

Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

The Mountain was Never Neutral: On Black Womanhood and the Invisible Labor of Belonging

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Dear Higher Education,

Last week, I received an email announcing the Vice Chancellor for Equity and Inclusion, a Black woman with decades of experience, would leave her position after less than two years. I did not interpret the announcement as a routine leadership transition. Instead, I understood it as part of a troubling and increasingly visible pattern; Black women continue to exit senior leadership positions at disproportionate rates, particularly in roles explicitly charged with advancing equity (Townsend 2021). These departures, which are becoming more common, demand structural analysis rather than private speculation.

Higher education institutions have rendered diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) leadership politically vulnerable (Abrica and Oliver 2025), and Black women who occupy these positions face heightened scrutiny of their credentials, authority, and legitimacy (Townsend 2021). Public discourse has amplified this scrutiny. Commentaries in outlets such as the *Boston Herald* (Carr 2025) have questioned the intellectual merit and qualifications of Black women leaders, often employing rhetoric that racializes and genderizes their authority. These critiques do not operate in isolation; they draw power from a broader sociopolitical climate that frames equity initiatives as ideological excess rather than institutional necessity.

Higher education has not insulated itself from these forces. Universities that once articulated solid commitments to justice, inclusion, and human dignity now recalibrate or retreat from those commitments under political and financial pressure. Leaders rebrand or dismantle DEI offices, reduce funding streams, and temper public messaging (Abrica and Oliver 2025). In this context, institutions, either intentionally or unintentionally, position Black women administrators and faculty as representatives of contested initiatives. Critics label them “DEI hires,” thereby reducing Black women’s extensive scholarly training and administrative expertise to a dismissive, biased political shorthand. This delegitimizing narrative destabilizes professional standing and narrows pathways to advancement and retention.

These dynamics also intensify the isolation of Black women in higher education. Black women frequently serve as the representatives of their unique racial and gender identities in departments, leadership teams, or governance structures (Melaku 2022). Institutions rely on their presence to signal diversity while simultaneously isolating them in predominantly white spaces (Kelly et al. 2021). Research consistently demonstrates that professional success depends upon belonging, mentorship, and access to networks of influence (Gardner, Cowan Pitre, and Dillard 2024). However, institutional cultures often deny Black women these essential resources.

The academy compounds this isolation through racialized and gendered expectations of invisible labor (Melaku 2022). Colleagues and students routinely position Black women as cultural translators, diversity representatives, and informal counselors (Quaye et al. 2024). They consult them on incidents of bias, request

mediation during conflict, and expect mentorship that extends well beyond formal work responsibilities. Students of color, navigating hostile or indifferent campus climates, frequently seek out the few Black women faculty or administrators for emotional affirmation, support, and even material goods (Kelly et al. 2021). Many Black women respond with resources such as food, transportation, emergency assistance, and makeshift counseling conversations as forms of labor institutions neither formally recognize nor adequately compensate.

Scholars have long examined this invisible labor in the historical context and stereotype of the mammy figure who constantly sacrifices her well-being for the benefit of others (Porter, Clay, and Oates 2025). In contemporary higher education, the mammy persists in a reconfigured form. Institutions implicitly influence Black women to absorb institutional strain without complaint, maintain composure amid hostility, and prioritize being overworked over personal well-being. Importantly, this labor extends beyond service to white colleagues and students. Black women also perform substantial carework for students of color, often motivated by shared experiences of marginalization (Porter, Clay, and Oates 2025). Although this labor emerges from solidarity, institutions exploit it structurally by failing to redistribute responsibilities or provide sustainable structural supports.

The cumulative impact produces measurable harm. Continuous hypervisibility, credential questioning, and emotional labor generate racial battle fatigue, chronic stress, and burnout (Calhoun 2024; Quaye et al. 2024). Black women must repeatedly demonstrate competence to counter assumptions of deficiency. They must navigate microaggressions in classrooms and meetings while sustaining professional productivity. Over time, this environment erodes mental and physical health and contributes to attrition from leadership and faculty ranks. Institutions then interpret these exits as individual choices rather than as evidence of systemic failure.

If higher education seeks to address Black women's isolation and attrition substantively, it must implement structural interventions rather than symbolic gestures. Universities should redesign their hiring, evaluation, and promotion frameworks to explicitly account for invisible labor and equity work (Melaku 2022). They must institutionalize mentorship and sponsorship structures that connect Black women to decision-making networks and leadership pipelines. Governing boards and executive leaders should establish accountability metrics that protect equity initiatives from political volatility. Institutions must also expand access to culturally responsive mental health services and workload adjustments that acknowledge disproportionate service burdens.

Such reforms require more than rhetorical recommitment; they require a redistribution of power and resources. Without structural transformation, institutions will continue to shift the burden of adaptation onto Black women while preserving organizational norms that marginalize them. Higher education now stands at an inflection point. It must decide whether it will remain a site of critical inquiry and social transformation or capitulate to forces that undermine its stated commitments. Black women should not have to equate endurance with belonging, nor interpret survival as success. Institutions bear responsibility for ensuring that presence does not require disproportionate sacrifice.

Thus, we come to the mountain, this academy, because we have hope in its intellectual and civic promise. We come to generate knowledge, mentor students, and advance equity through scholarship and leadership. Yet the mountain must confront the conditions under which it demands our ascent. It cannot celebrate representation while tolerating isolation. It cannot invoke equity while destabilizing those who enact it.

Until higher education aligns its structures with its professed values, the conundrum will persist; not only why we come to the mountain, but whether the mountain will sustain those who climb it.

Sincerely,
Katrina A. Calhoun

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About the author

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Calhoun's research has been published in the *Journal of Higher Education* and *Women, Gender, and Families of Color*. She has also presented at premier conferences, including the American College Personnel Association (ACPA), the American Educational Research Association (AERA), the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE), the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA), and the National Conference on Race and Ethnicity in Higher Education (NCORE). Dr. Calhoun was recently recognized by NASPA as an Emerging Faculty Leader in the Academy.