

# The Vermont Connection

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Volume 41 *Embracing the Whole: Sentience and Interconnectedness in Higher Education*

Article 4

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April 2020

## An Act of Courage: Providing Space for African American Graduate Students to Express Their Feelings of Disconnectedness

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### Recommended Citation

Engram, Dr Frederick V. Jr (2020) "An Act of Courage: Providing Space for African American Graduate Students to Express Their Feelings of Disconnectedness," *The Vermont Connection*: Vol. 41 , Article 4. Available at: <https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/tvc/vol41/iss1/4>

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## **An Act of Courage: Providing Space for African American Graduate Students to Express Their Feelings of Disconnectedness**

Dr. Frederick V. Engram, Jr.

*The purpose of this article is to discuss the lived experiences of African American graduate students (master's level) enrolled at a predominantly white institution (PWI). I explore the experiences of graduate students lacking connection to their institution. I will also explore how institutional and systemic racism impact creating a space for African American graduate students to persist. I examine how persistence allows for these students to complete their degrees and feel a sense of connectedness to the institution. I will use the television (TV) series *A Different World* and *The Quad* to draw comparison and contrast to African American students' sense of belonging and connectedness. There is a gap that exists within current literature that focuses on master's level African American learners. Therefore, it is often difficult for the gatekeepers at majority white institutions to recognize this urgent need for change. Students desire student affairs professionals who look like them (value of sameness). This article is intended to provide context for scholars, scholar-practitioners, institutions, and students regarding African American graduate student experiences. For the purpose of this article, Black and African American will be used interchangeably. This is because Black is meant to be inclusive for members of the African Diaspora who identify as African American, African, Afro-Latinx, or Afro-Caribbean.*

*Keywords:* anti-Blackness, whiteness, institutional, systemic, racism, HBCUs, PWIs, graduate students, white manning

### **Who am I, Who are you, Who are WE?**

It is often very difficult as a critical race scholar to check your bias in your research, specifically regarding race and racism. However, to make certain that the work you believe in remains free of personal bias you must be mindful to always check

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your positionality. As a scholar of critical race who works directly with African American graduate students, I cannot help but to become intimately familiar with their experiences. Similarly to four of the participants in the mentioned study, Institutional and Systemic Racism and How It Affects African American Graduate Students Enrolled at a PWI: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, I also attended a Historically Black University located in the south. As a native upstate New Yorker, I was extremely concerned about what that experience would be. I was initially uncertain if I would be able to make friends or reconcile my own biases of Southern living. Once I arrived in Charlotte, North Carolina, I was met with an overwhelming amount of love and pride. This would be the first time that I had ever been in an all-Black learning environment. Most people discuss having experienced imposter syndrome at majority white institutions. However, in my quiet and most solemn personal moments, I questioned whether I belonged at my own HBCU. This is because although my parents affirmed our Blackness consistently, I was not accustomed to this within an educational institution. My experience is directly attributed to the impact that whiteness has on the K-12 learning environment. If I had the experience of seeing Black men teachers, or Black women administrators in my youth, I would not have been as “green” upon my arrival in Charlotte. I quickly learned of the beauty and depth of our Blackness, and the immeasurable levels of gratitude for our African ancestors.

### **It’s a Different World Than Where You Come From**

On September 24, 1987, the much needed and anticipated TV show, *A Different World*, premiered on NBC. The show ran for six seasons before it was cancelled. Although the show ran for a short period of time, it had a profound impact on the African American collegiate experience. *A Different World* added something to American television that had not otherwise existed. It showcased a fictitious HBCU (Hillman College) located in Virginia. Although the school was fictitious it provided a vivid depiction of HBCU life. Many teenagers and babies of the 80’s indicate that the show was a necessary motivation for choosing to attend an HBCU later in life. Hillman presented Black faculty, staff, students, athletics, and Greek life. The visual depiction of sameness (having visual representation and likeness present) provided a landscape for what college life could feel like. American education grew 16.8% and HBCUs saw a growth of 24.3% during this time period (Watson, 2016). *A Different World* assisted in bringing HBCUs into mainstream media (Watson, 2016). The impact of the show is still very valuable in college students of today (Watson, 2016). *A Different World* inspired us to attend Black colleges, pledge Black Greek Lettered Organizations, and become informed about the AIDS epidemic. One of the most memorable aspects of the show was the safe space that *The Pit* provided. *The Pit* was not only the space that the students would use to eat, it was also where they would go to hash out real life issues and

receive sound advice from its manager, Mr. Gaines. Mr. Gaines provided advice on relationships to Dwayne Wayne, while also providing a safe space for a student named Josie played by Tisha Campbell as she came forward with her AIDS diagnosis. These examples highlight the impact of community, mentors, sameness and its connection to persistence. Although these experiences occurred at a fictional institution, these occurrences are quite commonplace at HBCUs.

