

Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

When Enthusiasm Outpaces Infrastructure

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Dear Higher Education,

You were eager to bring me into your institutions, first as a doctoral student, then as a faculty member. Yet, neither time were you fully prepared for me. I embodied identities and experiences uncommon in your halls. You spoke a language of inclusion and opportunity long denied to many like me and suggested you were ready to rectify that omission. However, because so few had come before me, there were still few beside me, and your institutions remained, in many ways, lonely places.

First, as a Doctoral Student...

As a doctoral student, I arrived with a master's degree from a prestigious university, competitive scores, and a research trajectory already taking shape. Based on my work and research commitments, you read me as an Indigenous scholar whose presence would fill a visible gap and stand as evidence of both excellence and inclusion.

At first, I was enticed by your enthusiasm for my admission to your program, which included funding for my first year of study. As a first-generation college student, I was unfamiliar with the norms of doctoral education and did not realize that many programs routinely offer four years of guaranteed support upfront. Only later did I recognize how that initial arrangement foreshadowed a broader imbalance I would encounter throughout my studies.

I began my doctoral education with curiosity and openness, believing you might provide the kind of intellectual utopia I craved. That belief shifted as I realized much of what I was learning felt disconnected from the communities I cared most about. As a first-generation, low-middle-income, mixed-race Indigenous, Black, and white woman, I often found myself at the margins of your inner circle, seeing little of my lived experiences reflected in your curriculum and classrooms (Mackey et al. 2022).

Still, I stayed, determined to make space for myself and others like me. I understood that my "success" would likely look different from my peers and would have to happen on terms I could live with, without losing myself in the process (Rockquemore and Laszloffy 2008). Perseverance became less a personality trait and more a means of surviving within a system not designed for someone like me.

I met and at times exceeded expectations in my coursework, all the while searching for signs of myself along the way. I found refuge outside the classroom in the work of scholars of color who centered community and spoke a language I recognized. I sought community beyond your walls, receiving a fellowship that placed me in close community with other scholars of color who offered the understanding and belonging I had been missing. In those spaces, I began to find my voice. I learned to name funding inequities and uneven opportunities among doctoral students, and to advocate for myself in ways I had not known were possible but were necessary.

I pieced together mentorship from faculty who were kind and well-intentioned, even when they did not always know how to guide the work I felt called to pursue. That mentorship, however, came after periods of trial and error, of placing trust in faculty who initially expressed support but later showed it was conditional. The stress of those initial mentoring experiences, layered with the early years of motherhood and caregiving for family, began to surface in my body. After a particularly poignant falling out with a faculty member, I developed a stress-induced illness, brought on by prolonged anxiety and tensions. During my health crisis, I had to pause and recenter, for myself and for my family.

Determined to finish my doctoral studies ‘in a good way’, I moved forward with the support of a few faculty members who believed in my work, and with a clearer sense of the scholar I needed to be. Once I completed my coursework and stepped away from the classroom, my dissertation research renewed my sense of purpose. Time in the field—in community—restored something in me that had been strained within the boundaries of the university. That distance also gave me clarity. I began to see more clearly how academic success is often narrowly defined and how certain methods and timelines are privileged over others. Although I understood that critique is part of scholarly training, I was told by some that community-based research would take too long and that my methods, which require prolonged engagement, would make the job market difficult. A faculty member commented that I sounded “more like a practitioner than a researcher,” but in retrospect, I think they just did not see community the way I did.

These comments stung, but I remained committed to the work and communities I believed in. I completed my dissertation research with a local Tribal community, only to find that faculty who had once questioned the feasibility of my work were suddenly curious about my accomplishments (see Mitchell 2018). Around that same time, I received multiple tenure-track job offers from institutions that expressed genuine enthusiasm for both who I was and how I worked.

After years of strain, inconsistent mentorship, and the exhaustion of proving myself in predominantly white spaces, being wanted in that way carried a weight I can still feel. It was not simply a job offer; it was a moment of being seen, a moment of recognition. I had again earned my place among your ranks, and I had done so in a way that felt authentic to me and the communities I cared about.

Then, as a Faculty Member...

I accepted a tenure-track position at an R1 university with optimism and a sense that my work had finally found a place. Our enthusiasm felt mutual. I believed I was joining an institution that could support me in ways that the previous one had not. As the only tenure-track Indigenous faculty member the department had in recent memory, I understood that visibility came with the role. Nevertheless, I trusted that the institution’s culture of inclusivity, diverse student body, and presence of Indigenous faculty and leadership throughout the university signified more than symbolism.

However, because my department served many Indigenous students, my presence mattered from the start. As the Lonely Only in my department, I became the default representative. Enthusiasm for my arrival also meant students sought me out for connection, colleagues invited me to guest lecture and serve on committees where a “voice like mine” was needed, and leadership across the institution asked me to participate in initiatives meant to signal commitment to representation and inclusion. Each request was framed as an opportunity—an opportunity to lead, to influence, to make change, to be visible in meaningful ways for students and the community. Many requests were meaningful, which made them all the more difficult to refuse.

