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Being Black in Education is a Journey

Dr. Tiffanie Spencer

I am truly honored to be asked to contribute by this year's executive board, to offer my reflections for the forward of the 42nd volume of *The Vermont Connection*. The theme this year, *Black Lives Matter: Centering Black Narratives in Higher Education*, is personal to say the least. Because it is personal, it is difficult for me to write this reflection; particularly, as I am not one to be extremely vulnerable, even with family and close friends. But this topic requires it, so I will challenge myself to share what it means for me as a Black woman to experience (higher) education as a student, staff member, and an instructor.

I learned to question my intelligence in seventh grade. I went to a new school that was predominately white in virtually all ways – students, teachers, administrators, and of course academic curriculum. What stands out most vividly for me is being accused of cheating on a math test, by a white male teacher. I had a hard time acclimating to learning pre-algebra and admittedly did not do well on my first exam. But I was determined to do better. It was extremely important for me to do well to honor the sacrifice my parents were making to send me to a private school, ultimately to increase my educational and life opportunities. I studied relentlessly, both by myself and with my Dad's help. Even though I was doing well in all my other classes, it was also important to me to do well in this class. I was ecstatic when my hard work paid off and I received an A on my next exam. While handing out our exams, the teacher asked to meet with me after class. Naively, I thought this was to congratulate me. Instead it was an inquiry as to how it was possible for my grade to have increased so significantly. As someone who worked hard to excel in school, it was difficult for me to understand how and why my integrity and honesty was being questioned. Why was I the only student being singled out? How was my improvement on an exam different than my peers? Was my intelligence somehow inferior to my mostly white peers around me?

Being Black in education is a journey. As soon as a Black individual enters the formal American K-12 education system, it is often unwelcoming to your identity itself. You are part of a vast system, one which can impact your future and that of anyone else who looks and identifies like you. Even if you are fortunate to

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have those around you who can offer formal and informal resources and support of how to navigate this system, it is still different to experience education for yourself in a Black body. Largely, education in America, as we know it, was and is not created for black people, and often offers more barriers than accessible pathways. Education was and is created to perpetuate dominant and white ways of knowing, which explicitly exclude content which recognizes black identity and personhood. And regardless of how you demonstrate or attempt to demonstrate your intellect, others have the right to evaluate, question, and assess your learning against measures created by pervasive dominant and white epistemologies and philosophies. I've only mentioned a few systemic and macro-level type barriers, and those which mostly pertain or are adjacent to education itself. Why is it that education can be such an individualized experience for someone who is Black? Individualized experiences include contextual considerations such as income, family circumstances, geography, gender identity and expression, cultural and linguistic diversity, and a myriad of other aspects of identity and personhood which intersect with how a Black individual experiences education. Identity and life experiences are integral to how a black individual understands and defines the value of education; they cannot be separated. But how does a Black person define the value of education, when it doesn't seem to value you?

Sometimes I am amazed at my choice to be a student in higher education three times at predominately white institutions. Sometimes I think I have made the choice to continue pursuing more education to prove my intelligence, even though I continue to question it almost everyday. But my education has led me on a path in which I am constantly thinking about how I can create an environment in higher education which acknowledges and values black voices. But what does that look like, practically, for me in how I do my work and teach everyday? How can I personally uplift and advocate for Black students in a predominately white higher education context? I have made this choice deliberately, but it comes with immense challenge. It's not so much that I experience imposter syndrome, but it's more that I don't know the extent to which my colleagues and peers perceive my competency as a measure which is interconnected with my race; and how is this measure compared against my white colleagues and peers? I'll share an example. As a Black woman who teaches and serves in an administrative role, I must constantly and consciously decide how I enter all of the spaces I am invited, attend as part of my responsibilities, or decide to place myself into. It is not unusual to spend most, if not all, of my workdays in meetings as the only Black woman, Black individual, or person of color. I am constantly aware that there are assumptions and biases of me which exist both inside and outside of these spaces of which I have limited control. Sometimes I do experience feelings of imposter syndrome when I show up in these spaces. But more often than not, I also feel the need to show up exponentially more prepared than my white colleagues, because mistakes can impact my own reputation, with the unintended consequence of

harming other colleagues of color. This also means, I am always negotiating with myself how much of my identity I can bring into each and every space I enter at work – in the classroom, in a meeting with a faculty member, or in meetings with institutional leaders. I am constantly questioning if I am doing my work in a way which establishes my competency and ultimately my job security as a Black woman. More importantly, can I manage these necessities while advocating for students of color in the ways in which they deserve? And, when do I feel safe to bring my whole self and identity when doing this work?

Every Black individual has a different journey in how they experience education. How do we reflect on our experiences in education in a way which informs how we do our work in higher education? My journey has been centered on an awareness of how many Black students do not feel welcome to exist as they are in higher education and other post-secondary pursuits. By this I mean Black ways of demonstrating intellect are not valued, Black experiences are offered as unique or commodified, and often those who teach and offer programming exclude examples and content which acknowledges Black cultural, ethnic, and racial identity. This is why I seek to do work which intentionally includes and acknowledges the existence of Black students in very tangible and macro-level ways. Individual student meetings and teaching in a classroom setting are just as important as finding ways in which I can advocate for students of color in higher education systemically.

In our Higher Education and Student Affairs Master's program at the University of Vermont, we hope to empower our students to transform higher education by leading with social justice, equity, and critical conscientiousness. Our students rise to this challenge often - the intentional decision to choose Black Lives Matter: Centering Black Narratives in Higher Education as a journal theme is a powerful example of this. I actively engage in this work and always aspire to continue learning. I am absolutely committed to working towards creating post-secondary opportunities and environments in which Black students, and other students of color, are not expected to conform and adapt to ways of knowing, being, and existing. I invite all of us to do this work individually and in our own areas of agency within and adjacent to higher education to dismantle anti-Blackness. But what would it look like to not only dismantle anti-Blackness, but to also celebrate Blackness? I hope you'll join me in committing to this work in uplifting and listening to Black students, faculty, staff, administrators, and, well me.