

# Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

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## A Black Woman's Call for Recognition, Equity, and Early Tenure at a Predominantly White Institution

JENNIFER J. MALONE

*Dear Higher Education,*

I write to you as a Black woman scholar at a predominantly white institution (PWI), standing at the threshold of early tenure, an achievement that reflects years of rigorous teaching, sustained service, and meaningful research, yet also a journey marked by isolation, resilience, and unwavering determination. My presence in this space is not only professional but historical. Black women remain profoundly underrepresented among tenured faculty in the United States, comprising only about 2% of tenured professors nationwide (National Center for Education Statistics 2021). This statistic is not simply a number; it represents barriers that are structural, cultural, and deeply rooted in the legacy of exclusion within higher education. To pursue early tenure as a Black woman at a PWI is therefore to carry both the weight of personal aspiration and the responsibility of representation for those who have been systematically marginalized in these spaces.

My journey to this point did not begin in higher education. It began in K–12 classrooms and communities where I witnessed firsthand the transformative power of teachers who saw potential in students long before those students saw it in themselves. Those experiences shaped my purpose. When I stand before my university students, I am not just delivering lectures; I am preparing future educators who will shape the lives of children whose names we may never know but whose futures depend on the quality of the teachers we prepare today. I teach with urgency because the stakes are real. I teach with care because belonging is not guaranteed in academic spaces. I teach with rigor because excellence should never be compromised, especially for those who have historically been denied access to it.

My classroom is a place where students are challenged, supported, and expected to grow. I push them to think critically about the systems they will enter and the responsibility they will carry as educators. I also listen to their fears, their doubts, their aspirations. Many of my students share that they have never before felt seen by a professor, never felt that their experiences mattered in academic discourse, never felt confident enough to imagine themselves as leaders. When they return to tell me they persisted because someone believed in them, I am reminded that teaching is not just about information; it is about transformation. This relational labor is often invisible, yet it is central to who I am as an educator.

My research is an extension of these commitments. I study inequities in education because I have witnessed their consequences in real time. I ask questions about access, representation, belonging, and opportunity questions that are sometimes uncomfortable but always necessary. My scholarship seeks not only to contribute to academic conversations but to influence practice, policy, and preparation so that future educators are empowered to serve all students effectively. Conducting this research as a Black woman in a predominantly white academic space comes with additional pressures: the need to justify the importance of my focus, the expectation to translate lived realities into language that feels safe for others, and the awareness that work centered on marginalized communities is often scrutinized differently. Still, I persist because the work matters.

Service, for me, is not an obligation; it is a reflection of my values. I serve my department, my institution, and my community because I believe higher education should be connected to the world beyond campus boundaries. I mentor students navigating systems that can feel isolating and opaque. I contribute to committees and initiatives that aim to strengthen programs and improve institutional practices. I support efforts to recruit, retain, and uplift individuals who might otherwise feel invisible. Much of this labor is unseen, yet it is essential to the functioning and growth of the institution. It is work I do because I care deeply about creating spaces where others will not have to struggle in the same ways.

Choosing to go up for early tenure required reflection, courage, and honesty. It meant assessing not only whether I met the formal criteria, but whether I believed my contributions had made a meaningful impact in a relatively short period of time. Early tenure is often framed as an exceptional case, a signal of extraordinary productivity and promise. For me, it is also a recognition of the intensity with which I have approached this role from day one. I have worked with the awareness that opportunities for scholars like me are hard-won and should not be taken for granted. I have invested in this institution because I believe in its potential, even when that belief requires patience and resilience.

There have been moments when the path felt heavy, moments of exhaustion, moments of doubt, and moments when I questioned whether the expectations were sustainable. There have also been moments of affirmation: students succeeding beyond their own expectations, research gaining traction, collaborations forming, small changes that signal progress. These moments reminded me why I chose this profession and why I continue to believe in the promise of higher education.

Going up for early tenure means trusting that my record will be evaluated fairly and comprehensively. It means hoping that the full scope of my work, the measurable achievements and the invisible labor, will be recognized as evidence of readiness for long-term investment. It means believing that excellence can be expressed in different ways and still be valued equally.

I am not seeking special consideration. I am seeking acknowledgment of what has been done, what has been built, and what is possible moving forward.

See the teacher who prepares future educators with both competence and compassion. See the researcher who pursues questions that matter for the field and for society. See the servant-leader who invests in students and institutions even when the work goes unnoticed.

I am not simply a candidate for tenure. I am a scholar committed to advancing knowledge, a teacher dedicated to student success, and a leader invested in strengthening the academic community. My presence here is not accidental; it is the result of years of preparation, perseverance, and belief in the power of education to transform lives.

I remain hopeful that higher education can continue to evolve; that institutions can move beyond symbolic commitments toward genuine equity, that excellence can be recognized in all its forms, that belonging can become the norm rather than the exception. Seeking early tenure is my way of saying that I am ready to continue this work here, to grow with this institution, and to contribute to a future that reflects the values we claim to uphold.

As I seek early tenure, I am also thinking beyond it. Tenure, for me, is not a finish line but a foundation for deeper leadership and broader impact. After tenure, I aspire to become the first Black woman to serve as Chair of the Education Department at my institution, not for the sake of a title, but for the opportunity to shape policies, support faculty, and influence the preparation of future educators in ways that reflect equity, excellence, and inclusion. Representation at the decision-making table matters. My leadership matters. The ability to open doors for those who will come after me matters. I want to help build a department where diverse voices are not

an afterthought but a driving force, where future teachers are prepared to serve all students, and where no faculty member feels that belonging must be earned through silence or assimilation. My pursuit of tenure is therefore also a commitment to institutional transformation; a promise that I will continue to invest my leadership, my scholarship, and my service in strengthening this academic community for generations to come.

I am a scholar grounded in purpose, committed to advancing knowledge that matters and transforms lives. I am a teacher whose influence extends beyond the classroom, equipping students to carry forward what they have learned with confidence, competence, and care. I am a mentor who works intentionally to make the path clearer, more accessible, and more affirming for those who follow.

I am ready for tenure, not only because of what I have accomplished, but because of what I am called to continue building. My vision extends beyond this milestone. I aspire to become the first Black chair of the education department at my institution, using that platform to lead with equity, elevate diverse voices, and reimagine what leadership in higher education can and should be.

Sincerely,  
Dr. Jennifer J. Malone, Assistant Professor

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## References

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## About the author

**Jennifer Malone** is an Assistant Professor of Special Education, teaching undergraduate and graduate courses at Missouri Western State University. Dr. Malone's work advances equity in teacher preparation, with a particular emphasis on students with disabilities and historically marginalized communities. Grounded in her experience as a K-12 educator and instructional leader, she prepares future teachers to serve diverse learners through rigorous, relationship-centered pedagogy and culturally responsive, evidence-based practices.

Dr. Malone's scholarship critically examines issues of access, representation, and retention within the educator workforce, with a focused commitment to supporting teachers of color and addressing systemic inequities in special education. Her work bridges research and practice, emphasizing sustainable pathways into the profession and improved outcomes for both educators and the students they serve.

Beyond the classroom, Dr. Malone is an engaged scholar-practitioner who actively contributes to university and community initiatives. She mentors aspiring educators, advises student and professional organizations, and collaborates on programs designed to expand and strengthen the teacher pipeline. Through her teaching, research, and service, she is dedicated to advancing inclusive excellence in higher education and ensuring that all learners—particularly those historically underserved—have access to meaningful, high-quality educational opportunities.