During the Fall of 2018, I conducted research that intended to focus on the lived experiences of seven African American graduate students. Each of the graduate students were enrolled in master's programs at American University in Washington, DC. It was my intent to answer the question "How do African American graduate students make sense of their experiences with racism while enrolled at a PWI?" (Engram, 2019). I hoped that the students felt comfortable enough to share with me their lived experiences. What I found out from the collection of data was more than I had bargained for. As a staff and faculty member, I sat in a place of privilege, one of the only privileges afforded to me as an African American male in the academy. However, it still provided enough protection where I did not encounter many of the experiences of the seven graduate students. What I always intended to do in my role was create a safe space for students who look like me. That work was always intentional. It was not a space that excluded my White students. However, it was most certainly a space that welcomed dialogue and safety for my Black or African American graduate students.

Four of the seven graduate students who participated in the study each attended HBCUs: Johnson C. Smith University (Charlotte, NC), Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University (Tallahassee, FL), and Spelman College (Atlanta, GA). The remaining three graduate students each attended PWIs: Liberty University (Lynchburg, VA), East Carolina University (Greenville, NC), and University of Georgia (Athens, GA) (Engram, 2019). Five of the participants were African American women (she/her/hers) and two of the participants were African American men (he/him/his) (Engram, 2019).

There were fundamental differences in each of the student's undergraduate experiences. For three of the graduate students, their current experiences were reminiscent of their undergraduate years. The remaining four students discussed having completely different experiences in graduate school. These experiences were nothing like the HBCU experiences they grew accustomed to. This was an uncomfortable experience because the institution sold them on its diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts. However, once they arrived, they indicated that the selling points were not necessarily the most truthful (Engram, 2019). True diversity, equity, and inclusion work means disrupting the hold that whiteness and its tenets have on an institution. If this is not your end goal, your institution is simply providing a band-aid for a situation that requires full surgery and stitches.

### Where Do We Go From Here?

PWIs across the country have been increasing their African American graduate student recruiting efforts (Engram, 2019). The perception is that if majority historically white spaces create space for African Americans to attend, they've done their job. What many of these institutions and their administration fail to realize is that accepting students is simply not enough (Engram, 2019). If the institution is not actively doing the work of creating initiatives and space for these students to convene and excel, what is the point? (Engram, 2019). Each of the four HBCU alum feel as though they were not adequately provided information to be the most successful (Engram, 2019). They each indicated that they were forced to find out necessary information on their own (Engram, 2019). Critics might argue that they are adults and should have figured these things out on their own. Most of those critics likely have a closer proximity to whiteness and are also not first-generation college students. This ideology also has roots in white manning, a term coined by myself in 2019 which allows for calling out how whiteness, white supremacy, white maleness, and white privilege take up unnecessary space. It also discusses how white manning allows for zero consideration of Blackness and those who do not benefit from being a white male. Certain aspects of this transition must always be considered. This is also similar to the hiring of Black faculty and staff and not providing them adequate resources for transition (Engram, 2019). Violence in the classroom is a direct result of lacking institutional preparedness (Engram, 2019). The participants indicated having negative experiences in the classroom that they have been forced to tolerate. These negative experiences varied from discussions about their hairstyles, admissibility into the academy, sexist comments, to being cursed at by a white male professor (Engram, 2019). Was the intent of PWIs to admit African American graduate students simply to harm them? I most certainly hope not. However, the lived experiences of the participants certainly indicate that.

One of the biggest complaints of the participants was that they did not have anywhere to exist in community. There were no designated spaces for African American graduate students to convene. This would allow for the graduate students to be able to find their tribe, to create community and have an appreciation for sameness and kinship with their peers. One of the participants discussed that as a first-year master's student she inquired about creating an affinity group (Engram, 2019). She was immediately dismissed and informed that her request would not be honored (Engram, 2019). The primarily White graduate student council did not want to inspire the creation of additional affinity groups (Engram, 2019). What does this exactly say about inclusion, diversity, or equity?

