

The Black Studies Program at the University of Tennessee: Perspectives from an Ex-Program Director

O Programa de Estudos Negros na Universidade de Tennessee: as perspectivas de uma ex-diretora do programa

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Abstract: This text assesses the dilemmas of an Afro-Descendant female administrator, head of a Black Studies Program at one of the main universities in the southern region of the United States. It discusses the benefits, alliances, and challenges of the experience, together with a description of the program, especially barriers to its development and expansion. The text: 1) describes the administrative power structure at the University of Tennessee Knoxville; 2) serves as a testimony of my trajectory as director of the African and African American Studies Program from 2011 to 2016 and; 3) offers a general discussion of the challenges Black women face in academia, throughout their careers.

Keywords: university, administration, Africana Studies.

Resumo: Este texto trabalha os dilemas de uma administradora afrodescendente, chefe de um programa de estudos negros numa das principais universidades da região sul dos Estados Unidos. O texto apresenta os benefícios, as alianças e os desafios da experiência, ao lado de uma descrição do programa, principalmente das barreiras de seu desenvolvimento e de sua expansão. O texto descreve a estrutura de poder administrativa na Universidade de Tennessee Knoxville; serve como um testemunho da minha trajetória como Diretora do Programa de Estudos Africanos e Africano-Americanos de 2011 a 2016; e oferece uma discussão geral dos desafios da mulher negra na academia, na trajetória da sua carreira.

Palavras-chave: universidade, administração, Estudos Africanos e Afroamericanos.

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Introduction

This text seeks to examine the role, challenges, and achievements of a Black female academician, who became Chair of the Black Studies Program at a Historically White Institution (HWI) in the USA². This is the position I held between August 2011 and July 2016 at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. The Africana Studies Program (AFST) is an Interdisciplinary Program, located within the College of Arts and Sciences and it is dedicated exclusively to the study of Africa and its diaspora, especially the United States. As head of such an ideologically charged unit, what impact can I as a Black female professor have within a structure that was originally designed to exclude such persons as myself? How can we in fairness, impartiality, and justice measure the successes (and failures) of such an administrator when the very unit she oversees exists in a constant state of tension with the institution it serves? In her role as director, how should she perform in order to guarantee the well-being of her program, in an institutional environment that disfavors its survival, without completely sacrificing the very precepts that motivated its creation and, to date, determine its mandate? What administrative measures are needed to construct positive, fertile, and meaningful relationships among professors and students, in spite of our status as a numerical and ethnic minority, as well as a community very vulnerable to discrimination and isolation on campus? This text draws attention to national trends even as it is driven by administrative and professional experiences. It displays the dilemmas of an Afro-Descendant female administrator, referencing the benefits, alliances, and respect built throughout the years that favored the growth and development of the program, as well as realities that hampered its progress and expansion.

A Historical Overview of the Black Professor in the USA

An understanding of the tensions that exist between Black faculty and their universities demands a look at the historical trajectory of such faculty. Academia today is more accepting of historical reasons for the continuing under-representation of Black faculty than contemporary explanations that uncover causes for this current shortfall (Jackson, 1991). The limited number of Black professors in higher education during the 1960s was directly attributed to deliberate policies and practices of exclusion. Historical documents and studies have proven that before the abolition of slavery in 1865, education was not an opportunity available to Blacks, thereby nullifying access to the highest levels of intellectual formation necessary to assume the office of professor. As late as 1959, the few Blacks who did manage to become qualified were simply not hired by white universities. Between 1930 and 1960, such exclusion from the dominant intellectual circle was an intentional strategy, a systemic posture that remained in place until the 1970s in states of the Deep South such as Mississippi and Alabama. 1900 to

² In historical and ethno-racial terms there are various categories of universities: 1) PWIs (Predominantly White Institutions); 2) HWIs (Historically White Institutions); and 3) HBCUs (Historically Black Colleges and Universities). Traditionally Black Institutions (TBIs) is also used. Universities that fall into the third category have a rich history dating back to the 1800s and were established primarily to educate the African American community.

