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Accountability Reconsidered: Higher Education's Struggle with "Liberty and Justice for All"

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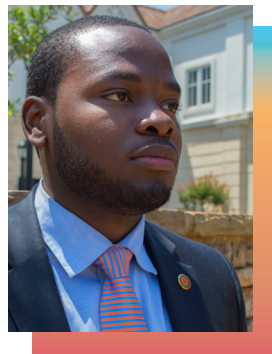
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Accountability Reconsidered:

Higher Education's Struggle with "Liberty and Justice for All"



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I am a young Black man in higher education. Sometimes, I wonder critically and passionately how we arrived at the current state of affairs in higher education. I wonder how we can make change. I wonder, where must we begin and what steps will follow. As I think critically and reflect often on my journey as a change agent, I have begun to answer the questions that plague our institutions of higher education. Central to my understanding of the current state of affairs is the understanding that higher education, in every way, is a microcosm of the culture of society in the United States of America. This culture undergirds the foundation of higher education, its operation, and its future.

I have come to the realization that in order for one to understand the current state of affairs in the academy, one must understand its origins. In examining the foundations of higher education, I continue to discover an intentionally exclusive system that seeks to reproduce harm by means of racism throughout history. The physical foundation of campuses was built by the compulsory, uncompensated labor of slaves whose descendants now attend the same institutions where

their primary academic experience is littered with microaggressions, macroaggressions, and institutional racism. This system was not built to provide access, equity, or social justice as it was built from a capitalist culture that values one group of people over another and wealth over the human experience. This organizational structure has continuously grown in size and scope while maintaining these rigid systems. As many have fought and died for equity and access, the foundation upon which it was built has not changed, and has continued to plague how higher education operates and what it values.

Institutions, much like people, must recognize and admit there is a problem before moving forward. Institutions must acknowledge American higher education's long-standing struggle with equity and civil rights. This admittance begins a journey of healing for many students like me, who fall victim to institutional discrimination undergirded by imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchy (hooks, 2009). Once this process has begun, institutions must have conversations that allow victims to air their grievances to

those that vowed to protect and support them academically, physically, and psychologically from the day they accepted their tuition. These conversations are vital, as they validate the narratives and lived experiences of students damaged by the system. They also commence the journey of institutional change; but conversations alone cannot sustain this fundamental effort.

Institutional accountability is the beginning, middle, and continuation of creating change. Although institutions should support all students because it is right, this burden of proof has not been substantial enough to create transformational and lasting change. Much like the United States of America has the constitution as its guiding document, institutions have their mission statements. Many institutional mission statements resemble the infamous constitutional clause: "All Men are Created Equal." Many institutions vow to be "an inclusive, academic community" that will "work together on behalf of all citizens," yet we have found this not to be the case. Holding institutions accountable for who THEY committed to BE and HOW they committed to SERVE, is a measure of accountability and proof that is unequivocally irrefutable. Often times student affairs professionals are tasked with holding institutions accountable, yet it is the responsibility of all stakeholders including academic affairs, the board of trustees, the board of governors, and state and federal leaders. Although institutional missions and constitutional amendments are sound tools for institutional and societal accountability, they will not create change by themselves. Mission accountability, coupled with

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Image by Gerry Lauzon

student activism, gives birth to an effective device for transformational and lasting change.

Across many campuses around the nation, students are protesting, going on hunger strikes, and disrupting business as usual. Although these methods are very effective, they have the potential to be more effective if navigated strategically. The student athletes at the University of Missouri exercised their political and financial capital creating what Derrick Bell termed interest convergence. The student athletes knew how to hold the university accountable to working together on behalf of all citizens of the state of Missouri. This knowledge, in most cases, comes from knowing the origins of institutions and how they work. Exercising a thorough knowledge of institutional foundations and governance would arm students with the ammunition to appropriately address institutional accountability with the stakeholders who have the influence to begin the journey to transformational and lasting change. If exercised correctly, in most cases, this knowledge would empower students to address academic issues with the provost, issues of safety with the vice president of student affairs, and policy issues and institutional accountability with the president, board of trustees, and state leaders. Many students do not arrive to campus with a nuanced understanding of institutional foundations, governance, and change. One way to assist in the transformation of institutions into physically and psychologically safe spaces is to affirm students in their real hurt, anger, and rage, and to empower them to use their narratives and channel their activism to those who have the responsibility to hold the institution accountable to their mission. As a Black male professional who has experienced institutional discrimination on multiple occasions and of varying degrees, it is my responsibility and I vow never to recreate this experience for any member of any marginalized community, EVER!