

Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

My Call to Be Heard: A Letter from the Lonely Only

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Dear Higher Education,

I write to you from the vantage point of being a “Lonely Only” – a Black female educator, physical therapist, researcher, and leader who has spent her entire professional life in a field where fewer than 5% of us look like me. I occupy academic spaces not built for my presence yet shaped by the undeniable imprint of those who came before me. I am the “outsider” who stays in higher education, refusing silence and claiming the right to be heard.

I stay for myself. I stay for women educators who are Black and others of color who paved the road to careers in academia with grit and brilliance. I stay for those who stand alone now, navigating the weight of being the “Lonely Only” in rooms heavy with history. And I stay for those entering higher education, tasting yet again what it means to be the lonely outsider, and realizing that feeling was never theirs to carry alone. Staying has never been an act of passive resilience. It has been an active reclamation of belonging.

I invite you to sit with these words, to hold them with care, and to continue reading.

Moving Beyond Resilience: Claiming My Belonging

Resilience implies surviving what was never meant for me. Belonging demands that I reshape the space itself. Belonging is not a soft, optional feeling. According to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, it is a foundational human need. In professional environments – especially in higher education – it is directly tied to thriving, persistence, and well-being. When people experience authentic belonging, they are more likely to invest, collaborate, and remain.

My own research on belonging in higher education aligns with what the broader literature continues to confirm – that historically marginalized people disproportionately encounter barriers that quietly erode belonging. These barriers include stigmatization, exclusionary policies, and structural inequities that signal, even when unspoken, *you are here, but you are not fully held here*.

That is why belonging must be understood as a necessity, not a luxury. For those of us who are “Lonely Only” in departments and classrooms, belonging is rarely handed to us. Too often, we are expected to be grateful for proximity while enduring isolation as the price of admission. So, we do what we have always done – we build what we need.

Belonging can be fostered when professional legitimacy is affirmed, diversity is genuinely valued, and social support is intentionally created, not as a symbolic gesture, but as an institutional practice. These findings mirror my lived experience. I cannot wait for others to create space for me because I must also create it

myself. I do that through the work I lead, the academic communities I cultivate, and the standards I set for how I will be seen, heard, and treated.

For me, belonging is not assimilation – it is contribution. It is the right to bring the fullness of our intersecting identities, our histories, our cultural knowledge, our scholarship, and our excellence into academic spaces that have too often demanded we shrink to fit. Belonging means insisting that higher education not only include women of color, but recognize, protect, and elevate us as essential to the mission of learning and justice.

Why We Must Be Heard: The Power of Intersectional Voices

As a Black female professor in higher education, my voice matters as do the voices of other women of color. We matter to the students we teach who share our intersecting identities. Cultural concordance between educators and students can improve trust and communication and can shape how students perceive the quality of their education. When students see themselves reflected in us, they often experience a deeper sense of safety, affirmation, and possibility. Our voices and visibility expand their imagination for what they, too, can become.

However, we women faculty of color continue to navigate isolation and academic cultures that diminish or overlook our expertise. But when students – especially those who share our intersectional identities – see us at the front of the classroom, they witness possibility. They see that their presence is not an anomaly, but a continuation. They learn that higher education is not reserved for a chosen few, but can be a place where their brilliance belongs, where their questions matter, and where their dreams are valid. Our presence disrupts the quiet assumptions about whose voices shape knowledge and whose bodies belong in academic spaces.

Kimberlé Crenshaw’s intersectionality theory helps illuminate why our experiences cannot be understood through any single lens. Race alone cannot explain the barriers we face, nor can gender by itself. The convergence of these identities produces a layered experience shaped by simultaneous visibility and erasure, representation, and marginalization. Intersectionality reminds us that our stories are multidimensional, and so are the challenges we encounter. As a Black woman in higher education, my experiences exist at the intersection of race and gender, where visibility and invisibility collide. Intersectionality allows me to name this dual position that is isolated not because of one identity, but because of several that simultaneously shape the conditions of my professional life.

The Lonely Only: A Burden and a Beacon

Being the “Lonely Only” is not solely a hardship. It is a sharpening force. In keeping with critical race theory, my experiences as the “Lonely Only” are not anomalies but are predictable outcomes of structures that have historically excluded those who look like me. My presence in these academic spaces disrupts that structure, even when the systems around me resist change.

Therefore, as a “Lonely Only” I become a beacon in predominantly White academic spaces. My presence empowers others, disrupts invisibility, and signals that change is not just possible – it is necessary. Being the Lonely Only reminds me that I – and we – are needed. It affirms that the higher education system cannot function equitably without the participation of women faculty of color. It calls us to remain visible not for the sake of representation alone, but for transformation.