1960 reflected a marked and cumulative increase in the number of Afro-Descendants being educated, an absolute success in relation to their demographic percentages. This proportional representation did not extend to higher education where there were minimal transformations. Wolfe and Freeman (2013) point out that before 1960 the accepted norm was a lack of Black administrators in PWIs, a natural consequence of segregation and racism that haunted those decades. The Civil Rights Movement would later force universities to comply with all state and federal civil rights mandates, affirmative action policies designed to guarantee the inclusion and professional betterment of Blacks. Resistance to a potentially diverse leadership on campus was fierce albeit, over time, undermined.

Historically, the advent of Black Studies Programs as spaces ideologically committed to the Civil Rights cause, Black activism, and the education of African Americans, became a worthy countermeasure, existing as the sphere dedicated almost exclusively to the hiring of Black faculty. In 1961, nationally, Black professors represented 3% and well below 1% in white universities. The 1970s era of Affirmative Action pushed the national numbers to 4.4% so that by 1976 the national total was 19,096 Black professors. This achievement was the result of new compensatory policies that by 1985 had completely reversed the marked disparity between the numbers of Black professors in TBIs and those at white schools. By 1985, 57% of Black scholars were under contract at white universities, eliminating within a space of 20 years the exclusive concentration of Black professors at TBIs. The issue is that, within the total national percentages, there was an overall decrease, a virtual stagnation to practically zero, in terms of increases in Black professorial presence across the country. 1961 to 1976 registered an increase to 10,651 Black professors or 126%. 1976 to 1985 registered an increase of 355 Black professors or 1.9% (Jackson, 1991).

Institutional, political quiescence and retraction of the 1980s and 1990s contrasted greatly with the dynamic growth in numbers during the 1960s and 1970s, thereby provoking debates that condemned measures, institutional decisions, and interpretations of demographic realities that were ignoring the racial subject matter thereby causing a resurgence in race-based inequalities. Discussions did not dwell on exclusionary practices and structural restrictions that blocked access to mainstream academia; the attitude was that the problem had been resolved and there was no longer any need to focus on this (Jackson, 1991). Evans (2007) presents the telling statistics; by the year 2000, 176,485 full (tenured) professors occupied positions at private and public research universities, however, only 8% were Black, Hispanic or Native American men while a mere 2% were women of minorities. As one of the most ethno-racially diverse states in the USA, the numbers in Florida are telling. By 2004, there were 4,359 tenured male faculty and 1,451 tenured female faculty in the state of which 157 were Black women and 258 were Black men.

Currently, the need for such awareness is fully recognized and, at the administrative level, the issue is part of general discussion about institutional growth and equity, how to increase the number of Black scholars and guarantee that they benefit professionally from the system in equal measure as the white scholars on campus (Jackson, 1991). While discussions are in place the results, solutions, and follow through continue to be less than satisfactory. A sharp decline in the number and prestige of TBIs has directly impacted the number of Black academics overall. Also lost is the community pride in its Black schools, indeed, since 1987 most African American students are receiving their degrees at PWIs, simultaneously dealing with racism, isolation, and a difficult environment, all of which leave them with a very negative vision of careers in academics. They observe their professors of color stress about recruitment, contracts, tenure, and promotion. By 1985, 11,178 Black faculty were employed at white

schools while 8,273 were full time at TBIs (Jackson, 1991). Both groups faced different kinds of challenges: inter-personal and professional isolation, institutional racism, and micro-aggressions debilitated their capacity to advance in a timely fashion in PWIs, while, even as access and job security marked the TBI experience, those who worked there felt separated from mainstream scholarship and faced inadequate funding for research, conferences, and institutional growth.

