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Unjust Universities: Part II

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Unjust Universities: Part II

Submitted by Zachary S. Ritter and Reshmi Dutt-Ballerstadt on August 14, 2020

In our [last essay](#) ^[1], we discussed how institutions continue to have various administrators -- predominantly white -- whose primary function is to enforce damage control to ensure that white supremacist structures can be maintained. Rather than developing a new culture of equity and justice, institutions target their diversity workers within the administration, creating purposefully hostile work environments.

This week, we shift our focus from administrators to faculty diversity workers. These diversity workers are both faculty who identify as Black Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) and those who are not BIPOC but are serious allies and accomplices in creating, working and supporting various diversity and social justice works to bring forward the vision of a just university. Yet the work of these diversity workers is frequently obstructed -- often by their own colleagues and administration -- creating a toxic work environment.

Disclaimer: The list in this essay comes from a collective collaboration of BIPOC and other marginalized administrators and faculty members who wish to remain anonymous. As colleges and universities undergo restructuring due to COVID-19 and make new commitments to address systemic failings as invoked by the recent public murder of George Floyd, new spaces for revisioning real structural changes have materialized. Such attempts to address structural changes are a reminder that we continue to live in a culture where racial and gendered disparity and violence are pervasive, persistent, insidious and deep-seated.

Red Flags: Toxic Faculty-Related Work Environments

- Micro and macro invalidations -- by which colleagues constantly undermine your expertise, your academic training and your abilities -- have become a routine.
- When you complain about systemic oppressions, your institution hires investigators to investigate your complaints where you are made the "problem."

Yet, when the formal report of the outcome holds the university accountable for not addressing hostile climates, your legal counsel heavily redacts the report, sometimes even voids it in consultation with other upper level administrators, and claims that the investigator was incompetent.

- When your university hires a Title IX investigator, the investigator often tells you in your private interview that they can see various discriminations and retaliations in your case. When the final outcome is given to you by your HR Director, it often says that while your claims were substantiated, the investigation did not find any violation of your university's discrimination or harassment policies.
- Your white colleagues expect apologies for calling out their gaslighting and bad behavior. If you do not apologize, then they file complaints of harassment. Some faculty even call you a "bully."
- "Civility guidelines," "respectability politics," "anonymous bias reports" or "care reports" -- which sound high-minded but accomplish nothing -- are created to avoid addressing institutional and systemic racism.
- Your white colleagues keep referring to the "community" and refuse to talk about the institution as a *workplace*. In this "community" tone policing is normalized.
- Self-proclaimed white allies enact performative justice by displaying quotes about social justice on their doors and email signature files. They often speak for you in faculty meetings about the plight of faculty of color -- from the extra-services and labor they are often asked to perform to mentor students of color, to everyday mundane forms of racism that they experience. Yet they seek you out to receive your free labor, emotional support, validation and even occasional babysitting. They exhibit their visible discomfort when you question them about their performances that hardly lead to any actions or resolutions.
- You experience sidelining from both faculty and administrators, as major decisions are made without your input on important issues that directly impact you.
- You are asked to pose for brochures and webpages to promote institutional commitment to diversity, yet you continue to be invisible when it comes to being included in any real decision-making.
- You realize that differential performance standards are becoming normalized. You are required to teach more classes, perform more service and write more publications than your white male colleagues to achieve tenure or promotion.
- You are asked to lead workshops to address "white privilege" for faculty. When you express hesitance, you are seen as avoiding service. It also works the other way around: when you lead a workshop and set up scenarios for "difficult dialogues" about race or white-privilege, you are viewed as being hostile.
- You are passed over for leadership opportunities -- not because you do not have the skills or the criteria, but because the people who represent the institution on various committees cannot imagine that you have capabilities of being a "leader." In truth, they are apprehensive that if you were to lead, you might challenge their status quo of white privilege.
- "Oh, I haven't seen you" is a coded phrase for surveillance of your movements. Meanwhile you are there, but avoiding them because of their toxicity.

The combined list from this week and last week reveals a pervasive culture of toxicity that produces simultaneous aggression toward and the alienation of diversity workers within the academy. The cost of injuring and harming these bodies in the wake of yet another resurgence of the BLM movement, coupled with continuing conversations about

restructuring the university during the coronavirus pandemic, should not be taken lightly. College and university leaders should seriously consider the issues and concerns we've outlined and their impacts.

Ultimately, when diversity initiatives fail or are unsuccessful, the biggest immediate victims are underrepresented students, staff and faculty. In the long run, however, such failures of diversity initiatives not only harm BIPOC but also compromise institutional structures by weakening curriculum, threatening patterns of student recruitment/enrollment and the retention of faculty and staff members, and creating systemic toxicity that impacts the entire college or university.

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in the Urban Center: The Costs and Challenges of Continued Whiteness in the Americas and Beyond ^[2] and has a new co-edited book forthcoming: *A Peculiar*

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