

Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

You Locked Them Out and Call it Policy: Are They Accepted or Not?

KEISHA HOOK

Dear Higher Education,

I am a Black woman faculty member at a predominantly white institution.

I know what it means to be present in spaces that were not designed with me in mind. Although I am now allowed in these spaces, I am still othered. I know what it means to enter rooms where my intelligence is questioned before my credentials are read. I know what it means to be “the only.”

But I stay anyway to only end up watching my students disappear. Not because they are unmotivated. Not because they are unprepared. But because you locked them out.

When students cannot pay their tuition bill on time, you restrict their access to Canvas. You call it a financial hold. A necessary step for the institution to remain. But it looks and feels like institutional racism.

I teach many students of color. First-generation students. Students supporting families. Students who work overnight shifts and come to class with barely any sleep. Students who already feel like guests in an institution that markets diversity and belonging but takes away their access to education when they are unable to pay their bill when you say it is due.

When they are locked out of Canvas, they are not just blocked from assignments. They are blocked from participation, from readings, and from community.

As a Black woman faculty member at a PWI, I carry a particular burden in moments like this. Students who feel unseen elsewhere find their way to my office hours. They tell me the truth they do not feel safe telling the institution: *I'm trying. I just can't pay right now.*

And you expect me to figure it out. To keep them engaged and make sure they still have access. But how?

You rely on my ability to regulate classrooms when the world is worlding. You rely on my cultural background to mentor students navigating racial isolation (whether you admit it or not).

If equity is real, why is access conditional? If belonging is real, why can it be suspended by a balance due? If transformation is possible, why do our policies reproduce the very inequities we claim to dismantle?

There is something especially painful about watching students of color disappear from a PWI, not because they failed academically, but because the institution made learning contingent upon money.

And there is something especially exhausting about being the Black woman faculty member expected to explain it gently.

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I am asked to soothe students' panic. To help them draft emails to financial services. To reassure them that this is just temporary. To hold space for shame that does not belong to them.

This is what being the Only looks like. It is being hyper-visible in diversity efforts and invisible in decision-making. It is mentoring students through structural harm while having little authority to change it. It is being expected to translate institutional policy into something that feels humane.

But do me a favor and stop pretending. Stop acting like you care about students of color, first generation students, and students with families, when you clearly do not. Stop recruiting these students when you know you are fully aware of their financial situations during acceptance.

Do better, but until then I will stay.

I stay at this PWI because my presence matters. Because representation matters. Because students deserve to see themselves in authority.

*Sincerely,
A Tired but Dedicated Faculty Member*

About the author

Keisha Hook is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW) in the state of Pennsylvania. She is currently in her 2nd year of the Doctorate of Social Work (DSW) program at the University of Pennsylvania. Keisha obtained her Master of Criminal Justice (MCJ) in 2016 from Boston University, Master of Social Work (MSW) in 2012 from Temple University, and Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) in 2011 from Temple University. As an Assistant Professor at La Salle University, Keisha teaches across the BSW and MSW programs while advising first year undergraduate students. She also continues to provide clinical services in college counseling and psychological services at Swarthmore College and conducts assessments at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia inpatient unit. Keisha has over 14 years of experience providing individual and family services to the people of Philadelphia.