The situation as it relates specifically to Black female faculty is dire for they face classism, sexism, and racism in their quest for academic achievement. Nationally, they are the majority among women faculty of color, in 1996 accounting for a mere 6.43% of all full time faculty at the levels of assistant, associate, and full professors. Most of them teach at HBCUs or Black colleges and at community colleges, with a mere 1% fully employed at the four-year majority schools. Today, the tremendous difficulties they face as Black women professionals in academia combined with family and community responsibilities means that fewer doctoral graduates are choosing this career. Within the profession, most Black women never achieve the highest level of full professor, a situation that, as studies confirm, has to do with a kind of academic apartheid that relegates their scholarship to the least valued category, thereby marginalizing their involvement in academic culture generally. While the field is considerably more accessible today, their situation has not improved significantly. They continue to be promoted less, receive the worst salaries, and are least likely to attain the tenure track jobs. At the administrative level, a 1995 report confirmed that of the 453 female university presidents, 5.5% were African American of which nearly half were at HBCUs, or small schools with enrollments of under 3,000 students. This non-presence continues to indicate institutional persistence of tokenism and window dressing (Gregory, 2001; Williams, 1989).

The University of Tennessee's Black Studies Program

The existential value of a Black Studies Program is in its capacity to guarantee a concentrated community of African and Afro-Descendant scholars, staff, and students (and their allies), this within a space where their presence and academic foci are markedly underrepresented. The overall current racial underrepresentation at universities is usually assessed as the greatest barrier to diversity and read as a result of hegemonic systems that continue to exist, firmly entrenched, decades beyond the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. It clarifies why, to date, the Black scholar is envisioned as being “out of place” in the very profession she chooses. While this situation points to norms of thinking with regard to what constitutes the professorial profile (norms that determine the curriculum in higher education), it points to a mentality that guarantees a persistent resistance to any civil rights initiative destined to unravel those inequalities endemic in the education system (Branche, 2007).

The University of Tennessee (UT) is the largest public university system in the state of Tennessee. It has four campuses: Knoxville (UTK), or the flagship; Chattanooga (UTC); Martin (UTM); and the Health Science Center (UTHSC) in Memphis. The Black Studies Program is located on the Knoxville campus, officially called the Africana Studies Program, and I served as Chair from August 2011 to July 2016. Knoxville is the third largest town in the state and, in terms of its African American community, its African American students, its history, and the community's relationship with UTK, there are continuing tensions. The Black community has a very proud legacy built around the town's TBI called Knoxville College, an all but defunct historically Black liberal arts college founded in 1875 by the United Presbyterian Church of North America specifically to educate freed men and women (Knoxville

College History). Having declared bankruptcy, a great loss for the community, it remains a legacy worth remembering for the way it has produced highly educated, nationally recognized alumni. Lack of growth, a severe shortage of funds, and inadequate administration led to its demise. With the help of the HOPE Scholarship, private donations, UTK diversity funding, and Project Grad, few students from Knoxville's African American community are attending UTK, however not without problems of isolation, incompleteness, and safety on campus. Graduation rates could be better as could concern for their overall well-being and social integration in campus life. At UTK, there are units or offices that work in the interests of the Black professors, staff, and students i.e. the Commission for Blacks (CFB), the Black Faculty and Staff Association (BFSA), the Black Alliance, and the Africana Studies Program (AFST). The Office of Multicultural Student Life, Black sororities and fraternities are also very important student driven entities, probably most effective in reaching out and creating connections among students³.

The Black Studies program at UTK changed leadership several times since its inception. The position of program chair is usually by appointment, an office given to a Black teaching and research faculty member closely aligned with the program. Over the years there has only been one external hire for the position of program chair.

