



Harris, M., Sellers, S. L., Clerge, O., & Gooding Jr, F. W. (2017). *Stories from the front of the room: How higher education faculty of color overcome challenges and thrive in the academy*. Rowman & Littlefield.

A Review of Harris et al. (2017), *Stories from the Front of the Room*

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Abstract: A review of Michelle Harris, Sherrill L. Sellers, Orly Clerge, and Frederick W. Gooding Jr.'s book *Stories from the front of the room: How higher education faculty of color overcome challenges and thrive in the academy* is a collection of stories from diverse scholars that provides a thought-provoking, in-depth look at the challenges faculty of color face in the academy.

Keywords: higher education, race, citizenship, exclusion, administrators, mentors, invisibility, ethnicity, gender.

Stories from the front of the room: How higher education faculty of color overcome challenges and thrive in the academy is a collection of stories from diverse scholars representing various disciplines and experiences in higher education who provide a thought-provoking, in-depth look at the challenges faculty of color face in the academy. The authors, Michelle Harris, Sherrill L. Sellers, Orly Clerge, and Frederick W. Gooding Jr., presented an array of narratives that allow the reader to discover experiences from academics of different genders and races across different institutions and disciplines from various regions of the country (Harris et al., 2017, p. 2). The book comprises five sections, Colleagues, Students, Tenure, Administration, and Climate, each

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containing three chapters. In each section, the three chapters followed the same format, including research, shared letters from contributing scholars relating to the topic, and a mentor letter from senior academics. The twenty-three letters were addressed to colleagues, students, administrators, mentors, and friends and spoke of invisibility, discrimination, and exclusion in relation to the writer's race, ethnicity, religion, class, citizenship, status, and gender. On the other hand, some of the letters were expressions of gratitude and thanks to mentors, family, friends, and allies (Harris et al., 2017).

Higher education institutions continue to work towards diversifying the professoriate and building more inclusive campuses, but despite those efforts, faculty of color experience higher levels of discrimination and cultural taxation than their white colleagues (Harris et al., 2017; Hester, 2020). These efforts are to be applauded, but the challenges faculty of color face are an increasingly important issue in higher education as the population in the United States is becoming increasingly diverse (Cohen & Kisker, 2010; Grawe, 2017; Vespa et al., 2018). Although the United States has experienced significant growth in the past, the diversity projected for future growth makes the next several decades unique because the projection that the non-Hispanic White population will shrink over the coming decades and diverse populations will soar (Grawe, 2017; Hester, 2020; Vespa et al., 2018). The continued growth in population and immigration will bring new life to higher education in the future, and the demographic change is reshaping the population of the United States in ways that raise challenges for institutions (Grawe, 2017). With this growth in mind, Harris et al. (2017) presented an eye-opening picture of the nationwide systemic blight faced by faculty of color on university campuses.

Structure and Content

Section one, *Colleagues*, included chapters one through three and discussed the cultural taxation that faculty of color encounter in the academy. Taxation comes from various sources, including administration, student demands, and the stress inherent in negotiating professional relationships with colleagues (Harris et al., 2017, p.13). Through the current research provided and letters from contributors, it becomes clear that faculty of color are more likely to encounter a climate of withdrawn colleagues and to be excluded from collaborative research opportunities that are presented to their white colleagues. In addition, there is often a perception that their scholarship is not as rigorous or deserving of accolades as that of white faculty members, especially if they work with communities of color. Lastly, the authors identified that faculty of color must negotiate the unrealistic perception by others that they represent their racial or ethnic group creating immense pressure on the faculty member. The contributor of Letter 3, signed anonymously "Hopeful", demonstrates these feelings concisely when saying, "for so long, I have been underrepresented and underestimated in higher education" (p. 25). In yet another letter, contributor JeffriAnne Wilder shared a dreadful experience with colleagues while attending an event as a new professor when Barack Obama was elected as President:

Everyone at the party began celebrating. While I was overjoyed, I was hesitant to express my true feelings of euphoria because I was not surrounded by any of my close friends or family members. I was in a state of disbelief thinking about the enormity of the moment. You jolted me back to reality however, when you looked at me pointed your finger in my face and said, no more excuses. (p.27)

Experiences like those shared by the contributing faculty are brought to life vividly by the book author's choice to use a letter format. By reading the very personal life experiences, readers are able to immerse themselves in the lived realities of the writers. The section concludes with an inspirational essay by contributor Alford Young Jr, who talked about his status as one of few African American administrators and how he uses his position to influence and mentor students and faculty.

