



Community Engagement and Social Transformation: Understanding the Need for Change

From the editor of the HBCU Special Issue

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Initially, as a precursor to this special issue, I wrote a manuscript that highlighted work that I was doing within my community to extend volleyball to marginalized communities. However, with the onset of the societal changes resulting from the coronavirus and the demands for changes in policing triggered by the public lynching of George Floyd, I felt compelled to rewrite the introduction to this special issue considering the current climate.

For many faculty members, the types of communities that have been historically marginalized in the United States are foreign to them. This circumstance was overtly apparent to me during the early part of my academic career. I remember when the State of Alabama passed a law requiring faculty involved in the training of teachers to demonstrate their ongoing engagement in K–12 schools. The law was designed to keep faculty in touch with the very schools and communities that were destinations for the new teachers they produced. The following was an exchange between me and a colleague:

Colleague: Hey, Kim, I need your help on something.

Me: Sure, what's up?

Colleague: With this new law, I need to find a school where I can volunteer. I'm not talking about the schools where you work; I'm talking about other schools that I might feel more comfortable working.

Me: Honestly, Donald, I probably don't work with any schools where you would feel comfortable. I only work with schools that need me.

As I reflect on that exchange now, part of the challenge of higher education is its capacity to serve communities that the faculty “do not know” and oftentimes, “don't want to know.” This mindset is a reflection of white America. To distance themselves from knowing the realities of black and brown Americans is to remain delusional about the American dream and the reality that that

dream is attainable for all of us. It is not.

The onset of the coronavirus unveiled what some of us have always known to be true: that black and brown populations are disproportionately vulnerable to poverty and less likely to have access to healthcare. Because of these characteristics of our society, black and brown populations were disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. This is not the case because we are somehow less responsible. In fact, the visages of irresponsible behavior amidst this pandemic of people at the beach, attending parties, or going to church and not practicing social distancing cut across racial and class lines. No, diverse and poor populations are more likely to work in service fields deemed essential during the pandemic. These were the very people who risked their lives to continue serving food, stocking the shelves in the grocery stores, and working at the checkout lines, among other roles served. More notably, because healthcare insurance is often not tied to their employment circumstances, most of these workers do not have access to medical services.

Amidst the dystopian reality of the pandemic, Americans learned of three horrific cases of modern-day lynching at the same time, even though they actually occurred months apart. Americans watched a Minneapolis police officer strangle George Floyd, an African American man, for almost nine minutes. Derek Chauvin strangled Floyd leisurely with no fear of interference because three other police officers stood watch so no one intervened. We immediately learned of Mr. Floyd's murder because there was a video. This example of barbarism was companioned by the news that Breonna Taylor, an EMT in Louisville, Kentucky, was killed while she slept. The pathetic irony is that the person that the police were looking for was already in custody, but Taylor is still dead. While this event occurred in March, the public found out about this case around the time of Floyd's murder. These events were companioned by the modern-day lynching of Ahmaud Arbery. Unlike the other two cases, Arbery was not murdered by

the police. Instead, two white men ran him down in the street and one of them shot him. The third man is responsible for videotaping the incident and releasing the video almost two months after the fact. However, because one of the culprits was a former police officer, the case was pushed from one prosecutor to another, thereby delaying justice for Arbery's family. In two of the cases, Floyd and Arbery, the perpetrators have been arrested and the public awaits the trials and hopefully convictions. But the reality is that in most modern-day lynchings involving the police, there is no forthcoming justice.

So, why do I call attention to a colleague's unwillingness to work in underserved communities amid the current crises? Community-engaged work and the resulting scholarship, if required by universities for faculty tenure, would demand that faculty leverage their expertise to redress some of these structural issues that plague our society. When I consider the work of Dr. Denise Davis Maye, department chair for Social Work at Alabama State University, I'm reminded of the countless ways that she works to connect her program to the community by preparing her students to work with the racially diverse and economically marginalized. I cannot forget the innovative faculty at Tennessee State University, who experiment with diverse ways of growing food in order to eradicate the proliferation of food deserts in our country. I'm also reminded of Drs. Cheryl Seals and Octavia Tripp, both incredible STEM faculty, who extend their expertise in science to populations not widely represented in STEM fields.

While at a predominantly white institution, it is with faculty like Davis-Maye, Seals, Tripp, and others that we formulated community-based initiatives that provided marginalized students with opportunities to grow academically and personally. Programs like Kemet Academy contributed to these students' ability to successfully navigate high school with many going on to graduate from college. Kemet Academy was funded initially by Dr. David Wilson when he was at Auburn University, now the current president at Morgan State University, and subsequently supported by Dr. Royrickers Cook. It demonstrates that with minimal funding there is so much that we can do as faculty to change the circumstances of those least served by this society.

I want to end this editorial with a story about a student who participated in my first community-engaged program while I was a faculty member at a predominantly white institution.

During my first or second year, several of us decided to create a mentoring program for students at a local high school. We named the program Project Nia. We were only able to maintain the program for a year or two because we were all non-tenured faculty. So, the program ended.

Years later, I was walking through the hallway during the summer. We were implementing Kemet Academy for the first summer, but the hallway was filled with students matriculating in the fall at this predominantly white school. One of the matriculating students approached me. This was the exchange:

Student: You don't remember me, do you?

Me: No. Help me out.

Student: Years ago, I was a student in Project Nia. (Slowly the memory of this student from four or five years ago came flooding back.)

Student: I was hoping I would run into you. I want to thank you. Before Project Nia, I would have never thought that I would ever attend college. I definitely didn't think that I would be a student here. It is because of Project Nia and the time that all of you spent with us that I am here. I don't know where I would be otherwise, but I know I'm here because of you.

Me: (Attempting to hold back tears of joy, I weakly replied): You are very welcome.

Once the student finished with the exchange, he bounded off down the hallway to catch up with the other students matriculating in the fall.

When you consider what difference higher education can make, re-situating community-engaged work and the resulting scholarship as a requirement for all of its faculty would resonate. It would send a loud message to marginalized communities about their value. No more symbolic commitments to diversity that have no impact beyond a moment, it would add to the type of systemic change necessary if we are to realize a true democratic society wherein WE are all EQUAL!

References

Galtung, J. (1990). Cultural violence. *Journal of Peace Research*, 27(3), 291–305.