Chairs of the Black Studies Program at UTK:

- 1969-1971 – Charles Reynolds
- 1971-1985 – Marvin Peek
- 1985-1987 – Diane Morrow
- 1987-1997 – Cynthia Fleming
- 1997-2002 – John Hodges
- 2002-2004 – William (Bill) Dewey
- 2004-2009 – Wornie Reed
- 2009-2010 – Asafa Jalata
- 2011-2016 – Dawn Duke
- 2016 to date – Carolyn Hodges

Changes were also made to the program's name, in response to demands and trends nationally. Known as the Afro-American Studies Program, it began at the UTK campus during the 1968-1969 academic year with two courses being offered, 1) the Afro-American family and 2) Black History. The following year saw an increase in course offerings in the departments of English and Religious Studies. In 1968 a grant of \$10,000 secured by Dr. Edwin Redkey, then Chair of American Studies, helped launch the minor in Afro-American Studies, officially securing the establishment of the program. After great difficulty, the program's first official head, Marvin Peek, was pointed June 1st, 1971. The program was extremely popular, students were enthusiastic, and classes filled easily, however by the late 1970s student interest declined. Nationally, such programs faced various on-campus challenges and biases. They constantly had to defend their academic profile, confronted with the accusatory claim that their

³ In 1998 CFB published a very telling document prepared by BFSA about racism on campus, UTK's poor history when it comes to diversity, the difficulty African American faculty face when it comes to promotions, and the dire shortage of Black administrators (Commission for Blacks, 1998).

existence rested on political not scholarly motivations. Fortunately at UTK, as with other campuses nationally, a cohort of committed academics fully supported the program, pursuing scholarship and instruction in the area. During the 1990s, the name changed to African and African American Studies, under Cynthia Fleming. Dr. Fleming arrived at UTK in 1992 as the program's first tenure line faculty member, a joint hire with the History department. The final name change to Africana Studies was implemented under Wornie Reed, by way of ensuring that the program kept pace with developments nationally. On the one hand it was a worthy move, on the other, he did indicate that at times he found that communities on and off campus had difficulty understanding what the name meant. Many heard "Africana" but reproduced "African"⁴.

The Africana Studies Program (AFST) is the single unit dedicated to teaching and research. Located within the College of Arts and Sciences, it is one of several IDPs (Interdisciplinary Programs) that, every semester, offers Black Studies courses to some six hundred and fifty students, from the introductory level to the graduate level. The program offers an undergraduate degree (and a minor) in African and African American Studies as well as a Graduate Certificate. Most students take one of these two-course packages Introduction to African Studies (AFST 235 and AFST 236) or Introduction to African American Studies (AFST 201 and AFST 202). This two-course division is both curriculum and ideological, allowing students to appreciate what is unique to Africa and America when it comes to issues of culture and identity, and engage with international and local faculty who process topics differently. AFST is structured like a department, with its own offices, operational budget, and teaching faculty divided into two groups, lecturers and tenure line faculty. This detail is an important part of our trajectory as a unit; the original plan was to transform the unit into a department, a plan that was summarily revoked in 2008. Then program director who had been hired in anticipation of this expansion, worked hard to gain the reversal of this decision, to no avail. It came in the midst of the 2008 national depression when there was substantial downsizing and budget cuts on campuses across the country. This decision, along with the subsequent departure of the distinguished chair, had a demoralizing impact on faculty for it sent a clear message that we could expect no growth and reaffirmed administration's view of our lack of institutional importance. At that time, concern with issues of Diversity and the working conditions of minority faculty were not an integral part of the university administration's work and developmental agenda.

The AFST program is supported by Executive Faculty who direct the program, Core Faculty who are salaried with the program and who teach our main courses, Advisory Board Faculty who by research or commitment offer guidance for running the program, and Affiliated Faculty whose university-wide course offerings serve the program's students. AFST Core Faculty comprise four lecturers and six tenure line professors of English, Foreign Languages, Sociology, and Anthropology. Our tenure line faculty have dual appointments i.e. they are salaried in both AFST and a department, not an ideal situation since this dual appointment creates a sensation of difference, of not belonging anywhere fully. Further it requires service commitments in both units, which often turns out to be more than is required from other faculty. This is an ongoing concern for it directly impacts the faculty member's research and publication output (Africana Studies Program). As program chair, the major challenge I faced was program expansion in relation to our

⁴ Information compiled using public program and office documents such as the essay "Afro-American Studies Program: History of the program" (no author or year information available) as well as information from colleagues who served and are currently working in the program.

