

Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

Dear Higher Education: I Am Still Learning to Belong Here

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Dear Higher Education,

I am still learning how to belong to you.

I did not grow up dreaming of becoming a professor. I did not map my childhood ambitions onto the tenure-track. The professoriate was not a destination I saw in my future, nor was it a path carefully groomed by legacy admissions, elite fellowships, or connections. I arrived here by way of classrooms filled with adolescents who needed an English teacher who believed in them. I arrived here through a principal's office, where I tried—perhaps naively—to make a school more equitable for all students. I arrived here after being pushed out of leadership for insisting that equity was not optional.

And miraculously, I made it here.

My journey in education began in K–12 education as a high school English teacher, where I spent eight years pouring myself into students, who rarely saw themselves reflected in the curriculum or in leadership position, and serving as a high school varsity basketball coach. I loved teaching and coaching. I loved watching young people discover their gifts and talents. Eventually, I pursued the principalship because I believed structural change required positional authority. I wanted to create a school where students of color did not have to shrink themselves to survive.

But leadership, I learned quickly, is political. It is policed. It is racialized. It is full of hoops to jump through and bureaucratic red tape.

As a principal, I began challenging inequitable discipline practices and advocating for culturally sustaining approaches, which led to resistance from teachers and the community. Not subtle resistance, but overt sexism and racism from white teachers and community members uncomfortable with change. I watched students of color be scrutinized more harshly than their white peers. I experienced what it meant to be a Black and Indigenous woman leading in a predominantly white space that preferred compliance over transformation.

Eventually, I was pushed out.

Leaving that principalship felt like failure. But it was also an awakening. I returned to graduate school to study whether other women of color administrators faced similar racism and sexism. They did. Daily. Systemically. Predictably. My research confirmed what my body already knew.

In my doctoral program, I fell in love with critical inquiry. I encountered Paulo Freire's insistence that education is never neutral (Freire 1970). I read bell hooks and recognized teaching as a practice of freedom

(hooks 1994). I found language for what I had lived. Theory did not distance me from experience; it affirmed and dignified it.

Yet even then, I did not envision myself as a professor.

After earning my Ph.D., I applied broadly to K–12 leadership positions, to district offices, and, almost as an afterthought, to universities. The interviews that came were for higher education. I became a finalist at a Minority-Serving Institution. I was offered a tenure-track position.

I accepted with gratitude and confusion.

Higher Education, I must confess something: I still do not fully understand you.

Although you are designated as a Minority-Serving Institution and an Asian American and Native American Serving Institution, you still speak in code—impact factors, h-indexes, grant cycles, peer-review timelines. You continue to measure productivity in ways that feel disconnected from the communities my work centers. You reward individual authorship yet my cultures taught me knowledge is communal. You praise objectivity while demanding a performance of detachment from the very injustices I study.

As an assistant professor, I often feel siloed. The professoriate can be competitive and, at times, cut-throat. I was not raised in cut-throat spaces. I was raised in community where knowledge is shared, where wisdom is relational, and where success is collective. In my Indigenous culture, community building is not an extracurricular activity; it is life. Reciprocity and relationality are not optional; it is expected.

Yet in you, Higher Education, collaboration can feel strategic rather than sacred.

I wonder sometimes if I am a “real” researcher. Academic writing is laborious for me. It does not flow as easily as lesson planning or facilitating dialogue. I am a teacher through and through. I know how to hold space. I know how to ask questions that disrupt complacency. I know how to cultivate critical reflection in aspiring school leaders and school counselors. But publishing and producing manuscripts that must survive anonymous review feels like learning a foreign dialect of my own language.

And still, I persist.

Because my students deserve professors who understand what it means to navigate racism and sexism in leadership. Because women of color administrators deserve scholarship that names and validates their realities. Because Minority-Serving Institutions deserve faculty who are committed not only to prestige but to justice.

My pedagogy is grounded in critical reflection, praxis, and relational accountability. I ask my graduate students, future principals, counselors, and teacher leaders to interrogate their assumptions about school discipline, curriculum, and power within structures shaped by colonial logics. Through the use of Talking Circles as sacred pedagogical spaces, I invite them to examine how their identities inform their leadership and how hierarchical schooling practices normalize control over community. In the circle, authority is decentered, listening becomes an ethical responsibility, and knowledge is co-created rather than delivered. I encourage students to reimagine schools not as sites of compliance and surveillance, but as spaces rooted in reciprocity, healing, and collective possibility.

