

# Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

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## Transformation – It’s What We Do

DR. THERESA J. CANADA

*Dear Higher Education,*

So you want to know what I know about what we do every day? Keep reading and keep thinking. As a Professor of Education and Educational Psychology at a public university in Connecticut, I have learned what needs to be done to persevere. This is not based on where I am now, but on where I started. I am a Black woman who was born in New York City prior to the Civil Rights movement in the United States. Although both of my parents (based on family research) have varied ethnic backgrounds, each was born in the South and can be considered a part of the Great Migration (Tolnay). Of course, none of that mattered when it came to representation in New York City. As far as I was concerned, I grew up as a straight Black female from a working-class family. But it was those life experiences that had the greatest impact on who I am now.

The most significant aspect of my life was my schooling. I grew up in a section of New York City called Harlem. This was, at the early stage of my life, a somewhat diverse community. I say that based on the building I lived in and the surrounding businesses and institutions. There was a New York City Hospital across the street in one direction, a Chinese laundry in another direction, and a fancy restaurant and a movie theatre in another direction. What was special about where we lived is that I was within walking distance of my elementary school, and it was there that I found my spirit and was encouraged to be me. My energy source outside of my home was my school experience, for sure. There were classmates who became close friends and supplemented the social outlet that I needed beyond my home life. Educational excellence began specifically in the third grade, and my classmates shared my passion for learning. All was going well until after the third grade, when a life-changing transformation took place. I was “bused” to another school outside of my neighborhood, supposedly for desegregation purposes. I tell this story through my book *Desegregation of the New York City Schools: A Story of the Silk Stocking Sisters* (Canada). This experience, and who I am today, are central to why I know that we can move forward and not only survive but thrive beyond what we have accomplished in the higher education environment.

While my family background is the main reason for my perseverance, it is my own higher education experience and my training as a mental health practitioner that provides evidence that equity in higher education is possible. The best example to support the need for equity in higher education is the desegregation of colleges and universities in the South and the way in which Black students’ mental fortitude was necessary for them to persevere.

Obstacles existed in the U.S. that prevented Black students from enrolling in colleges other than Historically Black Colleges and Universities. It was during the middle 1950s that attempts were made to change that situation. Several individuals were part of the movement to desegregate colleges and universities in the South, including James Meredith, who enrolled and became the first Black person to graduate from the University of Mississippi (Miss), and Autherine Lucy, the first Black person to enroll at the University of Alabama in 1956—only to be expelled three days later (Perez and Chavez). Their actions set the stage for the eventual enrollment of James Hood and Vivian Malone in 1963 (Jones) at the University of Alabama. Although James Hood transferred shortly after admission, Vivian Malone remained and became the first Black graduate in 1965. These college

enrollments helped allow for more equity in higher education at a time when a person's racial identification determined whether they could attend a college or university of their choice.

What does this mean for those of us in higher education and how we manage the landscape since the presidential election? We have managed similar situations in the past and have used our professional and personal assets to do so (Patton et al.). The history of desegregation efforts in the South is not that far behind us. Black people in general are known to be resilient, especially Black women (Smith & Read; Woods-Giscombe, et al.). This was evidenced by their activities during the pre-Civil Rights movement. The current and future concern for the academy is to ensure that all students who want to earn a college degree can do so regardless of their ethnic background, financial status, or sexual identity.

While we must provide all students with the resources needed to be successful in college, the same is true for faculty members. Faculty members should be provided with academic freedom to provide students with knowledge of their subject matter, and should collaborate on projects that will provide students with the best practices in their field of study. Faculty need to understand that what they teach in the classroom should resonate with what is happening outside of the classroom. Everyone's voice can still be heard with a sense of respect. We need not accept what is going on outside of the academy. What is most important is that we learn to understand what is going on and then develop a path forward.

That path forward is to join other faculty in developing key strategies to address their concerns campus-wide, statewide, and nationally; in focusing on the areas where they can immediately help strengthen their campus environment; and in creating strategies to achieve long-term goals. Faculty must work across disciplines instead of staying in their own silos. Focus on what you do best at your university/college and highlight your strengths locally and nationally. Do this as an individual faculty member and as a campus community.

The example of the desegregation of southern colleges and universities shows how change occurred despite the country's administration at that time. If it happened then, why would you believe it wouldn't happen now? We must maintain our mental fortitude, and act on what we believe is best for higher education at this time. With this attitude, transformation is always possible!

*Sincerely,  
Theresa J. Canada*

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### About the author

**Dr. Theresa J. Canada** is a professor in the Education and Educational Psychology Departments at Western Connecticut State University. Her research interests include cultural diversity in education, early childhood education, equity, and urban education. Her recent book chapters are "'Old School' Urban Education: How Friends, Families, Communities, and Teachers Support Success in Early Childhood" in Lori D. Patton, et al (Eds.) *Reauthoring Savage Inequalities, Narrative of Community Cultural Wealth in Urban Educational Environments*, and "Development and Implementation of an Early Childhood Parenting Curriculum for Preschool Teachers" in L. N. Roberts (Ed.), *Redesigning Teaching Leadership, and Indigenous Education in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. She is the author of *Desegregation of the New York City Schools: A Story of the Silk Stocking Sisters*.