

# Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

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## The Current Attack on Black Superwomen in Higher Education Administration

E. HAIRSTON

*Dear Higher Education (H.E.),*

Yes, I am a black superwoman. But you knew that already.

I know you see it. My vibrant colored cape - bedazzled with audacity and confidence while blowing in tandem with the winds of unpredictability. I know you see it. My Godly-made golden shield and glistening tools of armor. Indeed, a black superwoman. I embody the elements of higher education's purpose; educated, driven, interested, curious, industrious, and inspired. But as a black woman in higher education administration, it is indeed lonely and dangerous being this special - this effective - this necessary.

The world of higher education is supposed to be led by advocates for change, empowerment, opportunity, and inclusion, yet there are imposters who spend countless hours trying to minimize the worth of black women while seeking to benefit from our impact. *They* try to dim our light while wanting to be rejuvenated by our glow, or usher us to the stage left while undeservingly commandeering center stage. The academy, a place saturated with creativity and ingenuity of black scholars and administrators has recently turned its back on many - most tragically the black woman. *We* black women, ordained with endless responsibility and expectation to be the best, and anointed to protect him, her, them, us, and everyone else.

Although unfair, we consistently answer this call; so why have you forsaken us H.E.?

I represent the "worker-bee," the working class of administration and operations that creates the foundation from which institutional effectiveness and efficiency derives. I ensure staff training, executive leader support, office operations, and collaboration. I am the one who connects with the campus community, nurtures relationships, and acts as a confidant - the rock, the generator, the organizer, and the truth-teller. Higher education administration depends on the working class to create an environment that allows uninterrupted learning and forward movement. Yet this vital group is regularly neglected and misused, unseen, and tossed aside, and more so for those who are not white, male, and heterosexual. As a black woman navigating the complexity of the university administrative lattice, there's temporary satisfaction in ascending from a department assistant to a director-level position in a President's office. Your subconscious believes you have earned a level of respect and admiration, even if it is an unsaid sentiment from peers or superiors. You believe that you are uplifting the culture of excellence and diversity in education for your community and for those black women coming after you. Yes, all women of color have endured along the way, constantly managing microaggressions, gaslighting, and excessive scrutiny, or for *Us*, just being labeled an angry black woman. This is our plight in the world, and higher education offices and classrooms are in this world. However, in the last six years the academy has reset itself due to the ever-evolving ghastly world of politics and power. In a time where DEI is under attack and such systems are being dismantled - systems designed for fair treatment and full participation of all people no matter gender, race, identity, or disability - a now clear understanding abruptly appears. *Our* extraordinary efforts to be dependable, accountable, and present, at this moment really do not matter. Black

women in higher education administration are a target like never before. Not a target for promotion, recognition, or inclusion in visioning the future - but for exclusion, envy, blame, and a dismissal of worth. From the university's working class through to the executive officers, the entirety of the scholarship and service black women instilled into the fabric and function of higher education is suddenly deemed inconsequential.

I am a Witness. I have experienced the intensified deliberate transformation of higher education administration since the 2024 United States presidential election. Prior to the presidential transition in January 2025, there was a general code of fairness, inclusion, equity, and respect - not always abided by, not always exercised by choice. And not to dismiss the continued struggles of inherent discrimination from which this country was built, but it was understood that the academy persevered through historical barriers and evolved to function as a place where all should be welcome and have opportunity for success. Between June 2020 and November 2021, 35.4% of presidents hired to lead American colleges and universities were minorities (Lederman 2022). This brought about increased opportunities specifically for black women to proactively be recruited and hired to both the administration and faculty sectors. I was one of those black women hired during that period to support someone who became the first black president at a predominantly white institution. Our mission was to reshape the executive office and university in the image of a hopeful world that is diverse, accepting, trustworthy, and rooted in the freedoms of individual expression and open dialogue. The Black Lives Matter Movement and the murder of George Floyd in 2020 (one of many), ushered in the next phase of advocacy for civil rights, not just for people of color, but the LGBTQ+ community and all the historically oppressed. And you, Higher Education, were at the epicenter of information gathering and sharing, protest, and resistance. Sadly, post January 2025 a new reckoning was upon us.

Again, this black superwoman is a Witness. In the last thirteen months I have experienced the purposeful malice of hatred and division exalted upon this country and the institution of higher education. The general code has been broken. The subtleties, the micro-aggressions, the secret judgements are no longer mostly quiet, hidden or somewhat manageable. A sizable portion of mankind is once again loud, proud, and intentional with their ignorance, violence, and intimidation. And for black women in this space, we are in the line-of-fire during a resurgence of blatant bigotry and injustice. I am currently experiencing the fallout of the turnover of that first black university president replaced by a cis white male, and those same black women who were employed and empowered under the previous president have been displaced to lesser roles or simply fired. I have watched white men and women promoted or hired into executive leadership positions, previously held by black women with far more experience and education. My burden now is trying to survive being the only black woman left at a manager-level on my team and my portfolio arbitrarily reduced under the new president. I once operated as a strategic integrator, cross-functional coordinator, and a trusted advisor. Those skills and talents have been of no use to the new president and his newly hired leadership team of cis white men and women. I am relegated to helping those "above" me, white women, perform nominal tasks unlearned on their journey to be "more qualified" than the black women that preceded them. That is another burden to carry; expected to be great whilst taken advantage of, void of recognition, and paid significantly less for my efforts. A familiar circumstance as a black woman, an ancient tale, but the current attack on our livelihood in higher education administration has reached a critical inflection point.

