

JOURNEYS OF BLACK WOMEN IN  
ACADEME

# DIVERSITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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DIVERSITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION VOLUME 26

**JOURNEYS OF BLACK  
WOMEN IN ACADEME:  
SHARED LESSONS,  
EXPERIENCES, AND  
INSIGHTS**

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

*To our mothers, grandmothers, and other ancestors whose educational backgrounds belied their wisdom and who truly inspired this book.*

*To our communities who invested in and supported us throughout our academic journeys.*

*To our mentors who graciously met us where we were and generously poured into us.*

*To the doctoral scholars and early- and mid-career faculty and administrators who sounded the call and trusted us enough to seek and hold dear our advisement and counsel.*

*To my dear colleagues and chapter contributors who without hesitation responded to the call despite having to deal with disquieting and unsettled memories.*

*To our children, grandchildren, and future generations whom we hope will be ultimately impacted by our work.*

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**Clara Y. Young** is a strategic transformational leader who has served as a Department Chairperson, an Associate Vice President, and a President of organizations. She is skilled in strategic planning, implementing strategies to realize the vision and scholarly writing. She has progressed through the ranks in academia up to Interim Assistant Vice President. Dr Young implemented strategic initiatives to assist students in their progression in higher education as a Doctoral Student, Professor, Department Chairperson, and AVP. She led the Tenure and Promotion process at Tennessee State University and addressed progress and issues related to academic programs. She also led “New Faculty Orientation” and implemented the “New Faculty Institute.” Dr Young’s academic career has included being an advocate for students in which she has mentored students through the academic process by instructing how to ask questions, take exams, write papers, and communicate with professors.

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# PREFACE

## INTRODUCTION

At first blush, this book, *Journeys of Black Women in Academe: Shared lessons, Experiences, and Insights*, appears to focus solely on our academic journeys in higher education institutions. But it is much more than that. Unlike airport security demanding that you either quickly consume or toss out certain items before boarding flights, we could not and would not jettison our family backgrounds and lived cultural experiences. Each chapter author had her own private reckoning with how her career in the academy was impacted by family, community, and cultural backdrops. The following chapters, both joyful and painful to write at times, meld the academy with the communities in which we grew up. When you've been in a field over three decades, it is natural to retrospectively examine your career. You begin to ask yourself questions such as: Have I made the impact that I wanted? What were my points of pride? What regrets, if any, do I have? What facilitated my success? By the same token, what prohibited my success? What would I do differently next time?

As I reflected on my own journey, replete with successes and challenges, I believe that it has covered multiple terrains. My conversations with Black women in the academy in the field of education have led to similar conclusions. Throughout our careers, we have traversed across varied terrains, pathways, and routes as we navigated the academy and its formal and informal reward systems. This book emerged from smooth and rough spaces and all those in between – intersections, crossroads, railroad tracks, and roundabouts.

I enjoy going to professional conferences. They provide great academic getaways to disseminate my work, stay abreast of what's going on in the field of education, and engage in professional development via plenary sessions, roundtables and panel discussions, and speaker series. As exciting and enlightening as those activities are, what I look most forward to is gathering informally with my academic "sisters," with whom I feel connected by culture and circumstances in the academy. We make time, cramming our social time into an already overprogrammed schedule. At these gatherings, we talk about our families, current events, and, of course, what is going on at our respective institutions. At times, we are conscious of lowering our voices as our excitement rises – other times, not so much. Regardless of our individual backgrounds, the conversation is often peppered with what we refer to as old folks' sayings that we heard frequently as children. They are those sayings that we heard from our mothers, grandmothers, and other elders and are passed down from generation to generation. While we used to call them old folks' sayings, we have come to

realize that we say them now quite often. According to that line of logic, we have become old folks.

Before you talk about others, sweep around your own front door.

If you tell one lie, you gotta tell two.

She didn't stay in school as long as John stayed in the army. (*She didn't stay in school* can be replaced with any occurrence that happened or didn't happen in a short period of time).

The pot can't call the kettle black.

What's done in the dark will come to light.

I'll be there tomorrow, if the good Lord's willing and the creek don't rise.

These are some of the most common sayings. I'm sure every culture has its own ancestral sayings. As you read this book, I hope that you will reflect on your ancestral sayings and how they have or have not impacted you as a scholar preparing for, or in a professorial or administrative role in the academy. This book also comes from a place of realizing that most of us have either retired or will be sunsetting our careers in the academy in the not-too-distant future. As I stand on the sunsetting phase of my career, and take a rearview mirror approach, I'm reminded of those sayings even more. What is most striking is the realization that having earned a doctorate in education and a jurist doctorate, it was the ancestral sayings and lessons that facilitated the lessons and insights that I gleaned. In light of those foundational experiences, I believe that I was able to navigate the academy somewhat better. Moreover, that is what helped me reconcile many of my higher education experiences and dissonance.

