

# Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

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## No One is Coming to Save Us: Navigating the PWI Roller Coaster as an AfroCaribbean American Woman

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*Dear Higher Ed,*

While I'm grateful for an extensive career in academia and all the benefits that come with working in this industry, they don't quite balance out with the personal challenges that affect my overall well-being.

For the past three years, I've struggled with my mental health, experiencing burnout and questioning the value of my positionality as an AfroCaribbean woman administrator and Doctor of Education in a predominantly White institution. The intersection of my multiple identities is consistently challenged and misunderstood in academia. I feel like I've been on an endless roller coaster trying to understand my place within my institution. One minute, I'm a high-achieving Black woman being cheered on, and the next, when I speak up too confidently because of my achievements, I need to be put back in my place—knocked down a notch.

I truly believed that the articles I wrote celebrating diversity gave me a voice. I thought the LinkedIn kudos helped to affirm diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) and increase awareness. But I was wrong.

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### The Changing Commitment to DEI

In 2020, institutions reaffirmed their commitment to DEI in response to the killings of Black people—most notably George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery—at the hands of police. However, in 2025, with a new federal government administration, suddenly none of that seems to mean anything anymore.

To me, the shift in rhetoric stems from two things:

1. Those who have turned their backs on DEI never truly cared about it in the first place and now, given the country's leadership, feel emboldened.
2. Many people never understood what DEI was or who it truly benefits.

It's safe to say that whenever Black people fight for their rights, other groups ultimately benefit. Just look at the Civil Rights Movement—it paved the way for underrepresented groups, including women, Latinos, Asians, Native Americans, the LGBTQ+ community, and those with disabilities, to advocate for their rights.

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### The Burden of Advocacy

Personally, it has been difficult to bring my best self forward without advocacy, mentorship, and compassion. Right now, many issues threaten the livelihood of Black professionals in higher education, especially those working in DEI offices. Layoffs, restructuring, and reassignments are becoming increasingly common.

How can faculty, administrators, and staff of color be expected to pour into students if we haven't been able to pour into ourselves? As a scholar who has researched the experiences of administrators among the Black diaspora in higher education, I now find myself experiencing the same challenges my research participants described—the feeling of being overwhelmed, microaggressions, bullying, intimidation, and isolation.

Higher education is deficient in compassion, equity, fairness, and understanding. Leaders do not take the time to understand an individual's story or how their culture and lived experiences shape the way they show up and function. There is little tolerance for employees showing up as their authentic selves at work—especially people of color.

We have to dress a certain way.

We have to wear our hair a certain way.

We have to code-switch our accents.

We have to constantly put on a mask to gain respect and feel a sense of belonging—despite our education and experience.

As a result, many of us experience racial battle fatigue and cultural taxation. Navigating the intersectionality of being Black, a woman, and AfroCaribbean has taken its toll on me. My values are challenged daily, to the point where I feel frozen when making decisions. I take pride in getting a holistic view of a situation before making a decision, but the imposed timelines and deadlines have become unrealistic.

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## The Cost of Leadership

I struggle with passive-aggressive leadership. There is no value in being in a leadership role just to play games with the lives and livelihoods of others. Pretending that things aren't what they seem and that employees are not experiencing trauma. Pushing a narrative that tries to force employees to unsee the horrors of past leadership. What impact are you truly making in this industry? What story are you really telling? Even if you're making progress as a leader, what legacy are you leaving behind if you've harmed human beings in the process?

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## A Call to Action for Black Professionals in Higher Ed

After seeing three Black women college presidents (Dr. JoAnne A. Epps, Temple University; Dr. Orinthia T. Montague, Volunteer State Community College; and Dr. Antoinette “Bonnie” Candia-Bailey, [Lincoln University](#) of Missouri) suddenly pass away in late 2023 and early 2024—along with seeing Dr. Claudine Gay resign from Harvard University as president after just six months—I knew I had to take my health and well-being more seriously.

So, my message to the Black diaspora in higher education is this: Look after yourself.

- Take the time off—medical leave, sick time, vacation.
- Make the doctor's appointments. See your primary care physician and any specialists you need.
- Love on your family.
- Control what you can.
- Choose yourself every day—these jobs will always be here, but we will not.
- Remember: These institutions don't care about us.
- Affect change where you can, but don't lose yourself in the fight.
- Hold on to your faith. Trust God.

- Seek therapy.
- Get a pet.
- Check in with your tribe.
- Find mentorship.
- Reach out to your community.
- Find a hobby.
- Exercise or take a walk.

Do whatever is necessary to remain sane and healthy so you can enjoy your family. Live so that you can make it to retirement.

I end this letter with a sense of urgency because no one is coming to save us. **We have to save ourselves.** Please, take care of you.

Respectfully,  
Esther C. Lawrence, Ed.D.

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## About the author

**Dr. Esther Lawrence** has two decades of professional experience in higher education. Born in Brooklyn, NY, 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, a Master of Arts in Media Studies, and a Bachelor of Arts 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 U.S., particularly Afro-Caribbean culture.