Newsflash H.E., I am in serious debt from the emotional tax paid for enduring, while always going above and beyond, always exceeding expectations, and always depended on to be the fixer or fire extinguisher. Not because I wanted to, but because that is the expectation set upon me, or else. The less talented, less remarkable, and less melanated are offered reprieve when it suits them. So many claims of being too tired, too busy, or simply not in their job description, are accepted and offered sympathy. Oh, how I wish I could just **decide** what was **too** demanding for my energy and then be given space to move on. The notion of overworking and overlooking the underrepresented is not a new concept, but currently higher education is overwhelmingly burdening black women with unrealistic expectations while simultaneously making us the scapegoats for others' failures and

shortcomings. Others get the opportunity to fail up, while *We* fight and claw for liberties, chances, and privileges that we have earned ten times over. This type of never-ending race is exhausting. The world depends on black women to be great but throws us away when it pleases ego. Or when new leaders prefer not to be held accountable, and disguise leadership transitions as “necessary” change. Or because the man in the oval office decrees that what makes us colorful and unique is less-than. Black women’s exceptionalism helped elevate environments in the academy that these new unexceptional leaders reside in. I know you see it H.E., the bricks these people have tossed onto our capes and the scratches on our armor from battle.

I am forever a Witness. I was raised by a black superwoman who was raised by a black superwoman. My grandmother, blessed with the responsibility of being the first, endured the burdens of unrealistic expectations and fears of being cast aside. The baby of ten siblings born in the south to parents who were the children of slaves, she grew up learning about the importance of education and service to others. She went on to earn degrees in education and curriculum and worked as a college professor in the 1940s. She was also the first African American to teach in newly desegregated elementary and middle schools in the 1950s, breaking the color line for teachers in that district. She understood how quality education, and specifically higher education, could quite literally help save and enrich the lives of the oppressed, especially for people of color - for progress, for survival. My grandma also understood how her journey in education and administration was deemed improbable, yet she boldly wore her womanly blackness as a beacon of pride and purpose.

During college and graduate school, and while working various roles in higher education administration, I used to ask my grandma about stories of the past. I wondered how she dealt with the aggressions, blatant racism and injustices, and the weight of being young, black, and female. I carried a naivete about those burdens being of the “past.” Her answers always conveyed lessons of strategy, patience, and empathy, with perspective and wisdom I knew I was supremely blessed to receive. She never wanted me to lose focus on the task at hand - to get my education and do my job with purpose. She also told me what so many black folks have heard a million times: “You have to work twice as hard...” and “Don’t let anyone outwork you.” Thus, put on your black superwoman cape and never let that you cannot control tear you down. My grandmother’s story is just one of many in the history of black women in education who took the punches and kept standing. But I am confident that when she passed eight years ago, she never could have imagined that in 2026 her oldest granddaughter would be fighting some battles she believed we already overcame.

The history of higher education tells us that black women have made vast and lasting impacts on the quality and access of education and overall meaningful functionality of college campuses.

Achievements in teaching and research innovation, student development and peer mentorship, investments in diversified faculty, and taking the helm leading institutions, have all changed the makeup of the future of the academy. H.E. you saw them - Mary McLeod Bethune, Johnnetta Betsch Cole, Ruth Simmons, and the many unsung sheroes - black superwomen who helped build the blueprint for commitment and dedication to education. You benefited from their crafts, perseverance, adaptability, and courage. This is your history too. So again, why have you forsaken us?

The answer to the question of “why?” is inherent to the condition of black women everywhere; because *We* have rendered our talents, multidimensional beauty, and contributions as undeniable to the oppressors. I dare not label my journey in higher education administration as rare or unique, because I stand on the shoulders of black superwomen who persevered and left a legacy of strength and promise. I do not have a positive outlook on our future together H.E., nor a resolution or guide for reciprocity. And honestly, I am too tired to figure it out and that is ok. The truth is black superwomen never needed acceptance or inclusion of us to define our self-worth. No matter the battle, we continue because we must and because we can. I salute all black women in service to the academy remaining in this fight, and I send them light and permission to engage in self-care and to extend grace themselves.

Higher Education, I hope this letter reminds you that efforts to minimize black superwomen only add more layers to our cape.

*With audacity,  
E. Hairston aka - A black superwoman bothered, not broken.*

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## References

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## About the author

**E. Hairston** has worked for over seventeen years in higher education administration for three different major research institutions. She provided management and executive support for dean, provost, and president offices, leading strategic planning for operations and administrative processes and services, training and supervising executive staff support, overseeing events and engagements, and leading communication strategies for internal and external collaborations. She also served as advisor and liaison for executive leaders and led administration and logistics planning for the Board of Trustees. E. Hairston also serves as a part-time consultant and coordinator for an annual academic leadership development program that aims to increase the representation of diverse groups assuming higher education leadership positions. She holds a B.A. in Applied Behavioral Science and an M.S. in Communication.