

# JOURNEYS OF BLACK WOMEN IN ACADEME

Shared Lessons, Experiences,  
and Insights

**Edited by** Brenda L. Walker

DIVERSITY IN HIGHER  
EDUCATION

**VOLUME 26**

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**

EDITED BY

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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.

Without Emerald Publishing Company, this book truly would not be possible. I am immensely thankful for their editing and publication teams including Kirsty Woods, Joshi Monica Jerome, Lydia Cutmore, Sangeetha Rajan, Lauren Kammerdiener, Varsha Velmurugan, and Denise Woolery. They made the technical aspects as painless as possible and graciously worked with us despite the time difference. I will forever be grateful for their diligence and commitment to a high-quality product.

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!

# “FORE DAY IN THE MORNIN” AND BLACK WOMEN IN ACADEME: EMBRACING OPPORTUNITIES AND CONFRONTING MICROAGGRESSIONS

Brenda L. Walker

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## ABSTRACT

*This author reflects on her academic career spanning three decades as a Black woman in higher education. Ironically, the elders’ sayings she heard and detested as a child resonated throughout her career. While in eighth grade, her grandmother admonished her for being deceptive and trying “to pull one over” on her and said that this author would need “to get up ‘fore day in the mornin’” to accomplish that feat. “Fore day in the mornin’” must have been the time before her grandmother was fully alert, astute, and had the most clarity. For Black women to succeed in the academy, we must remain alert and recognize when faculty, administrators, and students attempt to pull one over with microaggressions and other forms of resistance. Microaggressions and resistance were perpetrated across race and gender lines, and occasionally by those who look like her. Having been reared in urban and low-income communities, the author acknowledged the investments she received throughout her schooling and career from both members of the academy and from Black communities. Consequently, her mission to improve outcomes in schools and communities, much like those in which she grew up, has not changed in 33 years. Understanding race and culture in self-definition and identity are discussed, followed by embracing opportunities and return on investments. There are increased calls for reciprocal and culturally responsive mentor–protégé relationships and successful strategies for tenure and promotion. The author*

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*makes meaning of both successful and challenging critical incidents in the academy.*

**Keywords:** Black women faculty; microaggressions; academia; intersectionality; mentor and protégé relationships; Black women administrators; tenure and promotion

In junior high school, my friend “Simone” invited me to her birthday party. It was to be held on the upcoming Sunday. I wanted to attend, but there was one problem. It was on a Sunday. I went to church with my grandmother on Sundays – literally all day on Sundays. We went to Sunday School in the morning and stayed for the regular church service from late morning until the afternoon. We went home for some downtime and dinner and returned for the evening church service at 5:00 p.m. I reluctantly asked my grandmother if I could miss the evening service to attend “Simone’s” birthday party. After some hesitation, she finally agreed. I was ecstatic! That Sunday, I excitedly walked around to “Simone’s” house and discovered that she was not having a birthday party. Not only was she not having a birthday party, but her birthday was six months away. Since my grandmother was at church, we invited several friends over to my grandmother’s house. We were having such a good time in the basement; we were laughing, talking, playing music on the record player, and dancing. What I did not know was that my grandmother suspected something was awry and returned home early. She was furious! I can still hear her saying, “You gotta get up ‘fore day in the mornin’ to pull one over on me.” Growing up, I heard that “‘fore day in the mornin’” saying and cringed more times than I can count.

Ironically, as much as I didn’t like to hear it as a child, “fore day in the mornin” resonated with me as I took a rearview look at my career in the academy and crafted this chapter. It became an automatic mantra whenever I suspected someone was trying to pull one over on me or be deceitful to achieve their goal. Even though I was unknowingly misled initially by my eighth-grade friend “Simone,” I allowed the deception to play out by inviting friends over while my grandmother was at church. Similarly, in higher education, whether the deception is intentional or not is immaterial, especially when it is knowingly played out or committed. To this day, I have no idea what time “fore day in the mornin” is. I imagine it is not only relatively early, but more importantly, it must be before the time when you are most alert, have all your wits about you, and have the most clarity. Perhaps it is before you can readily discern when something is awry, not right, off-kilter, or the butter in the milk not clean. Maybe it is analogous to the advice that Thelonius Sphere Monk, the legendary jazz musician, gave to other musicians. He said that, “There are no wrong notes, only notes in wrong places” (<https://www.bookey.app/quote-author/thelonious-monk>).

