

# Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

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## Skinfolk Ain't Always Kinfolk: How to Create Community in Institutions Where Community Should Be a Given

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*Dear Higher Education,*

*This is a letter for the first, the only, the different (F.O.D.) in your institutions. This letter serves as a vision of transformation.*

In 2015, the titanic powerhouse, Shonda Rhimes, published *The Year of Yes: How to Dance It Out, Stand in the Sun, and Be Your Own Person*. In this book, Rhimes explained a new concept to the reading world: “F.O.D.”

I am what I have come to call an F.O.D.—a First. Only. Different. We are a very select club, but there are more of us out there than you’d think. We know one another on sight. We all have that same weary look in our eyes. The one that wishes people would stop thinking it remarkable that we can be great at what we do while [B]lack, while Asian, while a woman, while Latino, while gay, while a paraplegic, while deaf. But when you are an F.O.D., you are saddled with that burden of extra responsibility—whether you want it or not. (Rhimes 2015, 169)

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In academia, specifically at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) —institutions to which I have pledged my loyalty, fealty, and academic trajectory—it is rare to be the first, the only, or the different since there will likely be other female or male faculty members who consider themselves Black. However, even amid academic situations where I should have felt surrounded and in community, I have instead felt lonely, alone, and isolated. But why? I was not the first. I was not the only. I was not different... except I was.

I was the first in my immediate family to attend a four-year institution, and then I became the first to graduate, and then the first to pursue and complete graduate study. I was the only one in my family to have done this, and these facts made me feel as if I was different from my family.

*In full transparency, though, I had long believed myself to be different from my family and loved ones. The added alphabet soup before and after my last name did nothing to assuage these concerns. In fact, the titles only served to amplify my differentness.*

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I thought, then, I would immediately find my community—my people—at historically Black institutions. Surely, because I was not the first, the only, or the different on campus, I would feel warm and welcomed on the historically-Black hallowed ground.

That was not the case, Higher Education.

I soon learned there was still room to be the only and the different even in a space where I was not the first, so *this is for colored girls who learned home is a chosen community and must be cultivated*.

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### **“Go Where You’re Celebrated, not Where You’re Tolerated”**

I am not sure where I heard it for the first time, but this mantra reverberates in my head; leave places that tolerate you and find places that will appreciate, celebrate, and venerate you. I will admit, Higher Education, I thought committing my career to historically Black colleges would mean that I would finally be accepted by the Black people with whom I had never really felt at home. In fact, even in predominately Black spaces, I still *felt* “only” and “different.” I spoke differently. I thought differently. I felt akin to Patricia Hill Collins’ “outsider within,” but I was the outsider within Black American culture, and I was not equipped to address that reality (Collins 1986). Authentic Blackness would feel out of reach until I recognized that however my “Blackness” manifested was the very definition of the authenticity for which I yearned.

After graduate school, when I accepted my first tenure-track position at a private, liberal arts HBCU, I believed I would finally belong to you, Higher Education. Instead, my faculty office was far across the campus, siloed away from other English professors and surrounded by colleagues in completely different disciplines. In fact, throughout my entire tenure there, I would remain the sole English faculty member on my floor.

I am sure Shonda Rhimes felt isolated as well; however, the difference between Shonda Rhimes and me was that Shonda Rhimes was a—no, the— showrunner. She commanded the attention of her writing staff, ABC executives, her cast, and her crew. I, on the other hand, was a new Ph.D. in a new city with two familiar faces, but this is what I had prayed for. I had petitioned God and written in my journal that I wanted a tenure-track position, and I received one. In fact, I did not even have to apply.

Higher Education, you chose me, so I “infiltrated the academy that had wooed me” with its autonomy and research opportunities (Christian 1987, 61). However, the higher education institution I met offered me three sections of first-year English composition and not a single colleague with a Doctor of Philosophy degree in English literature.

I was lonely, and I was alone, Higher Education.

What I did not realize about my dream was all the ways in which it could “fester like a sore and then run” (Hughes 2002, 251). For example, what if I were offered a position at an HBCU, but it was not tenure-track? What if the position was tenure-track, but the teaching load was five courses? What if the position was tenure-track, but the classes were only first-year composition? What if the position was a 3/3 course load with upper-level courses and a strong program, but the department chair considered me a sworn enemy? There were so many possibilities for a complicated academic reality that I had not considered as an F.O.D. What if, Higher Education, the version of you I dreamt of was not the one of my academic reality?

What if the dream quickly became a nightmare?

See, no one really prepares a new bride for an abusive husband, a new car owner for the first mechanical breakdown, the new parent for a child with a chronic illness. In the same way, all of my friends and colleagues who celebrated my announcement about securing a tenure-track position could not—or would not—have prepared me for a higher education landscape that would not warm to me.