Staying, Together: From Lonely Voices to Collective Power

One does not have to remain lonely. One plus one becomes two. Two become community. And this community amplifies our voices into a chorus that higher education cannot ignore. As Maya Angelou once said, *“I come as one, but I stand as 10,000.”*

Belonging research shows that institutional-level interventions rooted in equity, social support, and intentional structural change can reduce disparities and enhance retention among faculty of color. Social and professional belonging, especially when supported by affinity groups and inclusive work cultures, strengthens retention and well-being among staff and faculty of color.

This is why we need to be heard loudly, clearly, and collectively. We raise our voices not just to name inequities, but to illuminate pathways toward equity. We speak so that the next generation of women educators of color will inherit an academy that recognizes their brilliance, honors their humanity, and respects their intersecting identities.

Social capital theory reminds us that networks create opportunities, but for Black women like me, those networks often did not exist. I had to build my own social capital, forging relationships, creating community, and opening doors not only for myself but for those who will follow.

My Call to You, Higher Education

The time has come, higher education, to transform your structures, not simply diversify your brochures. My lived experiences as well as the lived experiences of other women educators of color are not anecdotes – they are truth. They are testimonies carved from years of endurance, navigating academic institutions that have benefitted from our labor while too often denying us a voice and full belonging. These truths are not whispers at the margins but are the pulse of your colleges and universities that demand to be acknowledged.

It is no longer enough to invite us into academic spaces that were never designed with us in mind. Spaces designed to keep us as the “Lonely Only” without a voice to be heard. It is no longer enough to ignore the conditions that make our presence extraordinary rather than ordinary. Your systems, traditions, and norms must evolve. Not at the pace of comfort, but at the pace of justice.

Create environments where belonging is not exceptional but expected. Support women faculty of color through intentional mentorship, inclusive policies, structural accountability, and equitable representation at all levels. Value the voices that have too long been treated as peripheral.

Because when Black women – and all women of color in academia – are no longer lonely, your institutions do not simply become more diverse. They become more capable of educating, healing, and leading in ways that reflect the world we live in.

When we are fully seen, fully supported, and fully valued, we do more than succeed – we transform. We expand what is possible, shape futures, and build legacies. We help higher education become what it has always claimed to be – a place where truth, justice, and human dignity are cultivated, not constrained.

That transformation benefits everyone, not just those of us who have been waiting for it far too long.

In Closing

Within my own academic institution, I remain the outsider who stays, but I no longer stay in silence. I stay with purpose, conviction, and a growing community of brilliant, bold Black female educators and educators of

color who refuse to let higher education define the limits of our voice and our belonging. We will no longer be the “Lonely Only” and we will not accept isolation as the price of admission.

I stay because I matter and we matter. I stay because the students are listening, watching, and learning what is possible based on who stands in front of them and who is permitted to teach. They are learning whether knowledge can hold them, whether excellence can include them, whether their college or university can be a home and not just a hallway.

I stay because my presence as a Black female educator is not passive; it is light, pressure, and disruption. Every time I tell the truth in rooms that prefer comfort, I change what can be said there next. Every time I refuse to disappear, I make it harder for higher education to pretend that I – and we – were never here.

So, I stay with a need to be heard, not as a symbol, but as a force. I stay to build what I needed when I arrived and to ensure that the “Lonely Only” becomes a story we tell in the past tense.

And I stay because when we stay – fully and unapologetically – nothing stays the same.

*With resolve and unshakable presence,
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About the author

Dr. Dawn S. Brown, PT, DPT, EdD, OCS, serves as Assistant Chair of Curricular Affairs and Assistant Professor in the Department of Physical Therapy and Human Movement Sciences at Northwestern University. A recognized leader in physical therapy education, Dr. Brown has delivered more than 40 invited and peer-reviewed presentations at regional and national conferences and continues to contribute to the field through ongoing scholarly publication in educational research. Her research focuses on leadership development, faculty development, and fostering belonging in academic and clinical settings. She has held influential roles, including Commissioner for the National Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Commission for the American Council of Academic Physical Therapy (ACAPT), Co-Chair of the Illinois Physical Therapy Association DEI Committee, and member of ACAPT’s Education Planning and Innovation Committee. Dr. Brown also serves on the Advisory Board for Simucase, contributes educational content to PhysicalTherapy.com, and is appointed to the Illinois State Board of Health as the Doctor of Physical Therapy representative, where she contributes to both the Policy and Rules Committees. Currently, she is a fellow in the 2025–2026 cohort of the APTA Academy of Education Fellowship in Higher Education Leadership. Dr. Brown’s scholarship and service have made a lasting impact on advancing equity and excellence in health professions.