Throughout my career in the academy, it was paramount that I remained alert and recognized and confronted micro- and macroaggressions and other forms of resistance while finding and amplifying my voice. I needed to provide advocacy and agency not just for myself but also for other Black women and men in higher education. To successfully navigate as a Black woman in the professoriate, I had

to deliberately lean in to define my own “fore day in the mornin” and learn to read all the notes, including those in between and in the wrong places.

This chapter continues the recent national dialog on unsilencing Black women in higher education so that our voices are heard and we are more visible, respected, and affirmed. This author discusses the need for self-definition and identification incorporating race and culture. Culturally responsive opportunities are then shared to return investments in both academic and African American communities. Further, microaggressions and other forms of resistance are addressed that uniquely impede Black women’s success in the academy. The author extolls the power of reciprocal mentor–protégé relationships and concludes with strategies that facilitate Black women in the academy attaining tenure and promotion.

## UNDERSTANDING RACE AND CULTURE IN SELF-DEFINITION AND IDENTITY

My serene pastel pink suit and matching pumps were oddly deceptive. I glanced in the hotel room’s full-length mirror and was even more convinced. My calm-looking outer appearance belied and was no match for the mounting anxiety and nervousness swirling inside me. It was March 1991, and I was interviewing for my very first Assistant Professor position at a university in the southeast. I was a doctoral candidate at the University of Kansas where I had conducted my dissertation research and was writing my results and discussion or chapters four and five of my dissertation. I flew in the day before the interview and was pleasantly surprised when I received my itinerary. It was the best!

The night before the interview, a Black woman faculty member hosted about six or seven other Black women who held various faculty roles at the university across several Colleges. It was an informal, kick-your-shoes-off meet and greet in her home. We watched the original movie, *The Color Purple*, sipped wine, and talked and talked. It was as if I knew them already. While I had interviewed at a few other universities, no other university provided a safe space for me to be with women who looked like me. No other university provided a no-judgment, no-apology-needed comfort zone where I could ask my uber-important interview questions. This hostess did. She created space so I could safely ask where to go to get my hair done and whether there were engaging African Methodist Episcopal Churches in the area. As an outsider moving there from the Midwest, I wanted a heads up on the city’s Black communities, in which I planned to immerse myself. It was important that I develop trusting, reciprocal relationships to authentically gain entrée to those communities.

As delightful as the eve of the interview was, it added to my anxiety that next morning. I was pressured more than usual to do well. I really desired a tenure-earning position at that university. After spending the evening with my new academic sisters, I realized even more the critical roles that race, gender, and culture play in my professional and personal worlds. Making time and space for my multiple intersectionalities of race, gender, and my cultural being did not go

unnoticed. My mind was made up. This was going to be the one – the perfect university for me.

When I received the call a week or so later from the Department Chairperson offering me the position, I knew that I would happily launch my career in the academy there. Knowing that the state had a hiring freeze at that time was even more confirming. The Department Chair made a case to hire me despite the freeze solely based on my credentials, qualifications, and what I would bring to the department. That did it! I was convinced that I would not have been happy at any other university. And to be perfectly honest, I was happy...until I wasn't. And I felt supported...until I didn't.