inability to retain Black faculty. The difficult campus environment of isolation, potential professional stagnation, and the sensation that they are not receiving the same work conditions or opportunities as white professors makes UTK a revolving door with Black faculty leaving the university in a space of three to six years, often in search of better more uplifting and supportive professional environments. The departure of male and especially young female faculty is especially significant, the main reason being an enormous sensation of solitude, a shortage of reliable senior female mentors of color, and the overall stress of being the only Black faculty or faculty of color in their units and departments. As an institution, UTK continues to construct its interpretation and institutional dedication to issues of Diversity and, from the perspective of its Black faculty, not always in a way that confirms its commitment to adequate representation. The financial and business model that drives this machinery most often translates into actions and policies that prove disadvantageous to faculty of diversity, thereby impacting Black presence and the overall capacity of such faculty to perform and excel. They proceed to depart, thus compromising universal academic excellence, case in point, the ability of a program like ours to flourish.

This is a program designed along two lines – African Studies and African American Studies. Our courses are primarily in the Humanities and Social Sciences, meaning that our majors are encouraged to follow one of these paths and select appropriate courses. As a specialist on Africa in Latin America I worked to ensure a very open and global perspective of African and Afro-Descendant studies within these two lines (i.e. Africa and USA) by encouraging events and perspectives that potentially included the Caribbean, Europe, and Latin America, in the interest of wider contemplations that include diversity, diaspora, Afro-Latinity, Caribbean identities, Black world communities and so on. The embracing of new directions has to be guided to ensure it does not represent dilution or loss of the program's character. It proved a welcome adjustment, especially for new incoming faculty, as well as current generation of students even as limitations prevailed since its success depended on the program's capacity to offer courses, a situation hampered by the unavailability of such research and teaching faculty. Over the 7 to 8 years, the huge decrease in new hires and the constant departure of faculty have affected courses offerings.

The status of our program is always, at best, precarious and insecure. There is a constant pressure from the college administration to achieve the highest number of majors and minors, under threat of losing funding or even the program if these goals are not met. Those of us who value its existence are forced to function within very unsatisfactory financial agreements and work conditions, in terms of personal remuneration, as well as almost no hope of increasing the program budget. There is a constant questioning of the program's value as an academic unit, since it was founded as a result of political and social movements, installed in a university structure by force, a space not originally designed to accommodate such a unit. This translates into a constant tension, antagonism that marks the very nature of the director's position. Teaching content, activism in research agendas, and the presence of a unit comprising only Black faculty is at odds with a space like the University of Tennessee, an institution at the service of a predominately white, right-wing Tennesseans from very small rural towns. Our program does not align with the expectations of those in power. By its very existence the program adopts a critical posture that defies and questions all procedures. Particularly notable is institutional disinterest in increasing the number of Black faculty and, more importantly, ensuring their retention. Such research presence on campus affects the quality and direction of educational offerings, especially important for a region and college such as this one where many students are first generation college attendees. Our course content includes ancient African civilizations, Pan-Africanism, the violent history of Jim Crow

and lynching, the African American community and family, and study abroad in Africa, areas offered to provide transforming experiences for our students. The creation of a new mindset that is global, wise, and tolerant feeds the agenda of diversity that continues to lag behind at UTK.

The Challenges of Black Female Leadership

Kusi-Appouh (2016) cites Patricia Hill Collins (1990) who urges the Black woman to embrace her subjective and specialized knowledge. One path to this state of enlightenment and liberation is by transforming our experiences into narrative, a process that would allow us to create and appreciate the world of which we are an integral part. This is a trajectory that demands reflection, interpretation, and decision-making. As Black women who are tenured and located in PWIs, we arrive at a crucial stage in our careers when oftentimes we have to make the decision to either continue exclusively as research and teaching faculty or, should the opportunity arise, become a top level university administrator, a post that often usually means abandoning the classroom and research. This could be a temporary or a permanent move; some faculty have served as administrators and after a few years of service have returned to their respective departments. This decision-making is not unique to Black women faculty; the extra challenge she faces is the way race plays into her ability to be successful. The structure of power and privilege endemic in PWIs was not originally established thinking that one day someone like her would be present. This automatically puts her at odds with the system, even before assuming office; by making the decision to become an administrator, she is defying the system, moving against the norm. Generally, the Black female scholar is a rarity in high academic, relevant, decision-making, budget controlling positions. In proportional representation she is not visible on executive committees, Boards of Trustees, prestigious academic editorials, or grants and awards committees.