So here I was, and “I had to do everything right. I had to keep it all afloat. I had to run to the top of the mountain. I could not rest. I could not fall [*or fail?*]. I could not stumble. I could not quit,” even though everything in me told me to cut and run (Rhimes 2015, 142). Instead, I sent out application after application and lived through your abject silence, Higher Education, where you rarely even offer the courtesy of a denial. One just never hears back... until, at long last, I did. Then I packed up my entire life to relocate to another state and to another position and essentially begin my career over again. Would you, Higher Education, now open wide your arms to receive me?

This time, Higher Education, I would require more from you than the offer of a position to be persuaded to accept. In the time we had together, I learned how to negotiate, to speak up, to clarify what was important to me. This time, I applied for positions in places I *wanted* to live. I applied for positions in departments with colleagues with whom I wanted to work. This time, I did my research before saying yes.

As the first in my family to attend college, “won’t you celebrate with me/what i have shaped into/a kind of life? i had no model” (Clifton 1993, 25)? There were mentors who counseled me, but I made my professional decisions out of desperation, not proper preparation. I thought I did not have room to be discerning as an F.O.D.; however, because I am a woman of faith, “all things [even academic appointments] work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to God’s purpose” (Rom. 8:28). I was called to be here for such a time as this, Higher Education.

This time, Higher Education, I arrived in the Deep South, the Bible Belt, with war wounds and deep professional and emotional trauma, but I found colleagues, neighbors, and friends who immediately warmed to me. I was hired as a member of a faculty cohort, and my co-hires continue to build community with and around me. In fact, our department regularly hosts informal forums for peers, colleagues, and mentors to share best practices in a collegial environment.

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### ***People Don’t Quit Jobs. People Quit Bosses***

Higher Education, I no longer feel as if I am the first, the only, and the different because I transitioned to an institution where my fellow faculty members are encouraged to be in communion with one another. We share meals at each other’s tables. We share readings and essays for formal and informal feedback. We develop working groups to hone our tenure and promotion documents.

Did Shonda Rhimes develop a writing/working group with other Black women who were writing shows? Did she consult other Black women directors, producers, and executives? Did she build her own beloved community since one did not exist in the corporate boardroom? Did she bring to fruition what she long imagined?

Higher Education, I have learned that community does not happen by chance or by happenstance. It is cultivated through strategic decisions and choices to build with those around us. Because I arrived at an institution that valued collegiality and fellowship, it was easy to build on a solid foundation of camaraderie and togetherness.

Dearest Higher Education, since this is a teaching institution, and we are here to learn, I offer a vision of transformation to create happy, well-adjusted female faculty members of color (this can also be applied more broadly):

- Hire in cohorts, and if this is not possible, identify co-hires across disciplines.
- Pair new faculty with collegial mentors who might familiarize the new hires with the campus, the community, and the college.
- Create community through food and fellowship opportunities (and ensure the menu is thoughtful and inclusive).
- Invite new faculty to athletic events, community programming, and campus activities.
- Establish an open-door policy for new faculty to ask questions and find answers.
- Develop activities for new faculty that span the first year of their tenure.

All in all, higher education does not have to be an isolating, unhappy experience where faculty move from institution to institution, opting for academic accolades without personal connection. Faculty can become friendly to each other, but this does require some level of participation from administrators, faculty, and staff, turning academic islands into five-star resorts.

*To the first, the only, and the different, there are places and spaces for us, too. We just might have to create them.*

*In love and struggle,  
Dr. Rondrea Danielle Mathis  
An elder F.O.D. (and not so alone-ly anymore)*

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## About the author

**Rev. Rondrea Danielle Mathis, Ph.D.** has a career focused on the intersection of Black women and God. She is an advanced assistant professor of English at Albany State University and received her Ph.D. in English literature from the University of South Florida. She is also a two-time FAMU graduate with a bachelor's degree in English and a master of education in English education. She has also taken graduate-level courses in Christian ministry at Bethune-Cookman University.

Her academic research focuses on how Black Christian women achieve self-definition. She is the co-editor of the volume, *Mamas, Martyrs, and Jezebels: Myths, Legends, and Other Lies You've Been Told About Black Women*. She also has also published on Black women's lives and divinity.

Professionally, Dr. Mathis is the president of the Southwest Georgia Chapter of the Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University National Alumni Association; a life member and 2026-2028 English Area Representative of the College Language Association—the oldest and largest organization for the study of literature and languages at historically Black colleges; a life member of the Florida A&M University National Alumni Association; and a Faculty Leadership Fellow and University College Fellow at Albany State University.

Dr. Mathis is also a licensed Baptist minister, social justice advocate, and public intellectual.