

Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

Reflections on Hypervisibility and Isolation in Academia

ANIQUE FORRESTER

Dear Higher Education,

In academic medicine, clinical supervision and teaching are considered a core part of the responsibilities that faculty carry with them throughout career. Administration and supervision of colleagues less so. This is especially true for underrepresented and marginalized physicians. In my 14-year career, I have expanded my responsibilities beyond what was expected, even from myself. As I became more confident, those core responsibilities, insights into next level systems thinking, became the central philosophy in my journey navigating promotions and increasing levels of supervisory responsibility. What I did not fully expect was that the shift in perception would be from my competency as a physician to less tangible critiques of my personality and other aspects of my behavior that are subjective and difficult to measure. Slowly but surely, I began to hear “she’s mean,” “her standards are too high,” “she’s difficult,” among others. One poignant statement shared with me by a supervisor around year five of my academic tenure was “you are too comfortable saying no.”

Much has been written and explained by faculty women of color who feel silenced, marginalized, and systemically excluded once they rise to higher levels of leadership. This phenomenon continues but has now gradually become a more carefully orchestrated and more subtly designed process to maintain hierarchies and organizational systems that are becoming increasingly ineffective. It feels like a dying gasp, a sinking ship of policy and practice desperately holding onto control. The simple truth is that releasing such control, facing these manipulative and destructive tactics head on, is the only meaningful way to create a more equitable system that can support the needs of future generations who will practice in academia.

I struggle to understand how the current organizational structures in most academic centers continue to function without centralized commitments to diversity and equity. Having monolithic groups of people who often share outdated ideas of what valuable contributions to the system look like has created damaging silos, which reinforce sameness. In the most recent foray into DEI, as it appeared in 2020, we observed an initial groundswell of enthusiasm. Within a short four years, the speed and swiftness of pushbacks and attacks on language makes it appear that no progress was made. Slowly but surely the overt and covert resistance shifted to silence. Silence and exclusion are historical tactics based on the understanding that the reality presented by those who do not fit historical leadership standards and narratives can simply be erased if not acknowledged. These tactics work to a degree, especially when they drive out the voices of those who consistently challenge the status quo.

Hypervisibility has become an acute phenomenon affecting underrepresented and marginalized leaders, especially since 2020. There were specific voices, including my own, that were highlighted and celebrated but again only for a brief period. A reference to the concept of the “tall poppy syndrome” (Feather 1994; Kirkwood 2007) comes to mind when reflecting on my experiences with silence and exclusion in the context of my hypervisibility as an expert in issues related to diversity, equity, and inclusion. The more I achieved, the more acknowledgement and success I experienced in the wider institution, as well as in my specialty areas of expertise, the quieter my colleagues got. When they did speak up in reference to me or my accomplishments,

compliments were muted and the personal criticisms intensified. A spotlight about who I am and how I contribute to the leadership space was created, which also gave an impression of difference.

When you are the only one or within a small group of onlys, you become omnipresent. You are the expert. When you are called on to provide an opinion on certain matters, colleagues who typically do not acknowledge your presence will highlight you as the person responsible for initiatives or as the main resource and repository for knowledge about diversity and marginalization. For me, this was not an accident. I had spent time developing knowledge and honing my expertise in these areas because of my passion and commitment to change. However, being the most visible champion of issues that were falling increasingly out of favor cast me in more unfavorable light as time went on.

By the end of 2024 into 2025, at the highest levels of leadership, it almost felt like I was being shown the door. I heard comments such as: “We don’t know what we can say anymore.” “Maybe you shouldn’t spend as much time on DEI.” “Things are becoming too political, and we need to focus on our self-care.” “What else can you do in this time of uncertainty?” While this is a reality shared by many who have championed diversity, equity, and inclusion, as an only, this time has been particularly devastating. The silence and normalization of systematic oppression have been difficult to witness. Carrying on with business as usual sends a message to those of us who have been in the spotlight that our opinions are no longer welcomed. Our presence is no longer needed. The institution no longer cares.

I, and others like me, refuse to accept these false narratives. What we know to be true and what has always been true is that representation matters. There is a need to move away from sameness and historical norms. These tenets no longer work in today’s reality. Increasingly, I feel a darkness encroaching the work that we do, not just in academic settings but across many sectors beyond healthcare. In the past, I have felt the need to be a bright light and illuminate the areas of inequity that many choose to ignore or rationalize as normal. Others like me have slowly and quietly begun to lose hope that allies will consistently come forward and share the burden of bringing attention to the issues we do not like to face. With each passing day, the outlook gets bleaker and we feel a shared sense of fatigue and apathy. Are we ready to develop new and improved systems? When will we tire of shaming and silencing voices of dissent? Who will shoulder the burdens that many of us currently bear? As we reflect on the concepts of hypervisibility and isolation, especially as leaders, what messages do we want to pass on to future leaders? For me, I continue to imagine a world in which those with diverse perspectives are invited to share in building a new and more inclusive future.

A Torch Accused of Burning too Brightly, A Tall Poppy

References

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About the author

Dr. Anique Forrester is an Associate Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Maryland School of Medicine. She has authored the perspective titled “Why I Stay: The Other side of Underrepresentation in Academia” in the *New England Journal of Medicine*. She serves as the Chief of Engagement, formerly Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, for the Department of Psychiatry. She completed medical school at the Howard University College of Medicine and general psychiatry and CL (Consultation-Liaison) fellowship training at Thomas Jefferson Medical College.