

Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

Speaking for Ourselves: High-Achieving Black Women Navigating Academic Milestones

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Dear Higher Education,

They are never-ending, they are always looming. Academic milestones, such as comprehensive exams, prospectuses, and dissertations, are pivotal to graduate student socialization, assessing our technical skills, academic training, and writing abilities. The evaluation of academic milestones continues into an academician's professional career. Accolades, such as publications, tenure, and promotion, serve as metrics of productivity and value. However, these milestones are often steeped in traditions rooted in white supremacy and anti-Blackness, reinforcing racial hierarchies within academia. For us, as High-Achieving Black Women (HABW), these experiences are shaped by the pressure to overperform—to prove intellect, womanhood, and Blackness in environments that often question all three. So, Higher Education, we want our work to speak for itself, instead of being required to constantly conform to dominant academic norms.

Collins (1990) tells us Black women's lived experiences and epistemologies must be centered to reject Eurocentric academic standards and traditional modes of knowledge production [in higher education]. Historically, the voices of Black women in the United States have been silenced, their labor exploited, and their ways of knowing omitted from politics and scholarship. These conditions of gendered racism have often forced us to assimilate our standpoint to survive and sustain our work within dominant institutions. Collins' framework calls on us to resist our erasure.

As HABW in academia, we conceptualize how race, gender, class, and cultural expectations shape the ways we are heard, misheard, or unheard within academic spaces. Black Feminist Thought is foundational to this work because it foregrounds three distinguishing features: "the meaning of self-definition and self-valuation, the interlocking nature of oppression, and the importance of redefining culture" (Collins 1986, S24). Together, these commitments create a foundation for the academy to take Black women's experiences seriously as sites of knowledge, theory, and resistance. We invite readers to acknowledge, value, and recognize the legacy of Black women's voices as a legitimate and necessary form of knowledge production. Our reflection illuminates our lived experiences as two HABW navigating academic milestones as students and now as faculty members, and the strategies we have employed to challenge dominant narratives, resist assimilation, and reshape what it means to move through academic spaces with purpose and integrity.

Now, mind you, we've been resisting pervasive hegemonic norms disguised as excellence since early in our educational journeys.

Dr. Jayla's Story

For as long as I can remember, I have loved school. I found joy not only in learning something new, but in pushing myself to master a topic and apply it. I have vivid memories of the excitement I felt mastering reading and advanced writing in kindergarten. These feelings of joy in schooling continued through the seventh grade. Until that point, I attended predominantly Black schools on the South side of the county. Almost every teacher I had from Pre-K through sixth grade was Black, and many were Black women like me.

Starting in seventh grade, my parents enrolled me in one of the county's magnet programs. I woke up at 5:30 a.m. to take two buses to the North side of the county. This transition introduced new norms, more racially diverse classrooms, few Black women teachers, and unfamiliar cultural expectations, and I slowly began to lose my love of learning. I did not yet understand that my personal and academic identities were deeply intertwined, creating a tension that would follow me through college and graduate school. In these spaces, I felt I had to constantly prove myself. My academic voice became a shield and a signal that I was worthy of being there, even when I was one of the few. I learned to overperform, to leave no room for doubt, and to measure myself by achievement rather than curiosity.

These same feelings resurfaced when I enrolled at a small liberal arts predominantly white institution (PWI) and later as a graduate student at a large public PWI. Instead of showing up fully as a learner, I often felt compelled to silence myself, conform to institutional norms, and persist through marginalization, isolation, and chilly academic climates. I learned how to anticipate what faculty wanted, how to write in ways that sounded "academic," and how to perform competence without revealing uncertainty.

As a result, I leaned into checking boxes and pushing through academic milestones, often at the expense of my identity and purpose exploration. My educational journey became less about becoming and more about proving I belonged. This way of being shaped my choice of major and early career path. I pursued journalism as a practical extension of my interest in writing and storytelling. Yet once I entered the field, I felt deeply misaligned. I had followed the right steps and earned the right credentials, but the work felt disconnected from the questions and communities that mattered most to me.

It was not until I found myself in learning communities outside formal academic spaces, particularly spaces centered on Black women's experiences, that I began to hear my own academic voice again. In these communities, I was not asked to be exceptional in isolation. I was invited to be honest, relational, and whole. These spaces reminded me that learning could be joyful, communal, and connected to purpose rather than productivity.

Now, as an early-career faculty member on the tenure track, academic milestones feel more present than ever. Publications, grants, teaching evaluations, and service expectations shape how my work and worth are assessed. Yet my relationship to these milestones has shifted. Rather than allowing them to define me, I now hold them alongside my purpose, not above it.

In both my scholarship and my personal life, I center my voice by leaning into alignment, knowing that who I am and the work I do are interconnected commitments. I understand my work as a Black woman as relational, community-engaged, and rooted in care. I choose to write, teach, and mentor in ways that honor lived experience as knowledge and wholeness as rigor.

