

Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

Introduction

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This collection of letters offers a chorus of voices—faculty, administrators, former students, and scholars—writing directly to higher education. Together, they bear witness to its contradictions: a system capable of transformation and liberation, yet often constrained by fear, inequity, and erasure. From calls to center Black womanhood and reimagine knowledge, to critiques of sanitized institutional histories and shrinking academic courage, these writers confront higher education with both love and anger. They testify to the lived realities of marginalized populations—international students, re-entry learners, justice-impacted scholars, women balancing family and leadership—and in doing so, they reclaim their right to narrate higher education’s unfinished story. Across their diverse experiences, a common thread emerges: transformation is not optional. Whether through collective resistance, inclusive pedagogy, or structural reform, these letters insist that higher education must choose between preserving old inequities or embracing its radical potential as a public good for all.

We open with **“We Were Never Meant to Be Invisible: Black Womanhood, Resistance and Reclamation in Higher Education,”** written collectively by “the Beyhive”- Shawntay King, Juanita Marquez, Keisha Rembert, Jolene Taylor and Dr. Thera Tilmon. Together, they testify to the erasure, tokenization, and silencing endured within predominantly white institutions, while also reclaiming higher education as a site of resistance, joy, and transformation. Framing lived experience as scholarship, they reflect on code-switching, the white gaze, and the devaluation of Black womanhood in academic spaces. Yet, through memory, community, and cultural expression—from ancestral wisdom to Beyoncé’s reclamation of space—they insist on their radical fullness and intellectual power. Refusing invisibility, the authors reclaim their voices and labor, envisioning a reimaged academy grounded in justice, care, and Black futures.

Darla Davenport-Powell continues the call to transformation in her letter, **“Rising from the Roots: A Call for Radical Reimagining.”** She invites higher education to move beyond performative diversity efforts toward genuine transformation. Writing from the perspective of a mother-scholar, she critiques the gap between institutional promises and lived realities while urging a reimagining of knowledge grounded in community, lived experience, and ancestral wisdom. Transformation, she argues, is already rising from the roots; higher education must choose whether to participate or be transformed by it.

Patrice Jones likewise critiques higher education’s retreat from its historic role as a courageous catalyst for social progress in her letter, **“She, Desperately Seeking a More Courageous HE.”** Once a space for advocacy, dialogue, and transformation, higher education now too often cowers before political pressure, corporate interests, and fear of controversy. Despite her disappointment, Jones insists on higher education’s potential to reclaim its mission by embracing transparency, equity, inclusive curricula, ethical partnerships, and academic freedom.

In her letter, **“Developing the Institutional History Narrative,”** Stacey Wilkerson critiques higher education’s reliance on sanitized histories that privilege whiteness while erasing Black experiences. Drawing on Critical Whiteness Studies, she presents a framework for analyzing institutional history narratives. By uplifting counternarratives—such as the testimonies of the first Black students—universities can confront racism,

acknowledge hidden histories, and foster reconciliation. Wilkerson calls for truth-telling as essential to creating inclusive, equitable spaces where all students feel they belong.

Whereas Wilkerson challenges the grand narratives of higher education, the next letter, **“Finding Things in Common”** by Jerry Kruse, demonstrates how the stories we tell about ourselves shift over time. Reflecting on over fifty years of teaching race and ethnicity while white, Kruse observed how his working-class student body diversified over time, and how collaborative pedagogy highlighted the social construction of race, shared experiences of oppression, and the dangers of ethnic pride distorted by misinformation.

In our next section, we hear from populations whose status is vulnerable in the current political climate. We begin with Suchitra Samanta whose letter, **“International Students: My Personal Experiences and Reflections on What We Contribute to American Higher Education,”** recounts her four decades in the American academy as an international student turned professor. She speaks to the challenges of cultural adjustment and isolation, as well as emphasizes her contributions to research, mentorship, and curriculum, thereby underscoring international students’ vital role in higher education and the need to safeguard their freedoms.

Marginalized professionals in particular have felt a dissonance between their expertise and daily lived experiences. In her letter, **“From Margins to Microphones: How I Reclaimed My Voice Outside the System,”** Esther Lawrence recounts instances of silencing, marginalization, and toxic cultures. Rejecting institutional constraints, she reclaimed her voice through public speaking, writing, consulting, and entrepreneurship. Framing impact beyond institutional walls, she urges colleagues to assess their return on investment in higher education, embrace autonomy, and pivot toward opportunities that honor their expertise and amplify their voices.

Jennifer Lagier Fellguth recounts her journey as a first-generation college student who pursued higher education after early setbacks and societal discouragement. Her letter, **“Supporting Non-Traditional Student Reentry”** warns against dismantling programs that support non-traditional students and urges higher education to remove barriers, foster flexibility, and mentor learners of all backgrounds.

Lena M. Campagna and Angela S. Murolo advocate for expanding educational access as a crucial pathway for social reintegration of formerly incarcerated individuals in their letter, **“Looking Beyond the Stain of Incarceration: Educational Access as a True Second Change.”** They highlight the limited employment and housing insecurity barriers faced by justice-impacted populations, as well as systemic barriers within higher education that limit access. They call for inclusive university policies that recognize education as a true second chance, enriching classrooms and advancing social justice.

While the letters in the collection address higher education in the United States, the letter, **“Mother, Wife, Lecturer, and Dean in Pursuit of Academic Success,”** from Saidat Nakitto of Uganda, speaks to the universal experience of navigating multiple roles. While administrative duties strain family life and cause burnout, she emphasizes the importance of networks of support in overcoming barriers and advancing women’s careers.

The final letter returns to the question of higher education’s transformative potential. In **“A Letter of Farewell,”** Michele Deramo reflects on her unexpected departure after 35 years in higher education, precipitated by the political dismantling of diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. She mourns the erosion of higher education’s values under partisan governance, corporate logic, and silencing of expertise, and leaves us with the question: *Is transformation possible for you, higher education, in the world we live in today?*