Section two, *Students*, brings focus to the difficulties faculty of color face with students in and out of the classroom. The tribulation inside the classroom can manifest in unsavory ways throughout the faculty career. For example, bias in student evaluations is problematic for faculty of color and for women who often encounter a deficit of credibility and students who are more likely to comment on their instructors' appearance, clothing, and tone of voice in anonymous evaluations (Boring & Ottoboni, 2016; Hendrix, 2007; Sampaio, 2006; Subtirelu, 2015). In addition, contributors in this section discussed how it is common for faculty of color to feel they have the responsibility to mentor their students and all students who share their ethnic or racial backgrounds. Black women as mentors are essential to black students' growth, development, and success (Hester, 2020, p.18). Mentoring is an enormous responsibility, but one that many faculty of color take on with pleasure and pride (Harris et al., 2017; Hester, 2020). Letter 8, written by contributor Delores Mullings, spoke about the mentor role stating, "I happily morph into the supportive mentor, encouraging, sharing, and most importantly acknowledging your experiences of racism in academe" (p. 53). At times, faculty struggle as they witness the experiences of the students of color they teach and mentor encountering the same racial bias and inequities they face in higher education. In Letter 7, contributor JPS described such a situation:

I wanted to run after you, but I didn't. I watched you go because what I would have said would have just made you feel worse. Welcome to academia. Welcome to a place where black women are first presumed incompetent and then, when the initial assumption has been irrefutably disproven are dismissed ad hominem. I didn't run after you because I would have also had to say that this is just your freshman year. "Get ready, it gets worse." (p. 50)

The challenges described are not solely experienced at predominantly white institutions but are inherent throughout higher education. In Letter 9, the contributor wrote about being asked why they are "so black" while employed at an HBCU. The contributor responded by saying, "my blackness is my ability to survive and thrive. My blackness is my pride. My blackness is my safety net. It is my comfort zone as well as who and what I am" (p. 56). Lastly, contributor Mary Pattillo closed out section two with an essay about the importance of continuing to reflect on your own implicit bias. If academics are to change the environment described by the reflections of the faculty contributors, they must first begin by creating a practice of self-examination to check their own bias.

Authors in section three, *Tenure*, reflected on the challenges faculty of color face when navigating higher education's tenure and promotion systems. Harris et al. (2017) described the tenure process as "a mechanism of transforming outsiders (newly hired faculty) to insiders (tenured faculty) within the academy and as a test that faculty must pass" (p. 69). Faculty of color face numerous challenges, including bias, racism, and sexism, in addition to structural and institutional inequities, while often having to surpass the normal expectations of scholarly work to prove themselves worthy of tenure (Harris et al., 2017; Hester, 2020; Lowney, 2018). In addition to the

challenges mentioned throughout the letters in each section, a reoccurring theme referenced the intense pressure faculty face when being one of very few diverse faculty on campus. They are not only taxed as mentors, as described in earlier sections, but also as champions of campus diversity initiatives. Again, they often pursue this task with visions of creating system change for future students and colleagues to enjoy the aftereffects of their efforts but often at the peril of time to focus on their scholarship (Harris et al., 2017). Letter 11, addressed to “Dear Faculty Members who Mentor Doctoral Students of Color,” demonstrated the struggle with representation when the contributor wrote:

Scholars of color are often seen as representation of an entire group while whites are typically seen as individuals. In other words, people of color bear the burden of representation in a way that white people don't never have to. And since the academy remains majority white, this perspective continues to thrive. (p. 78)

The struggle to keep up with all the laborious expectations is evident in the heartfelt apologetic letter (Letter 12) in which the contributor discussed feeling that they have let down their mentors.

So, I walked into this oppressive system, dream in my back pocket, looking to make a difference. That's the equivalent of having an iron chain knotted around your neck while offering the loose end to any passerby willing to snatch it. At least, it seems to be, if you look like me. (p. 80)

The experiences shared by these contributors exposed the structural and institutional discord in higher education that will not soon be resolved if not addressed. Without tenure, many faculty will be unable to rise to the ranks of administration, furthering the exclusion of diverse representation and inequity in higher education.