### **Sentience In Discomfort**

The educational preparation for African American graduate students has been a responsibility shared by institutions, community, and the professionals therein historically (Hanley, et al., 2001). However, we should consider the experiences and direct perception of the students. As a researcher I wonder if these students were intentionally made to be uncomfortable. Although discomfort exists at the core of the experience of many African American graduate students. The graduate students still managed to persist even in the most uncomfortable of circumstances. In the academy I often hear my colleagues discuss horrific experiences that they had to endure. Most recently we have been made aware of a higher education scandal that speaks directly toward discomfort. A notable White female scholar at the prestigious University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education made headlines. She made headlines due to years of complaints lobbied against her for creating a hypersexualized racially insensitive climate (Flaherty, 2019). This isn't a new phenomenon and the participants in the study provide proof of a practice that needs disruption. Institutions that are genuinely seeking to increase their true diversity work must be mindful of the full experience of the African American graduate student. African American graduate students should be provided all of the same resources as their White peers.

It should never be assumed that African American graduate students know how to advocate for themselves in majority White spaces. Institutions must take into consideration the culture shock of attending their graduate school. School administrators, faculty, and staff should also be well versed in different aspects of cultural competency. This way they are best equipped to provide a more positive transition for African American graduate students. One of the participants graduated this past May. I remember her as a first year and her asking a very intriguing question: "Why do all the second years look so miserable?" (Engram, 2019). Having an opportunity to hear about her experience was devastating. She was an excited first year with a bubbly personality and an infectious smile. As she neared the completion of her degree her light seemed dim (Engram, 2019). She spoke of the harm she had endured and how she now understood why the previous graduates looked so defeated (Engram, 2019). She spoke of having to decide every day. Whether she would be able to go to class and learn, or would she have to defend herself (Engram, 2019). As a graduate enrollment expert how can I effectively and morally continue to recruit these students? When I know that the institution that claims to be prepared for them really is not? More importantly, how can I resolve this within myself as a critical race theorist and diversity, equity, and inclusion strategist? The African American graduate student experience is a unique one. It requires deliberate and intentional work. Work that should only be engaged by

faculty, staff, and administration who understand the uniqueness that each Black or African American student brings. Blackness is not monolithic, and students should not be treated as such.

### **Courageous Acts of Persistence Even Through Disconnection**

One of the most admirable qualities of the African American graduate student is their ability to persist despite it all. Although each of the participants acknowledged having experienced racism as well as microaggressive behaviors, none of the students indicated a desire to quit (Engram, 2019). This speaks to the human conditioning of African Americans. The ability to be socialized into their programs also aides in their ability to persist. Graduate school allows for students to gain their professional identities (Joseph, 2012). This is primarily due to the process of socialization (Joseph, 2012). The participants were forced to develop completely new skills, skills that would be crucial to their survival (Joseph, 2012). As I recall the discussions with the three participants who were graduates of UGA, Liberty University, and East Carolina, I was able to garner a deeper understanding of how persistence was very common for each of them. Each of the participants mentioned their racialized undergraduate experiences. Each reminded me how common place the use of the “n-word” and microaggressions were. The participants each spoke of having to learn to ignore racist behaviors and attitudes to maintain day after day. Therefore, the experiences for these three at a PWI graduate school were not as jarring. Although the transitions have not been positive for most of the participants, they were successful in learning the culture of their departments, how to study, and how to thrive. Although their experiences have proven less than desirable, each of the graduate students have a vision and direct plan for how to achieve their goals. Having clear direction also assisted in providing each participant the ability to persist. Each participant posed that they were the first in their families, or one of the firsts to graduate college. This indicated that the completion of their graduate degree symbolizes more than just completion. It symbolizes a new start and increased opportunities for future generations. The desire to endure less than desirable lived experiences requires a constant act of persistent courage, a trait that was passed down through African Americans from our enslaved ancestors. We are who we are because they are who they were. This alone could be enough to push any African American graduate student toward degree completion. In that same breath, it also should not have to be the push when an institution should be dedicated to this work.

### **Conclusion**

The impact that institutionalized and systemic racism has on the graduate student’s experience the academy cannot deny. African American graduate students are a unique group of individuals. By the time African Americans have reached adulthood, they have had their fair share of impactful lived experiences. These experi-

ences are both positive and negative and have had a profound impact on the lives of the graduate students. These varied experiences have shaped them into who they are and who they will become. Graduate schools provide a unique opportunity to attain a level of education that not many African Americans past or present have had or will have - graduate school attainment is a cause for celebration. The impact of shows like *A Different World*, and most recently *The Quad* on African American youth is immeasurable. BET's *The Quad*, although not as impactful as its predecessor *A Different World*, paints a fictional picture of the HBCU experience of today. These shows provide us with the ability to dream, and to see our dreams come to fruition. As Langston Hughes said, "What happens to a dream deferred?". Many African American graduate students realize that they are the deferred dream, a dream that once seemed impossible for so many. A dream that is now tangible and attainable even when whiteness tries everything in its power to make it impossible.



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