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Shametrice Davis

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The Future of Higher Education!: Reflections on My First Year in Academia

Shametrice Davis

The future of higher education! There are several ways in which one could punctuate this statement, as current discussions regarding higher education can be plagued with concerns regarding decreased state fiscal support, increased privatization and corporatization, and issues of access and (in)equity for several underrepresented student groups. Such concerns may compel some to end this statement, the future of higher education, with a question mark. Others may choose to end it with an ellipsis; a series of three periods indicating a pause in thought or flow. In today's highly digital world, current students may select to end this statement with an emoticon, one that expresses sadness or perhaps apprehension in consideration of the rising costs of higher education and subsequent fiscal debt under which they are burdened.

Yet, when I reflect on my year at University of Vermont (UVM), my wonderful experiences with both the 2013 and 2014 cohorts and other fantastic administrators and faculty, I can only choose to punctuate the statement with an exclamation mark. The passion, persistence, and devotion I observed amongst UVM students, faculty, and administrators restore and affirm my confidence in the future of our field. The theme for this year's journal is thus strikingly appropriate and relevant, given the motivated, resilient spirit that embodies the UVM community. Those powerful attributes of resilience and motivation are integral to forging the (re) creation of domains in our field to effectively address some of the aforementioned difficulties in higher education at this time.

Although I am filled with glowing memories of intense discussions in class, conversations during Sisterhood Circle at the ALANA Student Center, and informal student meetings at Penny Cluse and El Gato, I would be remiss not to at least mention some of the hardship we all experience when in transition. Vermont is quite possibly the coldest place I have ever lived in my entire life. I was extremely green, fresh out of my doctoral program, looking at 16 eager, highly motivated students anxiously wanting to rigorously attack their comprehensive projects. We all know that being a person of color in Vermont is not easy. There was a three-hour

Shametrice joined the University of Hawaii at Manoa faculty in Fall of 2013 after completing a postdoctoral fellowship at the University of Vermont. Through her research, Shametrice hopes to expose underlying systemic injustice leading to inequity or oppression. Also integral to her research is a strengths-based approach to empowering underrepresented communities and leaders.

drive separating me from the immense sense of comfort I find in an urban area. Co-teaching a course regarding social justice, oppression, and change to another 15 enthusiastic, motivated students was highly enjoyable, but also marked with painful disagreements that may have permanently changed some relationships.

While I recognize and remember the discomfort of some of those challenges, they are tempered with incredible bright spots of growth and development. I am so grateful for the students' willingness to make that enormous leap of faith with me as I cautiously navigated my first year in the academy. The immediate embracement I felt from administrators and faculty across campus overwhelmed me with feelings of support and advocacy. I hold back tears when I think of how both cohorts came together in times of difficulty, how extensive parties in celebration of birthdays were thrown, how people reached out to each other despite possible differences in personality, and the numerous efforts, programs, and events for people of color on campus to connect and build friendship and community. Never have I witnessed the strength residing in a community to the extent in which it exists at UVM. But it is only in hindsight that I can truly understand and appreciate it.

I reflect on these memories because when we are in the difficult moments, we can decide to give up our aspirations, to release our seat at the table. When our faith and understanding of goodness in the world is shaken or when our suspicions of deception are confirmed, our first thought might be to run and never look back. But the UVM community speaks a different language. Unwavering inspiration, resilience, and loyalty allow UVM students, faculty, and administrators to rise through such difficulties to persevere and create new domains in higher education that will continue to positively shape our field. That is one of the ways this small, yet powerful community has endeared thousands of loyal alumni to remain connected to the institution, to the production of this journal, and to the continued development of the program and its fantastic students. The students.

I do not know if I will ever experience the same deep connection and sense of community with students as I did during my year at UVM. I will never forget the huge support shown for the cohort DJ; how everyone came together to support him at community events. Never did I think I would groove line dances, namely the wobble and cupid shuffle with all of you. The song, "Get me Bodied" by Beyoncé is now turned up whenever I hear it on the radio. The intense discussions regarding race, gender, and sexuality in Research Methods and Cultural Pluralism will forever remain etched in my mind. The advising/conversational meetings in the Davis Center (I miss those maple-syrup lattes!). Allowing me to briefly become emotional when I learned sad information at the NASPA conference. Supporting me throughout the remaining time after I announced I would not return the following year. Allowing me to make mistakes in class without rescinding your

belief in my credibility as an instructor. These memories flow from my brain to my fingertips typing the keyboard in a stream of consciousness fashion, and I am fortunate to feel the emotions that come with such memories, a conglomerate of happiness, sadness, and warmth.

The intensity of such memories reminds me again of times of difficulty and transition. The incredible, supportive moments are often accompanied by trying situations, during which we can feel like giving up, not playing politics, essentially removing ourselves from the table. But we cannot do that! We will not do that. We need all of you too much.

We need you! We need you to illuminate issues of mass incarceration for African American and Latino college-aged males. We need you to shine a light on the experiences of queer students of color and nonmonosexual students. We need you to highlight more literature that centralizes the voices of South Asian, Asian American, and Pacific Islander students. We need you to pioneer deep explorations of Whiteness, White guilt, and White anti-racist advocacy. We need you to conduct work through a Chicana feminist lens, to continue to explore and develop African American identity, issues for students who have varying socioeconomic status, are first generation, or have learning disabilities. We need your work to provide more knowledge regarding students who experience profound grief in the event of a death in the family and those who are transracially adopted. These are just a few of the topics on which you all write articulate papers and speak so eloquently. You cannot give up your seat at the table at the risk of not creating these new domains in higher education that will undoubtedly contribute to our field in an indelible way. You must find the right context in which you can continue creating these all-important, new domains.

I truly cannot think of a better way to have entered academia last year. Sometimes I worry that all subsequent years will pale in comparison to the relationships I have developed with so many UVM constituents. You all make me want to shout from the rooftops, “The future of higher education!” Because it is not a question, nor a moment to take pause, it is rather a path being paved by all of you and your important pursuits from practice and research standpoints. You, my dear UVM friends and community, are the future of higher education! And I am invaluablely lucky to witness the effective new domains you are continuously (re)creating.