When I was in fourth grade, my classmate "Carlton" threatened to beat me up when school got out every single day. I started watching the clock and getting anxious after lunch. I dreaded 3:00 p.m. rolling around. The dismissal bell. I'd grab my books and run as if there was no tomorrow – with "Carlton" on my heels. Each day, "Carlton" seemed to be getting closer and closer before I reached my front door. This went on for about two weeks. I reluctantly told my mother that as much as I loved school, I didn't want to go because of "Carlton." After I shared how I was fast becoming a track star, she asked me if I really wanted to stop him. I said that I wanted nothing more than for him to leave me alone.

She told me to go and find a big stick the next morning and on the way to school, to discretely put it behind a tree. When the 3:00 dismissal bell rings, she said to just run to the tree, duck behind it, grab the stick, and come out swinging. She forewarned me to make sure that I made it to the tree.

Sure enough, the next morning I found a nice-sized stick and put it behind a tree that I pass every day on the way home. Every time "Carlton" passed me at school, he said, "Imma beat you up after school." I had even more anxiety after lunch that day. At 3:00 p.m. sharp, the bell rang, and I sprang into action. I quickly grabbed the books perched on my desk for easy access and takeoff. And I ran and ran. I looked back and he was right behind me. *If I could just make it to the tree.*

I made it and ducked behind the tree. I came out swinging that big stick wildly and blindly (I think I even had my eyes closed). The next thing I knew, "Carlton" took off running in the opposite direction. In the academy, I thought of that

incident often. Even though I don't think I hit or even made the slightest contact with "Carlton" while I was swinging the stick, it sent him a strong message that even though he was much bigger than me, I stopped running and stood up for myself. I'm sure my mother pondered whether she should go to the school and report it or teach me how to handle my business. To this day when faced with a challenge, I tell myself that everything will be all right if I just make it to the tree. Of course, I wouldn't advocate that big stick approach to addressing school bullies now, but that was a much different day and time.

There are so many other rich experiences that the contributing authors and I recount throughout this book. Those experiences, lessons, and insights shed light on our successes and challenges encountered along our academic journeys. Four of the contributing authors are retired professors, and four of us have not retired (three professors and an Associate Professor). The eight authors jointly amassed over 250 years in academe, with an average tenure of 30 years.

This book was also written and emerged during a time when many universities were undergoing legislative bans on diversity, equity, and inclusion that were disrupting and displacing initiatives, offices, and personnel (see <https://www.npr.org/2024/03/04/1235725631/university-florida-cuts-dei-office> and <https://www.texas-tribune.org/2023/12/28/texas-new-laws-dei-ban-colleges-universities/>). DEI positions often are assumed by persons of color who stand to be most impacted by the shuttering of those offices and initiatives. Teacher preparation programs are also impacted regarding promotion and teacher guidelines and sanctions for violations of the legislative bills. Perhaps this book can be instructive regarding the continued need for initiatives and services that take advantage of the exceptions that are identified in the legislative bills. Tenure and promotion strategies are addressed in each of the eight chapters.

Mentorship of Black women in the academy is more crucial now than ever before. Each of the eight authors discussed mentorship and what we deemed effective mentorship model components. Mentorship models must avoid a deficit-driven approach where the protégé is the one perceived on the receiving end of mentorship. Instead, developing a reciprocal mentorship-protégé model can be more beneficial. Several of us debunk the myth that only race-similar mentors are the best for Black women. While same-race mentors are sorely needed, we in no way downplay their importance and effectiveness. Some authors have experienced effective mentoring from men, including those who are racially dissimilar. In fact, my mentors in higher education have been men – both Black men and white men. They had the most profound impact on my growth and development in my Master's and doctoral programs and the early-, mid-, and senior-level faculty phases of my career. That said, this book is also intended to be instructive to non-Black faculty and administrators regarding the strategies that go beyond eliminating invisibility and microaggression phenomena to affirming the uniqueness of Black women using strength-based approaches.

To orient you on how this book came together, I sent letters out to Black women who have been in higher education for over two decades and who, despite challenges, have successful academic careers, however they defined "successful careers." I aimed to gauge their interest in crafting chapters that would be

instructive for graduate students and early- and mid-career faculty and administrators in higher education. I also asked them to reflect on their ancestral or old folks' sayings that resonated with them throughout their careers.

It was amazing that among the eight of us who answered the call, four spent most of their careers in Predominately White Institutions (PWIs). Three spent most of their careers in Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), and the last one had experiences in both institution types, with her last one in a HBCU.

Interestingly, I asked the authors one question to which they were to interpret and respond in their own way: The guiding question was: As you reflect on your career, what advice/lessons learned do you most want to impart to early- and mid-career faculty and administrators? The intent is to pass the baton to faculty, researchers, and administrators of color, especially African American or Black women.

