

Democracy's College

Episode 4: Engaging Black Women in Institutional Transformation in Education

Welcome to the Democracy's College podcast series. This podcast focuses on educational equity, justice, and excellence for all students in P-20 educational pathways. This podcast is a product of the Office of Community College Research and Leadership, or OCCRL, at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Learn more about OCCRL at occrll.illinois.edu.

In this episode, Dr. Eboni Zamani-Gallaher from OCCRL will talk with Dr. Lori Patton Davis, a professor of Higher Education and Student Affairs at Indiana University, about engaging Black women in institutional transformation in education.

Dr. Zamani-Gallaher: Dr. Davis has just wrapped her discussion, *Hidden in Plain Sight: the Black Women's Blueprint for Transformation in Higher Education*, as part of the College of Education Dean's Distinguished Diversity Lecture series co-sponsored by OCCRL. Welcome, Dr. Davis.

Lori Patton Davis: Thank you.

Dr. Zamani-Gallaher: I'm so excited that we have a little time to touch base with you and wanted to speak with you a little bit more in depth around your talk, today's discussion, *Hidden in Plain Sight: the Black Women's Blueprint for Transformation in Higher Education*. What inspired that work?

Lori Patton Davis: I think a lot of things inspired it. One, my own positionality as a Black women served as an inspiration. Then to have an opportunity to learn about so many Black women and their contributions was another thing that inspired me. I think the primary inspiration was my desire to bring Black women's voices to the forefront. I think Black women have amazing contributions and do so many amazing things, but institutional leaders and those who espouse the goals of transformation rarely if ever look to Black women and their contribution and the way that they have done things in the past as a model for how our institutions or social systems might change.

Dr. Zamani-Gallaher: In your work, you talk about how Black women can be a blueprint, but in particular that they are few and far between when we look at senior- and executive-level leadership, as well as those who occupy full professorships at today's campuses. Could you share a little bit more in terms of what we can do to increase that pipeline.

Lori Patton Davis: Like the title of the talk was "Hidden in Plain Sight," I think the answers are right in front of us. Now, the willingness and the capacity to really think about them and make some difficult decisions is where we run into problems. There are, as you said, few Black women who are presidents or who are serving in an institutional leadership capacity, but that doesn't have to be the case. I think that presidents and those who are in positions to hire or recruit need to make the additional effort to, one, hire more Black women, but also to diversify institutional leadership period. Like there is no reason that in 2016 the majority of our institutional leadership is still White men. The same is true if we look at the faculty demographics. In order to sort of engage in a shift, it requires us to do things in a way that we haven't done them before, which I think Black women do all the time, tending to be innovators in that regard. To me, I think, it's about institutional leaders and those invested in particular in a program, department, or the overall institution, taking a long hard look in the mirror and deciding that things have to change and actually implementing them. So that would necessitate the creation of a pipeline of

faculty, if the goal is to diversify the faculty. It might mean committing dollars to train folks or to send them to training and professional development opportunities to help them, groom them, for institutional leadership. It might mean making different decisions about how we value people's research. So there is a strong belief that in order to lead an institution you need to have been a good scholar or need to have a specific type of scholarly record, and that type of record is usually very traditional, so it automatically leaves out people of color who have more unique ways of pursuing their scholarship. I think it is also about having the willingness to speak up, which I don't think a lot of our institutional leaders do very well. To speak up and say that by diversifying leadership and faculty the university stands to benefit from that, that it becomes a better place for all people, when there is a greater diversity.

Dr. Zamani-Gallaher: Much of the work that we focus on in terms of programs, policies, research, and practice at OCCRL is about looking at equitable outcomes. Much of what we see in terms of a P-20 pipeline reflected throughout each tier of education is where the robust numbers in the classroom are primarily White females in terms of the instructional core. As we look at higher education, as well as K-12, those at the helm in leadership roles and in control and in authority of resources are robustly White and male. Can you talk to us about how context matters? Is there a variation by which certain contexts are getting it right or are doing a better job?

