplash watching universities perform a swift about-face — initially refortifying commitments to strengthening DEI efforts, then making structural (legislative, policy, financial) retreats from these same commitments.

(Higher) Ed, here is what I have seen:

In 2020, following the ongoing publicity of anti-Black murders, piqued by the murder of George Floyd, many colleges and universities communicated renewed commitment to curating inclusive communities that persistently work to correct systemic inequities within their institutions.

By 2021, as bills emerged limiting the teaching of Critical Race Theory and educators' opportunities to address racism and sexism, leading institutions chose neutrality or appeasement of donors over firm protection of academics' rights to academic freedom (Binkley, 2024).

Since 2022, colleges and universities have been divesting from their DEI programs, rolling back DEI funds, and releasing staff in DEI-specific roles (Gretzinger & Hicks, 2024).

In 2023, instead of pursuing counter legal action, you acquiesced to the reversal of affirmative action policy in student admissions, resulting in limited opportunities for campuses to ensure equitable access to higher education (Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2023; Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. University of North Carolina).

In 2023–2024, I, and so many Black women, were horrified and remained unsteady after witnessing four of our leading ensemble members — senior leaders in your institutions — shaping back-to-back headlines for the premature and tragic conclusions of their leadership tenures.

*Dr. Joanne A. Epps, who was actively performing her duties as president of Temple University when she died prematurely;*

*Dr. Orinthia T. Montague, who was serving as president of Volunteer Community College when she died prematurely;*

*Dr. Antoinette Candia-Bailey, who documented months of workplace harassment before taking her own life immediately following her term as Vice President for Student Affairs at Lincoln University; and*

*Dr. Claudine Gay, who resigned less than 200 days following her historic appointment as the first Black president of the country's first college, Harvard University.*

Now, (Higher) Ed, in the eighth week of 2025, I write to you as you curate your response to the United States' 47th administration's "dear colleague" letter, which launches a direct assault at your institutions' policies and practices to protect people like me.

On February 14, 2025, as part of the current administration's *dismantle DEI campaign*, the Department of Education Office for Civil Rights issued an edict directly at you. Citing Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the edict threatens the withdrawal of federal funds, in as soon as 14 days, from any education institution that uses race-aware (contradictory to "race-blind") initiatives, including hiring, financial aid, scholarships, and other institutional practices. This effort directly targets DEI initiatives and threatens to rapidly dismantle decades of infrastructure, built to advance your stated commitments to inclusion — much of which was designed, erected, maintained, and advanced by the ensemble-Black women in your institutions.

Perhaps, (Higher) Ed, a quick reminder of your history with Black women may be helpful here.

The installation of the same legislation currently being weaponized against protected classes, including Black women, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, was the catalyst for dismantling the racial and gender barriers that, for the first 328 years of your existence, prohibited Black women from professional employment at your mainstream (historically White) institutions. Yes, in 396-year history, you have made room for Black women to be professionally employed for only the most recent 61 years — barely 15% of that history (Rai & Critzer, 2000).

In that time, Black women have made recurring, boundary-breaking strides chipping away at the centuries of exclusionary policies, practices, and cultures that shaped your mainstream institutions. They have managed to achieve the highest ranks across faculty, staff, and administration, including 282 college presidencies across all institution types (Jack, 2023). Black women's stories have proven critical resources in strengthening campus climates (Moorosi et al., 2018). At every turn, Black women have championed the charge to shift campus cultures by building inclusive leadership infrastructure, designing culturally affirming programming, advocating policy changes and accountability measurements, and embodying countless DEI leadership titles.

*What have Black women received in return, (Higher) Ed?*

In return for their investments, transforming the design of college campuses since the late 20th century, Black women have encountered barriers and shouldered burdens. Even with the underrepresentation of Black women staff, (7%, NCES, 2022), Black women faculty (6%, NCES, 2022), and Black women administrators (6%, CUPA-HR, n.d.), the *in spite of* chorus resounds over decades of research (e.g., Beaubeouf-Lafontant, 2009; Collins, 1986; Crenshaw, 1991; Croom & Patton, 2011; Evans, 2007; Harris et al., 2011; hooks, 1989; Lorde, 1984; West, 2017“b”; Wolfman, 1997). Among the barriers reported by Black women by across rank, title, and field are:

- “Racially toxic” environments (Husband, 2016)
- Racial battle fatigue (Corbin, Smith & Garcia, 2018)
- Hypervisibility/invisibility (Hughes & Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Showunmi, 2023)
- Black tax (Griffin, Bennet, Harris, 2011)
- Glass cliff (Ryan & Haslam, 2005)
- Glass ceiling (Harris et al., 2011)
- Institutional betrayal (Carroll, 2017)

The progress that has been made in colleges and universities has most certainly occurred on the backs of Black women and other minoritized individuals who, *in spite of* continued discrimination, harassment, exclusion, disrespect, and dismissal, have persisted toward the **diverse, equitable, and inclusive** possibilities of our day.