And so, I must ask you, Higher Education: Within your rigid schedules, assessment metrics, and hierarchical traditions, where does this kind of relational and healing-centered transformation truly fit?

You celebrate diversity in mission statements. You reference equity in strategic plans. Yet tenure guidelines continue to elevate conventional methodologies while marginalizing community-engaged and relational scholarship. Emotional labor and epistemic injustice—the mentoring of students of color, the unpaid committee work tied to diversity initiatives, which remains invisible in promotion files and ignored by you.

You ask scholars like me to bring our whole selves, but only if our whole selves can be quantified.

As a Black and Indigenous woman affiliated with the Nimiipuu (Nez Perce Tribe), I carry ancestral ways of knowing that do not separate intellect from spirit. My scholarship is not simply an intellectual exercise; it is a continuation of survival. It is informed by intersectionality, Indigenous epistemologies, and critical race theory—not as trendy frameworks, but as lifelines.

When I write about women of color administrators navigating daily racism or Native American student experiences in higher education, I am not detached. I am accountable.

When I facilitate classroom discussions about systemic oppression, I am not theorizing abstractly. I am remembering.

And yet, I sometimes feel that to succeed within you, I must sand down the parts of myself that do not conform to your dominant norms. Speak less about spirit. Cite more empirical studies. Publish faster. Network strategically, not authentically. Protect intellectual property.

But what if knowledge were not property?

What if mentorship were not gatekept?

What if tenure valued community impact as much as citation counts?

I do not write this letter in bitterness. I write it in hope.

Because I have also experienced your beauty.

I have seen students light up when they encounter critical pedagogy for the first time and finally feel seen and heard; their lived experiences have language. I have collaborated with colleagues who genuinely believe in collective liberation, freedom dreaming, and emancipatory education. I have found moments of affirmation when senior scholars say, “Your voice matters. We need you here.”

I am asking you, Higher Education, to widen those moments.

Support early-career scholars of color not only with workshops on publishing, but with honest conversations about navigating racialized institutions. Redefine rigor to include relational accountability. Recognize that for some of us, research is braided with lived experience in ways that cannot—and should not—be disentangled.

I do not want to merely survive you. I want to help transform you.

Transformation requires courage. It requires interrogating how colonial mindsets shape norms of professionalism. It requires acknowledging that metrics of excellence are historically constructed rather than divinely ordained. It requires believing that community and justice-centered scholarship is not lesser scholarship.

Freire (1970) reminds us that education can reproduce domination or practice freedom. Hooks (1994) urges us to teach in ways that transgress boundaries that confine. And as Wilson (2008) teaches us through Indigenous research paradigms grounded in relational accountability, knowledge itself is ceremony, and

rooted in relationship, responsibility, and community. If higher education is serious about social justice, then these cannot remain citations; they must become commitments.

I am still learning how to belong here. But perhaps belonging is not the right aspiration.

Perhaps the work is not to fit seamlessly into you, Higher Education, but to press against you, and to stretch you toward something more just. I know you weren't built for someone like me, but maybe my presence is a form of resistance.

I will continue to teach. I will continue to research. I will continue to write, even when it feels difficult. I will continue to build community and form authentic relationships in spaces that reward competition. I will mentor students who question systems. I will honor my ancestors in the way I hold knowledge—with care.

And I ask you to meet me halfway.

Create structures where scholars like me do not have to choose between cultural integrity and professional advancement. Make space for collective joy, healing, and emancipatory change. Understand that when I critique you, it is not because I reject you—it is because I believe you can be better.

Higher Education, I am here.

Not perfectly polished.

Not fully fluent in your dialect.

But committed to my students and my community.

The question is: Are you ready to evolve?

*With hope and accountability,
Veneice Guillory-Lacy, Ph.D.*

References

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About the author

Veneice Guillory-Lacy, Ph.D. is a Black and Indigenous (Nimiipuu/Nez Perce) assistant professor in a college of education at a Minority-Serving Institution in California. A former high school English teacher and K–12 principal, her scholarship focuses on amplifying the voices of women of color in K-12 educational leadership, promoting social justice and emancipatory counseling and leadership practices, and freedom dreaming that leads to relational pedagogies, community-engaged inquiry, and transformative educational spaces.