I deliberately started this chapter with a snippet of my university interview process. It may have been almost 33 years ago, but it remains symbolic and representative of who I am today. First and foremost, a pink pastel suit was not on the typical interview suit color palette at the time. Interview suits were more likely to be darker and more basic in color (i.e., navy, gray, black, etc.). In the interview, I intentionally disclosed both my culturally responsive research focus and my individual uniqueness in a true *caveat emptor* or buyer beware manner. Pairing a white starched button-down blouse with a cotton-candy pink suit symbolized my flair for the nontraditional, which is tempered by my need for some tradition at times. My individuality and uniqueness remain important to me and show up in my styles of dress, hair, office décor, and other aspects of my professional and personal realms.

I made a point to let everyone know that my research, teaching, and service have not occurred by happenstance. Emerging from my humble beginnings, my work would continue to be intentional. I am a proud product and beneficiary of urban and low-income schools and communities. That's what I know and am most passionate about. I would not want anyone to think that I duped them while interviewing. It would be egregious to say one thing in the interview and practice another. So, I explicitly shared how I am committed to improving outcomes for all children and youth but am primarily focused on improving outcomes for Black children and youth living in poverty.

I am proud of that commitment and dedication and how it continues to ground and center my academic journey 33 years later. The year 1991 was such a conflicting year because we were forced as a nation to have conversations about police brutality against Black men and sexual harassment accusations leveled against a Black man by a Black woman. Several Los Angeles Police Officers were videotaped brutally beating Mr Rodney King on March 3, 1991 (<https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/police-brutality-caught-on-video>).

In that same year and only 2 months after I assumed my Assistant Professorship, Anita Hill testified in the Supreme Court confirmation hearing that Clarence Thomas sexually harassed her while she was his adviser at the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Despite her graphic testimonial details, Mr Thomas was confirmed with a vote of 52–48.

I was keenly aware of police brutality targeting Black males and sexual harassment to which Black women have been subjected in this country. However, I was less familiar with how Black women are targeted and dealt with in the

academy. I came to the University with a social justice and equity penchant stemming from inequities I witnessed not just in K-12 classrooms but in every segment of society – law enforcement and criminal justice, housing, banking, medical, etc. What I was ill-prepared for, however, were the inequities perpetuated in higher education. Given my 33-year academic career, one overarching question guides this chapter: *As a Black woman in higher education, what are the most impactful lessons and insights that should be shared with Black women who are doctoral students or early- or mid-career faculty and administrators?* I also aimed to share lessons and insights that would be instructive for full Professors and administrators across race and gender. As a Black woman, of course, I intend for this chapter to be beneficial to Black women and other women of color, but the audience is not just Black women or women of color. I believe that White doctoral students, faculty, and administrators can benefit by viewing faculty and administrator experiences through the lens of a Black woman who has had bittersweet experiences throughout her career. Like many of my sister colleagues, I have enjoyed and achieved success but have also experienced gendered and racialized trauma and stress.

Sankofa is a West African term that means that we must return to or “fetch” our past to move forward. Sankofa is so fitting for this chapter to discuss and make sense of critical incidents that occurred throughout my academic career. As I go back and fetch my past in the academy, I must first go back and fetch my past growing up in low-income communities and being heavily influenced by my mother, grandmother, aunts, and cousins. I draw on my rich experiences in poor neighborhoods and communities, including the Norman Street Housing Projects under the Saginaw Housing Authority. When I think about it, that is where I learned to value individual uniqueness and appreciate collaborative problem-solving.

Some of my friends and colleagues appear perplexed when I tell them that I am proud to have grown up in urban and low-income communities. First and foremost, my mother was a single parent who raised five children in a firm but loving way. Contrary to popular opinion about low-income families, our home was filled with reading materials, including magazines, poetry books, and the *World Book and the Encyclopedia Britannica*. It was a running joke that despite having limited income, my mother faithfully paid every month so that we could have several encyclopedias or passports to the world at our fingertips. I am so grateful for the way she shored up my self-esteem long before I started kindergarten. She taught me to be proud of who I am, my racial background, and my dark brown skin tone.