Various studies have confirmed the disrespect and additional provocations such an academician faces in positions of leadership. She lacks networks of professional support and is condemned to consistent isolation, even as she may be a part of a network of other female administrators, all of whom are probably white. As is the norm with Black faculty, she suffers even more from the lack of a community and is reduced to rare encounters with individuals, generally formal encounters, or rapid exchanges in corridors. This situation generates a deeper marginalization, potentially a reduction in effective voicing, in the way her views are received and processed at meetings or on committees. Her incapacity to integrate potentially leads to less likelihood of promotion, or acknowledgement through nominations for awards or professional recognition. Miville and Constantine (2007) confirm the greater difficulty women of color in administration face, pointing to sensations of feeling pressured, squeezed, a feeling that she has to do everything, or is being pulled in multiple directions at the same time. These sensations are not unique to her; they are a part of the professional experiences of all Black faculty who tend to be overworked by a system in which we are very few in number. My experience has been that we automatically become the torchbearers of all things Race and Diversity, especially if we wish to survive the profession. The lack of mentorship has a devastating impact in the way it continues the cycle of isolation and unfulfilled careers. We are so few Black female faculty that we never have mentors to guide us through the system. The result is that we keep repeating the same mistakes. We overwork, to the detriment of our research, we do not learn the system, we avoid networking, we feel isolated, we stress over publishing, and we do not communicate well with each other, more than likely we ignore

each other, for whatever reason, driven by a general fear or reservations about forming a community. As most work goes unacknowledged, and as few Blacks are hired in relation to whites, the chances of promotion to director, head, dean, or provost are very slim. In terms of remuneration, the distinctions in salaries mirror all other inequities. We earn less than our white colleagues, both male and female. Black women's salaries are at the bottom of the tenure line pool. The African and African American Studies program tends to have international African and Afro-Descendant faculty and they in turn tend to earn less than their USA counterparts. International women of color earn the worse salaries overall.

As I became more familiar with the nature of the position, I found that discouraging Race from a position of leadership requires sensitivity to internal politics and a deeper understanding of the university community's personality and interrelationships. At UTK, the tendency at the administrative level, as well as among many faculty, is for there to be a daltonic approach to talking about race and racism on campus so as 1) not to offend anyone, 2) to avoid politicized and controversial discussions in the classroom and 3) supposedly to promote a peaceful and cordial atmosphere on campus. This posture coincides with the culture of East Tennessee, a southern way of being that is open, friendly, cordial, perhaps superficially so, for there continues to be a clear divide among Blacks and whites, extremely visible, for example, in how religion (traditional churches and their communities) is structured here⁵. At the administrative level, this provides a neutral, comfortable stance facilitating their navigation past issues of Diversity (which few really understand) toward their financial and business agendas, especially operations and expansion. Interrogating such debilitating ideological approach is a fundamental requirement for a sincere and authentic conversation that focuses on how racism and race interact with oppression, privilege, and power (Smith and Tuck, 2016).

As Program Chair, my consistent objective was to increase the professorial pool primarily of professionals with PhDs in Black Studies, thereby sustaining the curriculum, ideological focus, and content of the program. Some faculty however are worried about the idea of Black Studies as a narrow focus. This debate is ongoing in the program. One proposal is to include other kinds of faculty. However, today's academia is populated with faculty whose research hinges on identity, diversity, Africa, race, and so on, however, they are not necessarily Black Studies faculty. As we approach the end of the second decade in the 21st century, Black Studies programs find themselves under pressure to expand, diversify, and modernize, especially to sustain the interest of their students. Without a doubt, as a new and younger generation of faculty transition into program leadership they will bring new approaches to program structure and faculty hires. A more global approach to what constitutes African American identity in the USA is much needed.