*Journeys of Black Women in Academe: Shared Lessons, Experiences, and Insights* is where our academic wisdom squares up with our ancestral wisdom. We share and pass along this combined and culturally relevant wisdom to scholars and professionals in academia. The chapters are ordered in an alternating fashion by institution type – An author from a PWI is followed by an author from a HBCU.

Each chapter was individually crafted without conversations or communication with the other authors. In fact, the contributing authors did not know which authors were involved in this project until all chapters were completed and submitted for peer review. Notably, the overwhelming majority of the contributors provided glimpses into their family backgrounds and childhood lessons. Most of the authors were from working-class backgrounds, and one was from a poor or low-income background. There were similarities and some differences in the themes among the authors at PWIs and our counterparts at HBCUs. Racism among white colleagues was discussed more than gender among faculty at PWIs, and gender-related phenomena were more prominent among some authors at HBCUs. At least three of the authors discussed the phenomena of resistance they experienced from some Black colleagues. Self-esteem and ethnic identity were themes that emerged across five contributors, while six authors discussed family and community supports. Each author addressed the importance of mentorship in its various forms and provided clear strategies for successfully navigating tenure and promotion.

Other themes included the need for identifying passion and purpose and the role that spirituality and religion played in their careers in the academy. In conclusion, this book is not the culminating event of our work and journeys. It represents a beginning where we unabashedly honor our rich ancestral wisdom legacy and share experiences among ourselves and in mixed company. One of the authors quoted Shirley Chisolm, who said,

I want history to remember me... not as the first black woman to have made a bid for the presidency of the United States, but as a black woman who lived in the 20th century and who dared to be herself. (n.d.)

As the Editor of this book, I am honored to present our well-traveled sojourns where we simply exhaled and dared to be ourselves.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book would still be a figment of my imagination and an object of my heart's desire if it were not for Dr Henry Frierson, my long-time mentor, colleague, and friend. I could always count on him, as the Diversity Series Editor, to give honest feedback, encouragement, and well-balanced critiques. Dr Frierson is one of the most astute, generous, and talented scholars and former university administrators that I know. I am so grateful that throughout my career, he has always been there fulfilling a host of roles. Despite his busy schedule and being in such high demand, Dr Frierson is never too busy to listen to my ideas, no matter how far-fetched, and share his expertise, advice, and words of wisdom. I am so appreciative of Dr Frierson who, because of his impact, makes me want to be a better scholar and humanitarian.

I am forever indebted to my awe-inspiring chapter contributors and sister-colleagues representing Predominately White Institutions (PWIs) and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). You texturized my vision and breathed life into this book. I sincerely do not have the lexicon to adequately express my gratitude for the way you responded to the increased calls urgently sounded by Black women in higher education institutions around the country. I marvel how you each continue to be that woman, postretirement for some.

Mentorship is at the core of this book. I constantly reflect on the culturally responsive and effective mentoring that I received in my graduate schooling. I am grateful for Dr Paul Zions, who provided guidance as my Master's advisor at Central Michigan University and the Late Dr Richard Simpson, my co-major doctoral program professor at the University of Kansas. They were prime examples that effective mentoring transcends race and gender differences. I am also eternally grateful to the other men who mentored me throughout my career in the academy. In addition to Dr Henry Frierson, I will always appreciate Dr James L. Paul, Dr John L. Johnson, Dr Tennyson Wright, Dr Bernard Oliver, and Dr Ronald Rochon.

I also thank my colleagues across race and gender lines with whom I work. It has been refreshing and affirming to begin discussing some phenomena unique to Black women in the academy. I am encouraged that this book can be a vehicle for more open and honest dialogues. I thank you now and in advance.

I have been blessed to have had proud, hardworking, and spiritually uplifting women in my life. Every day, I'm thankful for the ancestral sayings and influence of my mother, the late Ms Louise Nutt, my grandmother, the late Ms Emma Lawrence, and my aunties, Ms Mildred Brent, the late Ms Gayle Ford, Ms Betty Dancer-Turner, Ms Velorice Collins, and my cousin, Ms Janet Hill.

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Last, but certainly not least, I appreciate and am grateful for my family and friends who gave me sacred time and space to engage in my three R process – Reflecting, Reminiscing, and Reconciling. My husband, Andre M. Walker, has been a staunch supporter throughout this process and stood in the gap of life's daily demands so I could maximize my reflecting and writing times. Carolyn Barton, my sister-in-love, DeAndre and Cindy Walker, my son and daughter-in-love, and my two beautiful grandchildren never cease to encourage and inspire me and my work. Thank you to my dear cousins who also make me want to be a better version of myself, especially Valerie Miller in Flint, MI, the Honorable Michael Wagner in Detroit, MI, and Father Maurice Nutt in New Orleans, LA. I would be quite remiss if I did not thank Dr Samuel L. Wright, Sr, my dear friend and unofficial accountability partner who checked on my progress daily. His handprint is all over every one of my initiatives and projects. This book is no different. Much respect to All!