Lori Patton Davis: I think that there are certain contexts that get it right. For example, if you look at historically Black colleges, they are primarily responsible for the number of Black people we see in STEM, in STEM programs, or pursuing STEM graduate study. So, something right is going on at HBCUs that specialize in STEM fields. The thing that I believe is going right is that they have fostered a climate of inclusion for people. I think that students learn better and have a greater investment in pursuing STEM degrees when an environment is conducive to that. But when you look at traditional institutions, Big-10 institutions, these predominately White institutions, these research institutions, the environment isn't one that fosters community; it fosters competition. It fosters independence rather than collaboration and interdependence. It fosters a lot of Westernizing Eurocentric values that contribute to structures that ultimately ensure that minoritized groups aren't as successful. I think I could probably speak more to what is going wrong than what is going right, which is sort of a testament to where we are in higher education. But there are some spaces on predominately White campuses where I think they are getting it right, where they are supporting students. A lot of these tend to be grant-funded programs, but again it is about the environment and the support. If the people who are in privileged positions to lead institutions and their circumstances are also privileged, they technically don't have to look and think about other people, and they don't. The key is figuring out how we generate this rethinking about what the educational process can be, whether it is K-12 or in higher education. I think higher education plays a tremendous role in who those teachers are in K-12, so we educate or miseducate them through our schools of education, where primarily the teacher educators are White too. I wish there was a clear cut answer. For me it is a change in thinking; it requires a dramatic and drastic paradigmatic shift for us to get to where we need to be in higher education. I think, What will that thing be that finally snaps and says to those decision makers and leaders that we have to change? Until we get there, I am not very confident that we will see these rising numbers, as institutional leaders and folks they talk about wanting increased numbers and diversity and seeing it throughout the educational pipeline. You can't just talk about that and not do anything. I'm not sure that they even know what to do; I am not sure that they have the philosophical underpinnings to really even think from

a social justice lens. I think the concern is about reputation and money and that higher education is very much about those things, but it is also about learning. Until that is front and center, until it is about learning and equity, we are going to probably remain the same and the status quo will continue.

Dr. Zamani-Gallaher: Just to shift gears a little bit, but related, some of your work in the past has really looked at, and you are a known expert for, work on cultural centers. Given that there has been heightened racial tension generally speaking, but also bubbling up on our campuses, what do you see as the role of cultural centers at colleges and universities in aiding and creating learning environments that are truly inclusive and engaging and supportive of racially diverse collegians?

Lori Patton Davis: This issue is that cultural centers do that, but they tend to be the only ones doing it. It never surprises me when I am an external reviewer or consultant and I am looking through what a given a cultural center director is doing and they are doing so much. They are doing the work that you might anticipate other offices should be doing. Like the cultural center director is giving financial aid advice, is advising student organizations, and is doing programming. By virtue of having a cultural center, lots of offices on campuses feel absolved of their responsibility and there really isn't any accountability. What I found is directors burned out or devalued, and they still have this commitment to do this work. However, cultural centers are also some of the least resourced offices on campus. So they play a critical role. Lots of students see them as a home away from home. They talk about them as a safe space, the one place they can go on campus where they are not judged, where they can be themselves. There is certainly value in cultural centers, and I think other functional areas on campus could probably look to the work that cultural centers are doing to enhance their own respective areas. In thinking about the recent protests on campus, I know at the University of Missouri, students were using the cultural center to galvanize and to come together and plan. And so, it is really critical on campus, but it is limited as to what it can do due with resources and the overabundance of responsibilities for serving a diverse student population in a meaningful way that is not represented elsewhere on campus.

Dr. Zamani-Gallaher: In closing, what call to action would you like to issue for those listening today? Who would you want to take a more active role in advocating for racial justice on our campuses and ensuring that equitable learning outcomes are achieved?

Lori Patton Davis: I would certainly like to encourage White colleagues and White people who are listening, as I think that people of color have been carrying the burden and the weight of trying to educate people, trying to move institutions towards a more socially just focus. We have been doing the work, but we need those who claim to be our allies to talk to other White people and help them to understand what is at stake and not to rely on people of color to educate and to carry the load. I also would encourage those listening who are in leadership roles to think about how they can create actions that are actually transformational. As leaders, they have people who are looking to them, and they also have the opportunity to make decisions, and I would encourage them to think about making a different decision that doesn't just benefit the majority, but that benefits groups that haven't had access and groups that haven't been recognized and acknowledged.

For more information about engaging Black women in institutional transformation in education, we recommend that you visit Dr. Lori Patton Davis's [website](#) at Indiana University for a list of publications. For more podcasts, links to today's recommended resources, or to share your comments and suggestions, visit occrll.illinois.edu/democracy or send them via Twitter @occrll. Tune in next month when Dr. Heather Fox from OCCRL will talk with Dr. Pamela Eddy from the College of William and Mary

about developing and retaining diverse leadership. Background music for this podcast is provided by DubLab. Thank you for listening and for your contribution to educational equity, justice, and excellence for all students.