Imagine my surprise when I found myself, without invitation, introduction, or orientation, inducted into the *in spite of* chorus. It was August 2017 when I joined. I became an “in spite of” woman when I stepped away from more than a decade of K-12 school leadership to level up my career by pursuing a doctoral degree. I entered the game confident, self-assured, motivated, and excited about the possibilities. But in less than a semester, I found myself effortlessly, and with increasing frequency, repeating the refrain “in spite of.” As a doctoral student:

I established my voice *in spite of* a curriculum in which the identities of the scholars I studied were most representative of the oppressors than of the people whose identities I share.

I formed supportive community *in spite of* the cultural and economic markers that separated me from many of my peers.

I made it to my candidacy *in spite of* the absence of mentors whose experiences mirrored my own.

I graduated with double-distinction **in spite of** being required to use language that is incongruent with the language of my communities and being negatively evaluated on a benchmark exam.

I became an academic writer **in spite of** a system where Black women's expertise is invisibilized.

After graduation, I re-entered the job market focused on a career in higher education leadership. I naively expected that I could abandon the "in spite of" chorus. Instead, the chorus reached a crescendo.

97% of my job applications were rejected **in spite of** me being overqualified for the majority of positions to which I applied.

I filed for 12 months of unemployment **in spite of** elite credentials and decades of experience.

I incurred enormous debt to self-sustain **in spite of** entering my degree program debt-free.

*(Higher) Ed, how do you explain these experiences — a successful professional achieving every qualification you offer to be iced out professionally by the same enterprise?*

I describe these experiences as quintessential encounters with the gendered racism that is so deeply baked into the policies, practices, and culture in your mainstream institutions. My story as the poster child for the overqualified and underpaid Black woman is extraordinary, but clearly not exceptional. You believe yourself to have left to the history books your entanglements with the oppressive systems that extend from White supremacy, patriarchy, and capitalism. You promote yourself as the "great equalizer," espousing democratic ideals of merit-driven advancement. However, (Higher) Ed, I offer my story as one of the many stories of Black women continuing to be bruised and battered by your hierarchical, exclusionary traditions.

(Higher) Ed, the **in spite of** chorus will retreat. Just as you saw during the "Great Resignation," when Black and brown women exited the labor force, your institutions being no exception, at higher rates than other demographics (BET, 2021), we are observing your cues to determine our next actions. Our self-protection is our primary priority — a priority which we were acutely reminded of as we memorialized our lead ensemble members in 2023–2024.

(Higher) Ed, you face a pivotal choice: resist external mandates and uphold your democratic commitments to diverse and inclusive communities, *or* capitulate and compromise the investments you've made in constructing inclusive campuses. The choice has been yours for almost 400 years. What will you do with this moment? Will you stand firm in your reckoning against exclusion and oppression, or will you cower to the pressure to comply? Will you finally uproot, eradicate, and reconstruct your structures outside of the racist, sexist, classist, hierarchical, exclusionary constructs upon which you were founded?

(Higher) Ed, from where I stand, you have not only a moral obligation and responsibility, but a strategic need to aggressively pursue the ideals that you promote and to protect the unprotected classes that fuel your campuses. The historical record has yet to be set straight. And to be clear, this work requires not just that you level representation across racial demographics in multiple categories (including staff, students, faculty, and administration), but also that you demonstrate that balanced representation can be maintained over generations.

**In spite of** the absence of affirmative action, will you actively recruit, support, and retain faculty, staff, and students from minoritized groups?

**In spite of** threats to defund institutions that champion diversity, will you be uncompromising on your values of representation, belonging, and justice?

**In spite of** legislative attacks aimed at disrupting scientific research that promotes the needs of the most vulnerable people, *will you uphold your commitment to advancing scientific thought communities?*

**In spite of** ideological attacks on inclusive curriculum, will you ensure that the histories, contributions, and lived experiences of all communities are preserved and captured in the academic canon?

**In spite of** the threats to institutional viability, will you ensure that Black women, the clearest markers of your vulnerabilities, are guarded and protected with every resource?

**In site of** the pressure to comply, will you choose bold leadership who will ensure that that inclusion and equity are your practice, not just your rhetoric?

(Higher) Ed, what will you do next?

*In grief and expectation,  
Chenelle S. Boatswain*

This letter is written

In honor of:

Dr. Claudine Gay, Harvard University

And in memoriam to:

Dr. JoAnne A. Epps, Temple University

Dr. Orinthia T. Montague, Volunteer State Community College.

Dr. Antoinette Candia-Bailey, Lincoln University

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## About the author

**Dr. Chenelle S. Boatswain** is recognized as an educator, scholar, and consultant whose work focuses on leadership, equity, and the experiences of Black women in higher education. She is the Associate Director of the University of Pennsylvania’s Mid-Career Educational Leadership Program and an adjunct faculty member in the School of Social Policy and Practice at the University of Pennsylvania. With over 20 years of experience in K-12 and higher education, she has held leadership roles in schools, teacher development, academic coaching, community engagement, and student success initiatives. Her research and writing examine issues of race, gender, and leadership, with a particular emphasis on disrupting isolation and fostering community among Black women in academia. She has previously worked with West Chester University of Pennsylvania, Delaware State University, and Missouri State University. She holds a Master’s in Education from Harvard University and a Doctorate in Education from the University of Pennsylvania.