When I was in kindergarten, my White teacher passed out drawing paper and told us to draw our best picture so she could hang it in the classroom. She was preparing our room for school administrators to visit the next day. I went to work on my best picture. I drew a picture of myself in the image my mother taught me and proudly reinforced it at home. After drawing the picture complete with correctly placed face, limbs, and clothing, I took out the special dark brown crayon my mother had bought me for occasions such as that. I shaded in my face, arms, and legs with that beautiful dark brown crayon. When I finished, I admired

my drawing and beamed broadly. Suddenly, I felt someone looking over my shoulder and spun around. It was my teacher. I waited for her to tell me that I did a good job. And I waited and waited. Judging by the scowl on her face, she was not about to affirm me.

Instead, she reminded me that we had important guests coming to visit and that she had intended to hang the pictures up for them to see. She walked away without ever collecting my dark brown girl "masterpiece." The teacher proceeded to hang everyone's picture up except mine. Kindergarten then was half-day, so I didn't have long to wait until time to run home and tell my mother what had transpired. That gave my mother the perfect opportunity to reiterate what she always told me. I have everything to be proud of – who I am, the African kings and queens from whom I originated, and the many contributions of the likes of Paul Laurence Dunbar, Marian Anderson, and Langston Hughes. My mother marched me back to the school and sat me in the hallway while she went into the classroom to meet with the teacher. Despite my trying, I could only overhear bits and pieces of the conversation. I found out later that in her soft-spoken manner, my mother very calmly explained to the teacher how she took great pains to ensure that I started school with a positive self-esteem and identity. She was adamant about not wanting the teacher to destroy my self-esteem. In hindsight, that teacher's action or inaction was serendipitous. It made me even more conscious at a young age to be proud of who I am. At the university, it has translated to my self-affirmation and affirmations of my village or support group. I do not depend on others' acceptance or value of me and what I bring to the table. Most importantly, I learned to never allow anyone to define who I am, what I stand for, or my worth.

Collaborative problem-solving was another principle I learned in my childhood that was instrumental throughout my university career. One of my earliest and fondest recollections of collaborative problem-solving happened when our apartment was next door to another single-parent family with the same number of children. Our families were quite close as our mothers fiercely looked out for each other. In one of our apartments, the electricity was cut off for nonpayment. To this day, I cannot tell you which one was temporarily without electricity. What does stick out in my mind is that until one apartment's electricity was legitimately restored, both of our families had enough electricity to meet our basic needs. Do not try this at home, but at that time, we ran extension cords from one apartment to the other. In effect, both families cooked using hot plates for cooking and for boiling water for baths.

As a child, I had no understanding or appreciation for the danger of running those extension cords from one apartment to the next. However, I did appreciate the way we all worked together for a common goal with no judgments made. Moreover, we imagined that we were having a fun and light-hearted camping experience. While sharing electricity was illegal and unsafe, the value of collaborative problem-solving and shared community was ignited and stoked for me, especially how it could be used to mitigate some effects of poverty.

## EMBRACING OPPORTUNITIES AND RETURNING INVESTMENTS IN THE ACADEMY AND BLACK COMMUNITIES

Without having the lexicon for it as a child, I also learned the importance of return on investment in its many forms. Growing up in urban and low-income communities, my return on investment has long been important to me. I returned to my hometown in Saginaw, Michigan, for my much anticipated 52nd-year high school class reunion. It was a reunion for the class of 1971 Black graduates from any of the Saginaw area high schools. As I imagined, reconnecting with my friends with whom I went to junior high and/or high school was so wonderful. From my peers, I heard the same resounding comments over and over. They consistently told me that they always knew that I would go far and that I would make a difference for others. Their sincere comments caused me to reflect on the many ways they held me in high esteem and invested in my future career and me. Remarkably, most were from low-income families quite like my own. Ironically, I managed to navigate elementary, junior high and high school without being involved in one fight and with minimal peer pressure to break academic or societal rules and norms. With the exception of “Simone,” I believe that my classmates invested in me by applying little to no pressure to engage in behaviors that ran counter to being academically productive. My peers encouraged and celebrated my academic and social milestones.