But representation is not symbolic; it is work. The asks were framed as opportunity yet added more labor to my already-stressed tenure-track timeline. In that space, opportunity and responsibility blurred together, and representation became work that did not always count as it should.

In academia, there is a quiet culture of yes, particularly around service. Saying yes signals collegiality and institutional citizenship. For women, however, availability is not merely assumed; it is often expected. Being pre-tenure also meant that saying no felt risky and combined with my intersectional identity as a woman of color, I recognized that setting boundaries could be misconstrued. Moreover, the asks rarely felt optional; they felt consequential. If I declined too often, I worried that future invitations—particularly those aligned with my scholarship or that could support my path toward tenure—might stop coming.

My concern was not abstract. I once learned that when a student asked a colleague about seeking my mentorship, they were told, “You can try, but she says no a lot.” The comment lingered, suggesting that boundary-setting had already translated into reputation, when in truth I rarely ever said no to students and, more often than not, said yes to most requests. Yet, when I said no to protect my time, it was noticed, and some interpreted my boundaries as resistance.

The unevenness of this dynamic became clear in conversations with peers at similar rank. When I described the mentoring and service requests that filled my days, they often paused and said, “That sounds like a lot.” Some admitted they were rarely asked to serve in similar ways. The contrast was difficult to ignore.

Tenure expectations were often abstract in conversation, but the reality of publish-or-perish was unmistakable, and productivity metrics were non-negotiable. Service and mentorship, however, did not count in the same way. My time was not actively protected, and in those early years, no one explicitly told me that I could say no. Enthusiasm, once again, outpaced infrastructure. What had been framed as an opportunity slowly accumulated into burden, and the cost unfolded over time in more ways than one.

My service expanded as my scholarship time narrowed. That narrowing meant less time in the communities beyond campus that had sustained both my scholarship and my sense of purpose. The emotional labor intensified as I tried to maintain some semblance of work-life balance, all while carrying the steady weight of expectations.

The tenure clock kept moving, indifferent to the uneven distribution of labor, and then it intersected with a new crisis—COVID-19 and social distancing. Demands multiplied. Supporting students required new forms of care. Teaching and research had to be reimaged overnight. Productivity was still expected, even as the conditions for producing collided with a body and mind already under strain. This was not collapse but accumulation, perhaps even a continuation of the imbalance that had begun during my doctoral studies—an exhaustion that, from the outside, looks like commitment and productivity but, from within, feels like a steady erosion of my capacity.

As I struggled to sustain the pace, remaining silent no longer felt sustainable. The absence of formal mentorship for junior faculty and disproportionate service requests, masked in flattering language, had converged. I was often told that I would be the “best” person for this, that my voice was needed, that my presence mattered. The praise was affirming, yet it carried labor that was neither evenly distributed nor fully acknowledged.

As in earlier times during my doctoral years, I found myself naming inequities again, this time as a faculty member. I spoke about the cost of being the only one, about how service expectations accumulated in ways that the tenure system’s supposedly neutral timelines did not account for. Raising those concerns required risk, particularly within a structure that was also responsible for evaluating me.

To the institution’s credit, my concerns were not dismissed. Conversations shifted, and some structural adjustments were made. Mentorship became more intentional, and clearer supports were put into place. However, much of that change followed strain that was not always visible. By external measures, I was successful. I earned tenure, met expectations, and exceeded some. From the outside, it appeared that I had managed the process well. In reality, I crossed that finish line mentally and physically depleted. While others

may now benefit from improved structures, I did not experience the full measure of that support while navigating tenure myself. The progress matters, but so does the cost at which it came.

Institutions can mean well and still sustain patterns shaped long before many of us were ever meant to belong. Enthusiasm, however sincere, cannot substitute for infrastructure. When representation is celebrated but not structurally protected, the cost is borne by those meant to symbolize progress. If inclusion is to be more than language, then the Lonely Only cannot be left to carry its weight alone.

Dear Higher Education, you welcomed me, valued my presence and my work, and relied on me. However, if you are serious about inclusion, then structural protection must be built in from the beginning. It cannot depend on my resilience or anyone else's. It cannot require exhaustion as evidence that the system was not created with all of us in mind. What I needed was not only your enthusiasm but structures that safeguarded my time, my labor, and my well-being.

Sincerely,
Dr. Mitchell

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About the author

Felicia M. Mitchell is a social work scholar and Associate Professor in a school of Social Work. Her research bridges environmental, structural, and epistemic justice, focusing on how relationships to water and institutions shape well-being among Indigenous peoples and other racially marginalized communities. Situated within environmental and critical social work, her scholarship examines how material conditions, knowledge systems, and institutional norms intersect to reproduce inequity. She develops theoretical and conceptual contributions that draw on culturally responsive and participatory traditions, including arts-based and narrative approaches, such as photovoice and counter-storytelling.