

Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

The Outsider Who Stays: Mentorship and Sponsorship for Women of Color in Academia—A Lived Experience

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Dear Higher Education,

I knew this was where I belonged.

For much of my academic and professional journey, I was often one of the few, or the only woman of color, in predominantly White spaces, including an Ivy League institution. Those experiences sharpened my awareness of how race, gender, and leadership intersect in higher education. They exposed me to new ways of thinking while also teaching me what it meant to navigate systems where belonging often felt conditional.

When I began working at a Historically Black College and University (HBCU), I finally experienced what it meant to exist within a community rooted in cultural pride, academic excellence, legacy, and collective resilience. I believed deeply in the mission of higher education and in the transformative possibilities of leadership, mentorship, and community. I believed institutions were places where Black women could thrive, lead authentically, and create meaningful change.

What I did not fully understand was how often women of color are expected to survive systems that were never designed with them in mind.

Visibility Without Sponsorship

Throughout my career, I outwardly appeared successful. I received teaching awards, served on committees, mentored students, and accepted leadership responsibilities. From the outside, it seemed as though recognition naturally translated into opportunity.

It did not.

Instead, I often encountered comments that attempted to diminish my leadership and reshape my identity:

- “You don’t dress the part.”
- “You have too much integrity.”
- “You need to play the game.”
- “You should dim your light.”
- “You are nothing but a teacher.”
- “Take those leadership positions off your résumé.”

Initially, these comments were painful. Over time, however, they revealed something important: leadership is not granted solely through titles or institutional approval. Leadership also exists in resilience, integrity, service, and the willingness to continue showing up despite exclusion.

I learned this lesson early in life. At twenty-three, I became a supervisor. By twenty-seven, I held a directorship position. Long before entering academia, I had already learned how to lead programs, supervise teams, and navigate complex systems. Yet academia introduced a different challenge: visibility without sponsorship.

Women of color are frequently visible for their labor, service, and emotional investment while simultaneously excluded from informal networks of influence and advancement (Fox Tree and Vaid 2022). Mentorship can provide encouragement, confidence, and professional development. It can affirm our belonging and strengthen our sense of purpose.

But mentorship alone does not always create access.

Sponsorship is different. Sponsorship involves leaders intentionally advocating for others, opening doors, sharing power, and positioning protégés for opportunities they might otherwise never access. Sponsorship disrupts inequitable pathways to leadership by ensuring marginalized voices are represented in rooms where decisions are made (Gatwiri, Krupka, and James 2025).

Too often, institutions emphasize mentorship while avoiding deeper conversations about power, access, and structural inequities. Equity initiatives become symbolic rather than transformational when they fail to address how leadership opportunities are distributed.

“Sponsorship is not charity. It is an equity strategy.”

The Complexity of Women Supporting Women

One of the greatest disappointments of my professional journey has been realizing that shared identity does not always translate into shared support.

I once assumed that women of color who had successfully navigated academia would naturally reach back to support others. Sometimes they did. Sometimes they could not. And sometimes institutional pressures encouraged competition, silence, or self-preservation instead of collective advancement.

There is no handbook that teaches women of color how to navigate institutional politics while maintaining integrity and authenticity. Much of academia operates through unwritten rules, relationships, and informal systems of influence. Learning how to navigate those systems without compromising one’s values can feel isolating.

Yet sponsorship did occur in my life.

A few women, and several leaders who did not look like me, recognized my leadership potential and intentionally created opportunities for me. One woman who later became a university president modeled professionalism, courage, and integrity in ways that transformed my understanding of leadership. She taught me that sponsorship requires risk, transparency, and intentionality.

True sponsorship is an act of courage.

Leadership Beyond Academia

Some of the most transformative sponsorship I experienced occurred outside traditional academic spaces.

Years before I ever considered public service, a mentor suggested that I had the capacity to lead politically. Eventually, I entered local government leadership, where I partnered with the first African American female mayor in my city. She trusted me, challenged me, and opened doors for me. Through her sponsorship, I rediscovered confidence in my ability to lead.

Juggling public service responsibilities while simultaneously pursuing tenure and promotion deepened my resilience and strengthened my commitment to values-based leadership. It reminded me that when mentorship is paired with sponsorship, possibility becomes action.

When someone truly believes in your potential, you begin believing in it too.

Navigating Academia Through a Strengths-Based Lens

The strengths-based perspective provides an important framework for understanding how women of color navigate and transform higher education. Rooted in social work practice, the strengths perspective emphasizes resilience, assets, and empowerment rather than deficit-based thinking (Saleebey 2013).

Through this lens, choosing to remain in academia despite exclusion is itself an act of leadership and resistance. Women of color are often asked to survive systems while simultaneously improving them. We mentor students, build community, lead initiatives, and create spaces of belonging even when institutions fail to fully acknowledge that labor.

Mentorship grounded in strengths helps individuals recognize their value and potential. Sponsorship extends that work by ensuring opportunities for advancement and leadership follow.

The outsider who stays does more than survive. She transforms institutions from within.

Why I Remain

There have been moments when I questioned whether I could remain in academia. Bias, isolation, institutional politics, and emotional exhaustion can make staying feel impossible.

But each time I considered leaving, I returned to my purpose.

I remain for students who deserve to be seen, affirmed, and challenged by faculty who understand their lived realities.

I remain for women of color who deserve to witness leadership that reflects possibility rather than limitation.

I remain because my purpose has never been solely about securing my own seat at the table. It has been about building larger tables where others might belong.

The greatest reward of my career has never been a title. It has been watching students discover their confidence, find their voices, and become leaders themselves.

Their success is my evidence of impact.

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Women of color have always transformed institutions, even when those institutions were not designed with us in mind.

Being the outsider who stays is not simply endurance.

It is courage.

It is resistance.

It is hope.

And through mentorship, sponsorship, and collective leadership, it becomes transformation.

At every table where we are blessed to sit, we must create room for another woman to pull up her chair and thrive.

Sincerely,
Dr. Monique Holsey-Hyman

References

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About the author

Dr. Monique Holsey-Hyman is a tenured Associate Professor of Social Work, mentor, social worker, and higher education leader with more than 25 years of experience in social work, public service, and higher education leadership. Her work focuses on mentorship, sponsorship, student success, leadership development, and equity in higher education. She is committed to creating transformative spaces where students and women of color can lead authentically and thrive