My Experiences as Chair of the Africana Studies Program at UTK

On 1st August 2011 I began my sojourn as Chair of the Africana Studies Program at the University of Tennessee Knoxville. I was a mid-career professor, a recently tenured Associate Professor, an important detail since many professors prefer to wait until they become Full Professors before assuming administrative office. This is an important detail in a system where your professional level and research

⁵ The lines are drawn between white churches and Black churches. The history of the formation and rise of the Black Baptist church coincides with the history of violence and segregation experienced by the African American community.

impact your influence and voice in the system. My assuming office at this time had to do with the particular circumstances of finances and race on campus. Even as this trend is changing today in various schools, the origin and nature of this kind of program begs that it be led by a Black professor, especially at a PWI such as ours. The current shortage of Black faculty at UTK meant there were limited candidates available and willing to assume office, especially under then current conditions of a failing program and terrible financial remuneration for whoever took the job. The program had a very inadequate budget, had just lost its director and main champion, was suffering from internal friction among faculty, and a dire shortage of majors and minors. What helped to save the program was the presence of a cohort of Black and white professors invested in the research and teaching of Africa and its diaspora, very concerned about the end of the program, and prepared to campaign for a solution. I was approached by two white female colleagues of African studies, I agreed, and was nominated by the Dean's office for the position. I rose to the challenge with very limited administrative experience and a lot of enthusiasm. The transition to my leadership was equally problematic and ultimately impacted professional relationships with certain key male faculty in the program. I faced disrespect and my authority was challenged and undermined on several occasions. The tremendous challenge I faced was sustaining a cordial and professionally wholesome environment within the unit, with the majority of faculty. My efforts paid off and today the program is considered one of the solid and thriving interdisciplinary programs here at UTK.

Important details are that I am not originally from the United States and my PhD is in the area of foreign languages, Spanish and Portuguese. I believe this difference was crucial in the way it introduced certain leadership of neutrality, in a program clearly divided along 2 lines – African and African American studies. I was not contracted as Africana faculty, however, upon my arrival on campus, I gravitated to the program given my professional focus on Afro-Latin American and Caribbean literature with a specific focus on Black women writers. Sometime between 2005 and 2007 I was invited to serve on the Africana Studies Advisory Board and as a result of that experience became very familiar with issues of Black Studies as well as Black faculty, staff, and students on campus. I was drawn to the program by way of seeking out an academic community that shared my cultural and ideological interests. By then I had been on campus for three to four years and was beginning to feel the effects of professional and general isolation. I felt the need for close friends and non-white colleagues with whom I could share my challenges in confidence. The quality of my interaction with others and my teaching suffered for I continued to feel disconnected and unmotivated. I felt frustrated teaching grammar and Spanish literature; opportunities to teach and enjoy my research topics were few and far between. Overall, students had a very narrow vision of Latin America, did not envision it as a region of Afro-Descendants, added to which in presence, appearance, and teaching topics, I definitely did not represent their stereotypical views of that region and its Latino culture. In their student evaluations, two students commented that they did not appreciate themes of Race and Blackness in classes on Latin America, as topics that had nothing to do with Spanish, that I was interpreting the region badly, forcing such race theme on a region that had nothing to do with that issue. They felt that I was working the topic because of my own heritage, as a Black woman, which ironically enough in the end, given my trajectories and experiences in Brazil and the USA (two countries with troubling legacies when it comes to issues of race), was actually true. What helped me through those years was my love for my research topics and the culminating sense of satisfaction in having my manuscript accepted by a university press. The Africana Studies Advisory Board meetings gradually opened my eyes to the reality of being Black

faculty on the UTK campus. For years I accompanied the lack of support and institutional depreciation, the shortage of funds and academic disrespect of a program deemed at best substandard. Perhaps, in another sense, these experiences prepared me for the struggles I faced as program chair.

