

# Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

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## Tall Fences and Sacred Ground: Recalibrating Worth in the Academy

MARTHA K. CLAVELLE

*Dear Higher Education,*

Here I sit again, in the in between hours; too late to be night, too early to be morning; the "second shift" familiar to mothers like me, writing in the only time life affords me to think both deeply and clearly. Like so many of the students for whom I have had the privilege to serve, I have written and worked from this posture for years; as a full-time employee, an African American woman, first in my family to attend college, a single mother of a little one on the spectrum, and the matriarch of a family whose survival has often depended on my advancement. I have been a consummate scholar; studying, serving, caretaking, providing, protecting; always against the clock.

I have to confess that as a child, I imagined the academy as a sanctuary of sorts. Like so many other children born into families who struggled to survive, it was instilled in me from a very early age that a good education would reveal the gateway to a better life. But it didn't take much to convince me, as I was drawn to learning, to books, and reading incessantly; whether it was a novel or a soup can. Some of my fondest memories are tied to trips with my mother to the library, where I inhaled the scent and the conjurings contained within those bound pages tucked amidst the labyrinth of shelving. I remember vividly playing "school" and always insisting on being the teacher to my siblings and friends. I believed sincerely that education afforded both freedom and liberation to those granted the privilege to pursue it. It does not require much imagination to understand how I arrived at the academy and education as my avocation. But I did not come to you for prestige. I pursued you, as both a student and professional with urgency; seeking to protect my family and others from poverty while guiding them towards greater opportunity- to the best of my ability. I equated you with justice and equity in opportunity. I saw myself excitedly as a social justice warrior and I believed my commitment to equity and justice aligned with your stated mission; so I came to work.

In the beginning, I was an earnest, open, altruistic, professional wanting to contribute meaningfully to your stated mission and vision as I understood it to be.

What I did not yet know or understand was that the mission to which I had tethered my sense of purpose was not fully aligned with the reality of your structural and cultural design. I began to see early on how your efforts towards institutional preservation, particularly your management of your reputation and perceived stability superseded the depth and pace of any meaningful transformation.

What I learned as a Dean and outsider within was that titles on paper often did not correspond to where authority was actually housed. Formal position suggested influence, but the way authority was received, recognized, and respected often depended on who held it. I was often responsible for implementing decisions that had been shaped and settled well before they reached my desk; decisions for which my expertise had not been sought or solicited to meaningfully inform outcomes or directives. Yet once those decisions were set in motion, I was held fully accountable to their execution and for absorbing the frustration, confusion, and ever-present resistance

that surfaced among my teams. In the middle space, responsibility and accountability traveled toward me from both ends, while authority remained elsewhere.

It was also from this middle position that I witnessed how diversity and equity operated in practice. I began to see that equity was most comfortable when it did not require the discomfort from those most invested in the status quo. The moment it pressed against entrenched authority, it was met with scrutiny. At times, so was I.

Much of the equity focused programming that was central in my areas of oversight often went without proportional budgetary support. Despite that, I led the cultivation of what came to be known as “The Village,” a cultural and relational hub for students who had long experienced marginalization and being ‘unseen’ on campus. It was a space that was built slowly, through trust, presence, and sustained engagement. Students stayed. They connected. They returned, again and again. Retention and sense of belonging improved. Yet while the space flourished relationally, it did not initially receive institutional visibility or endorsement in alignment with its impact. Only later, once leadership of the space was shifted, did it become more prominently highlighted as an institutional success.

When the Village was later embraced without acknowledging the labor that shaped it, I felt erased. It stung. That feeling was exacerbated by a growing sense that my presence within the institution had become easier to marginalize than to engage. It was not just that my work disappeared but that its legitimacy seemed detached from me.

These experiences, which I struggled to name, sharpened my awareness that something was wrong. For a long while, I internalized the shifts happening around me as personal failings. I turned my site of analysis and critique inward, replaying conversations and interactions again and again. What did I misread? How did I misstep?

What I experienced as regular practice was this: my decisions were questioned in ways that required explanation beyond explanation. My directness required qualification; my urgency had to be tempered. My tone and tenor were moderated and scrutinized. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, the version of myself I knew to be grounded and capable began to shrink beneath the steady dissection of the workplace. I thought I had lost myself.

To be honest, there is a particular grief that you wrestle with, when you realize that you participated, on some level, in your own diminishment in the name of professionalism. I adjusted, recalibrated, contorted, all in an effort to become more legible to the institution. In reality I only managed to become less of my Self.

It would take time, deep study and the steady embrace of a community of sister scholars to help me understand that I was not unraveling but had stepped into a patterned experience larger than myself; navigating a system that did not know how to receive me without distortion; a legacy as old as the institution itself. Women of color, Black women in leadership in particular, have long navigated similar terrain, including having proximity to power without benefitting from its protection, the assigning of compounded responsibilities that lead to over extension, and being visible without the extension of authority. The distortion of Black Women’s leadership is well documented. What I had begun to internalize as personal inadequacy was in many ways patterned experience.

Wisdom is earned in both scar tissue and clarity. Through the experience of harm and my refusal to allow further diminishment, I have learned to extend myself an abundance of grace. I have begun to practice kindness and care toward my Self. To be certain, extending grace does not absolve the institution of its responsibility, but it does help to clarify mine.

I recognize that I do not have the power to single-handedly dismantle a system that is designed to preserve itself, but I do have the power to change how I engage it moving forward. I no longer make the mistake in believing that the presence of challenge or friction is a sign of my being deficient in some way. I have learned to set firm boundaries to prevent my erasure. I remember how the elders used to say that tall fences make for good

neighbors, and I believe that firm boundaries make for strong stewardship. Strong boundaries help me to know what is mine to carry and what is not. They keep me from feeling like I have to hustle for my worth.

I know now that many women of color come to this understanding through their own experience with the institution. Despite our entering these spaces as capable and committed human beings, we sometimes learn, painfully, that the clarity of understanding what is ours to carry, and not, is essential to staying intact, healthy, and whole.

I humbly offer that the hope, our hope as women of color, lies in our willingness to remain in conversation and community with one another- to compare notes, to recognize the shared patterns in our experiences and name them accordingly, and to extinguish shame before it encroaches any further on any one of us. Our opportunity lies in our willingness to serve as reminders to each other that we are not misreading ourselves or institutional terrain.

*In community,*  
*Martha K. Clavelle Ed.D.*

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### About the author

**Dr. Martha K. Clavelle** is a mother, daughter, scholar, and higher education leader whose work centers the experiences of Black women navigating leadership within the academy. Grounded in Black Feminist thought and critical autoethnography, her scholarship examines misrecognition, institutional power, and the recalibration of identity within systems not designed for Black women's thriving. A first-generation college graduate and recipient of the 2023 William E. Piland Leader Among Leaders Award from San Diego State University, she writes to name patterns, cultivate clarity, and foster community among women of color in higher education.