In this way, my resistance is intentional. It looks like refusing to sever my humanity from my scholarship. It looks like creating spaces for students, especially those taught to survive rather than to dream. It looks like insisting that purpose is not something found after tenure or promotion, but something cultivated in the present.

Two Black women, one shared experience...

Although our paths crossed later in our academic journeys, we unearthed more similarities than differences in the barriers we were forced to confront.

Dr. Chelsea's Story

From a young age, my most prominent memories of academic life are anchored in praise. In grade school, I was routinely described as bright, gifted, intelligent, and deeply committed to education. Learning came naturally to me. I had a sharp memory, devoured books, and enjoyed the attention that academic excellence afforded. I grew up on a side of town where school-based resources were limited, and by third grade, I was accepted into the gifted program. Yet my home school lacked gifted-certified teachers, so once or twice a week I was bused to a more affluent school for instruction. No one in that classroom looked like me. While I could not fully name it at the time, I knew I was different. By my final year of grade school, the experience had become isolating enough that I asked to be removed from the program. What lingered most from this period was not the curriculum, but my internalization of external validation, an attachment to praise that has followed me into adulthood and continues to shape my sense of self-worth.

As I moved through adolescence, achievement solidified into a core personality trait. In middle and high school, I continued to perform well academically, enjoying both school and learning. I was good at it—until I wasn't. High school demanded more effort, but I maintained my identity as a "scholar," graduating 32nd in a class of 648. Still, that accomplishment did not feel sufficient. Excellence had become the baseline, not a milestone, and praise was never enough to quiet my own expectations.

College intensified this pattern. Being the "smart girl" was not just something I did; it was who I was. While friends relaxed after class, I headed to the library, racing to complete assignments before allowing myself leisure. As coursework became more rigorous, I remained an A and occasional B student until I earned my first C. I was devastated. Expecting disappointment, I called my parents, only to be met with laughter. That laughter marked a turning point. For the first time, I experienced validation not rooted in performance, but in being enough. Perfection was no longer the price of worthiness, and that realization quietly reshaped my relationship with achievement.

Graduate school allowed me more space to simply be, yet the pressure of academic milestones (e.g., publications, timelines, and career prospects) loomed constantly. Despite opportunities to publish and collaborate with renowned scholars, comparison crept in. As peers progressed faster, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, my confidence faltered. I was doing everything right—until I wasn't. Still, I completed the program and secured a promised faculty position.

Today, as an early-career faculty member, milestones remain omnipresent: teaching evaluations, publications, and awards. As the only person who looks like me in my immediate work environment, I am often reminded of my worth—until I am not. The recurring refrain of "until I wasn't" underscores a painful truth: no matter my achievements, gendered racism, misogynoir, and white fragility persist, shaping how my excellence is received, questioned, or dismissed. This awareness continues to inform both my healing and my resistance, as I work to disentangle my sense of worth from systems never designed to fully affirm it.

Concluding Thoughts

This letter documents the truths of two high-achieving Black women as we make sense of our lived experiences and navigate internal and external validation according to the concept of “performance.” Our stories contribute to the pervasive narrative within Higher Education, drawing from the evolution of our voices across our academic and professional journeys, with consideration of cultural and sociopolitical climates. At the intersection of Black women’s identity and institutional culture, we are reimagining our journeys through the lens of one of academia’s most accomplished yet overlooked groups.

We make three simple pleas. Center our humanity. Recognize our knowledge and contributions as valid. And Higher Education, please, stop posturing white-centric standards of practice as the prototype and sole metric of success.

In Power and Black Womanhood,
Drs. Jayla Moody Marshall and Chelsea T. Smith

References

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About the authors

Dr. Jayla Moody Marshall (she/her/hers) is an Assistant Professor of Higher Education at North Carolina Central University. Her scholarship centers purpose development among marginalized college students, investigating how institutional structures shape their journeys through higher education and influence their opportunities to thrive during and after college. Through critical, qualitative inquiry, she investigates how care, joy, and community function as tools for transformation. Her research also explores institutional practices in graduate education, including mentorship and holistic student development. Jayla earned her doctorate in Education Leadership, Policy, and Human Development from NC State, her master's in communications from Georgia State University, and her bachelor's degree in journalism and global development studies from Mercer University.

Dr. Chelsea T. Smith (she/her/hers) is currently a Clinical Assistant Professor in the School of Education at William and Mary. Her teaching, mentorship, and scholarship center on supporting the experiences of Black women and graduate students on college campuses. These interests and passions are catalyzed by her identities and experiences as a first-generation Black woman at historically White institutions as a student, educator, and administrator. Dr. Smith considers herself a scholar-practitioner who is committed to making tangible changes in the education landscape supported by relevant scholarship. Dr. Smith has experience in a variety of teaching, research, and practitioner positions, including admissions, learning communities, peer mentorship, and graduate student support. She has also worked with a number of nonprofit and pre-college programs to support high school and college students. Chelsea earned her doctorate in Education Leadership, Policy, and Human Development from NC State, her master's in Student Affairs from Iowa State University, and her bachelor's degree in History from the University of Georgia.