I attended Central Michigan University for my undergraduate education. It was about an hour away from Saginaw. When I went home some weekends and summer, older adults and family members expressed how proud they were that I was in college. They would give me tightly folded-up fives, tens, or twenties for “spending money.” Community service takes on new meaning when the community has invested in you, and you are compelled to return far more than what was invested.

When I assumed my Assistant Professor position, I asked what the criteria for tenure and promotion were. In the Fall of my sixth year, I was expected to meet the University’s criteria for teaching, research, and service to be promoted and tenured. My return on investment had to yield benefits to Black communities. That was non-negotiable for me. Early in my career, the challenge was determining how to meet the University’s tenure and promotion parameters while impacting and benefitting Black communities *and* my profession. That was no easy feat considering the low weight that service carries when tenure and promotion decisions are made.

To be clear, teaching effectiveness and cogent and impactful research records sway tenure and promotion decisions far more than service. To accomplish my professional and personal goals, I needed to infuse service throughout my service agenda and the two most important tenure and promotion expectations – teaching and research. Stated simply, I was able to maximize my return on investment to my profession and Black communities locally, regionally, nationally and internationally. For example, I intentionally incorporated culturally responsive and respectful pedagogy that focused on more equitable academic and

social skill instruction for pre-and in-service teachers. My solution-based research consistently examined phenomena that affect Black learners far more disproportionately than other races and ethnicities.

We are expected to publish or disseminate our work in well-regarded academic journals for tenure and promotion. As important as they are in the Academy, our academic journals are less accessible to those most subjected to the phenomena I investigated. Parents, community agents, and some K-12 school personnel entrusted with Black children and youth are less likely to read published work in journals unfamiliar to laypersons. Thus, I also relied on popular press venues, including my guest speaking and interviewing in mainstream and Black newspapers, television, and urban and Black radio shows. Those platforms allowed me to translate published research and scholarship for laypersons. In addition to getting audience feedback, I ensured they always had access to and information about my research findings and initiatives to improve outcomes for our most disenfranchised learners.

My sustained community service has socially validated my teaching and research and led to a genuine reciprocal and tri-directional relationship. Not only has the community been a viable part of my teaching and research, but I am very much immersed in the community. To be successfully tenured and promoted *and* to return investments to your community, you must build and stoke symbiotic relationships among all three tenure and promotion dimensions of teaching, research, and service.

Most of my investors were Black women when I was growing up. In contrast, my mentors who invested in me in higher education were men – White men and Black men. In my second year as an Assistant Professor, I decided that I wanted to compete for a federal grant to partner with the local school district to develop a Drop-Out Prevention Center. I served on committees with the local school district and knew that the drop-out phenomenon was one of the most critical issues they needed to address. Consistent with the literature, fewer than half of the Black males who enrolled in the ninth grade persisted to 12th grade and graduated as seniors 3 years later (Bridgeland et al., 2006).

Though I had worked on sections of grants while in my doctoral program, I had never written an entire grant by myself. It was a daunting task, but I was up for it. I told my department chairperson, a White male, that I wanted to pursue a federal grant opportunity and partner with the school district to develop the Drop Out Prevention Center. I proceeded to explain and show him data on why such a center was needed for urban and low-income Black learners. I was prepared to rattle off more reasons why I would be remiss if I did not craft a competitive proposal. He had one question: What supports did I need to prepare a highly competitive grant application? I must admit his question caught me off-guard. I remember while in my doctoral program at the University of Kansas, I had worked with two known grant writers who were typically successful in securing external funding.

Adding to my surprise, he told me to call them to see if they would be interested and available to work with me for a week. He said he would find the money to pay for their accommodations if they came. They did, and we had a