I served as the intermediary between our faculty who worked professionally in two places at the same time, i.e. our program and their respective departments. I was the cushion between faculty and the Dean of the College of Arts & Sciences. On the one hand I coordinated all program matters, on the other I was the spokeswoman for the academic interests of the only unit of Black professors and instructors in our PWI. These are two different roles that do not always coincide, indeed, the interests of the Dean's office tended to diverge from what this kind of program needed to develop and expand. My first year proved to be a steep learning curve, made all the more difficult by a lack of mentorship. In hindsight, there are decisions I would not have made had I known then what I know now. At the end of that year I worked to compile a list of responsibilities that would facilitate things for whoever followed me as program chair. These included: connecting with program faculty to identify and solve their concerns; hire and process new faculty, ensure faculty retention, and reduce salary disparities; advise all program majors and minors and support their academic challenges to ensure they graduate on time; attend budget meetings and fight for increased funding and more faculty; connect with alumni especially those with very successful careers as they are potential donors; manage and control the budget; develop initiatives to grow and improve the program (Miville and Constantine, 2007).

As chair I was alone and struggled to navigate the system. Especially disconcerting were administrative meetings with the dean, as the only Black female administrator present. It reminded me of how few women of color have the opportunity to assume higher office. I was privileged to have received the opportunity and alone. Even within such vulnerability, I learned to speak out, challenge the budgetary allocations, and work to explain the value of our program within the business and financial operational model. Miville and Constantine (2007) have identified barriers to success among such women. They include:

- The lack of a supportive network and a distant relationship with other administrators.
- Marginalization.
- Tokenism.
- Stereotyping and certain prejudices against women of color.
- Dissimilar cultural values: personal education and cultural values oftentimes clash with environmental and institutional values.
- Different styles in communicating and work (visible in both collaborative and independent projects).
- The sensation of too much pressure and of being split among different agendas.

These specific challenges have an effect on her capacity to accomplish her administrative duties. Further, they represent certain psychological burden, potentially resulting in sensations of frustration, the feeling of being incompetent and a helplessness, i.e. not being able to resolve problems. Leading a Black Studies program is demanding and requires certain emotional stability, to ensure cordial and productive interfacing with administrators, colleagues, students, and the local community (Miville and Constantine, 2007). Such a position necessitates a wide knowledge of all campus programs and entities that support minority affairs. It begs knowhow in problem solving, creativity, and motivation, in spite of difficulties.

It requires knowledge of institutional finances and how to access them. Institutional support is fundamental but difficult to achieve, for it seems that today we constantly have to be defending our right to exist. The program seems eternally caught in concerns about longterm funding, numbers of majors, and sustaining student-teacher ratios so as to ensure future hires of primarily Black faculty.

Conclusion

As the leading academic unit focusing on studies about Africa and its world diaspora, it is paramount to the unit's success that diverse faculty feel welcome and are made to feel an integral part of the program and its long term goals. There is no doubt that quality program leadership is vital for building an engaging and stimulating environment, even as all program faculty must buy into the program and strive to sustain an inclusive learning environment. An important measure is to perceive Black studies within the broader context of what constitutes a university, to quote Degitz (2007), it exists "to teach students at all levels in an environment of research, free inquiry, and personal responsibility; to expand knowledge; to improve the human life through service and publication; and to enrich our culture". Our ability to transform the structure is dependent on campaigns to change our operations and guidelines, incorporating policies on diversity into all major committees and decision-making forums. (Dade *et al.*, 2015). The task of building a community is never-ending. Currently, I perceive UTK as comprised of fractured communities and those of us committed to the process are faced with the constant tasks of appreciating and respecting our differences, working to reduce internal contradictions and misunderstandings, and finally, as Sasaki (2007) reiterates, negotiating and filling in faults, cracks, and fissures, especially those most harmful to the ideals of diversity and multiculturalism we hold most dear.

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