In section four, *Administration*, the authors' research and contributing letters highlighted the challenges faculty of color face in administrative positions and the dichotomy in higher education between the spoken focus on diversity and the lack of authentic inclusive practices. In higher education today, administrators are the actors who implement the university's policies that tax faculty of color while professing their dedication to diversity (Harris et al., 2017). Contributor Harvey Charles spoke to these issues in his mentor essay at the end of section four when he stated:

It is therefore often shocking for young faculty of color like you to discover powerful hierarchies in a place that preaches collegiality, and to discover multiple forms of racist behavior committed by many who publicly advocate for diversity. The contradictions and hypocrisies can be overwhelming! (p. 119)

When reading the letters in this section, followed by the mentor essay, it is indubitable that entering administration takes enormous resilience for faculty of color. Faculty of color build resilience through scholarship, mentorship, and community engagement (Hester, 2020; Lowney, 2018). As contributor Harvey Charles states in his essay,

If you want to be in the academy and you have prepared yourself for such a career, then you must claim your right to be there and defend your ground with courage and with the support of those who care about your success.
(p. 125)

In addition to the resilience and courage presented in the letters, section four also shared the struggles faculty of color face with feelings that they must repress their life experiences and concern for their community. In Letter 15, contributor Amanishakete Ani shared these experiences and the following sentiment:

In order to exist here, I quickly learned that I must pretend that these issues are not as important to me as they really are. That these children and families are not members of my family and my community. They are not people worthy of recognition. And respect. My dignity has no place here. So when my comfortable and self-assured white colleague greets me today in the hallway with “How's it going, Daphne?” With a curt smile? I suspect that what he really means is “We're still in character, right, Daphne?” (p. 104-105)

The hurdles faculty of color face in higher education catapult into an even higher level of strife and struggle when entering the administration. As noted by various letters, the policies and practices are created by the administration; therefore, it is ever so important to diversify the administrative ranks.

Section five, *Climate*, drew attention to the reality that higher education institutions in the United States were built to cater to affluent white men. Society has changed drastically since the 17th century when Harvard opened its doors in the United States. Although demographics have changed, the campus climate is still fraught with racially forged tensions between white students, faculty, staff, and students of color (Harris et al., 2017, p. 129). Contributor Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's mentor letter reminded us that

America was built on white domination, and all institutions and interactions flow from this structural reality. In a university system that was built on slavery-based capitalism, it is not surprising that faculty of color have a third-class citizenship and the hierarchy of the ivory tower.
(p. 152)

Throughout the letters and essays, a message of strength and resilience continued to surface. In section five, the contributors spoke of self-preservation through community involvement and activism. In addition, the theme of visibility was present in several letters. Uzma Jamil, the contributor of Letter 20, described the feelings by saying, “academics of color are constantly placed in the space of being hyper-visible on one hand and invisible on the other hand” (p.134). In Letter 22, contributor Professor Davis shared an insightful and powerful message regarding the terminology used to identify faculty of color, saying that

the term minority is often used to refer to people of color -human beings of African... descent. However...minority means the smaller part or number ...less than half. Minority suggest diminution...is it appropriate to use a group statistical representation as a euphemism for their identity? (p.140)

The words people use are powerful, and the statement by Professor Davis spoke to just one of the ways the message is perpetuated in the rhetoric shared in higher education.

Conclusion

Although it is irrefutable that higher education is changing but the question raised is, whether it is changing fast enough? Harris et al. (2017) bring to light the current experiences faculty of color face every day in higher education in a way that the reader can feel the gut-wrenching struggle. The composition of the letters in this book recounted countless public and private interactions that render faculty of color voiceless, disempowered and marginalized (Harris et al., 2017, p. 152). By utilizing letters and essays, this book has given the reader the ability to see inside the hearts and minds of the faculty. This book should be a must-read for anyone entering higher education administration, as change cannot begin within the institutional and structural inefficiencies if the policies created are at odds with the intention for an inclusive campus. While Harris et al. (2017) shared an illuminating narrative giving the reader an insight into the lives of faculty of color, it left the reader inspired to make change without a call to action. Therefore, *Stories from the front of the room: How higher education faculty of color overcome challenges and thrive in the academy* can be paired with additional critical resources to encourage and facilitate more critical and expansive thinking and practice in higher education.

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Notes on Contributor

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