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Build, Resist, Be Resilient, and Rebuild: Advising as a Womxn of Color

Alexa R. D. Erb

Racial battle fatigue, cultural taxation, and the challenge of practicing self-care in the midst of tumultuous racial campus climate are all powerful forces that affect how Advisors of Color show up in their relationships with college students. Through scholarly personal narrative, the author conceptualizes the role of building, resistance, resilience, and rebuilding through their journey as a Womxn of Color advising student groups at a predominantly white institution.

Contention, public protests, demands for change, and the largest racial justice movement that the University of Vermont (UVM) had seen in decades marked the spring semester of 2018. As a first-year student in the Higher Education and Student Affairs Administration program, a Womxn¹ of Color, and an advisor for a predominantly-white student organization, I learned valuable lessons during this time that none of my mentors or textbooks had adequately prepared me to face in the field.

Through the narrative of my involvement with the activism that occurred at UVM during the spring of 2018, I share my experience of building, resisting, developing resilience, and intentional rebuilding. By sharing my story, I provide a better understanding of the unique challenges and triumphs of Womxn of Color advising at predominantly-white institutions in times of tumultuous racial climate.

Build: Putting the Pieces Together

Growing up as the multiracial daughter of two transracial adoptees in Burlington, Vermont, my introduction to the concepts of power, privilege, and oppression came a little bit later than most. I grew up in a very white community where many of my friends and extended family members preached color-blindness as equality. On the surface, this rhetoric seemed to elevate and celebrate our common ground.

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[1] Womxn: a term to describe anyone who self-identifies as a womxn. This spelling challenges the notion that our identity inherently depends on men and intentionally includes the narratives of trans womxn.*

As a second-year student in college, I was writing a paper on the achievement gap, academic disparity between racial groups, and educational inequity. In my research, I stumbled across an article that condemned colorblind pedagogy in the classroom.

It was not until reading this article that I first began to reflect on how much of me had been erased, invalidated, and made invisible because of well-intentioned color-blindness in my formative years.

On the night of November 24th, 2014, I received my first heavy dose of reality as an undergraduate student that drastically shifted my perception of equality as color-blindness. I sat in my residence hall room, refreshing my Internet browser and waiting for the grand jury's verdict in the Darren Wilson hearing. In those final moments leading up to the announcement, I truly believed in a world that would demand justice for those who deserved it. I believed the institutions of this country would do right by Michael Brown, the unarmed, Black boy shot to death by a police officer in the streets of Ferguson, Missouri. My steadfast belief that justice would always conquer dissipated around 8:30 pm that night. My stomach dropped, uncontrollable tears streamed down my face, and an unshakeable dread filled my heart as the verdict appeared on my screen—Darren Wilson would walk free. My world turned upside down.

As I sat unmoving in a puddle of despair, other students at my alma mater used the cover of night to envelope the quad in toilet paper—a university tradition used to commemorate athletic wins—to celebrate Wilson's acquittal. It was my first glimpse at the ugly underbelly of an institution I so dearly loved. The dissonance was deafening.

My eyes were further opened to white supremacy rearing its ugly head in higher education through implicitly biased policing of Black and Brown students on campus, Yik Yak posts, racist party themes, death threats to leaders of the student activist movement, hate crimes and vandalism, and the empty words and actions of senior administrators. I experienced my first significant encounter with racial battle fatigue (Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007) as a result of the constant need to cope physiologically, culturally, and emotionally in order to navigate the racially hostile and unsupportive campus environment. Throughout my college career, I engaged more deeply with my identity as a multiracial individual in America, a Person of Color in a predominantly white friend group, an individual outside of the Black-white binary living in the South, and a Womxn of Color in higher education.

The rage, the fear, the overwhelming need for change, and the refusal to sink into hopelessness that I experienced as a result of the national and campus climate led to my awakening as a student activist. Desperate to build more inclusive environments in which Students of Color could thrive, I entered the field of student affairs.

Resist: To Exert Force in Opposition or To Withstand the Force or Effect of

In September of 2016, I learned through my Facebook newsfeed that UVM had raised the Black Lives Matter flag on campus. When the headline came out, I was working in a multicultural center at a small, private, prestigious university in the South. The upper administration of that institution had strongly discouraged the multicultural center staff from displaying Black Lives Matter messaging, prioritizing a delusional sense of “neutrality” over the needs of Students of Color whom our office was in place to serve. As I sat in my office, devoid of Black Lives Matter signage, watching the video of the flag flying in front of UVM’s student center, I felt a sense of pride and a longing for home. I ached to be surrounded by a community that knew “Black Lives Matter” should not be a politically charged statement or a hushed belief, but an affirmation on everyone’s lips. I wanted to be part of a campus that understood the importance of explicitly stating support for Students of Color. I aspired to be at a university where the raising of the Black Lives Matter flag was celebrated by students, staff, faculty, and community members alike. At the time, I had no idea how that flag would impact my own journey.

A year later, I enrolled as a graduate student at UVM in the Higher Education and Student Affairs Administration (HESA) program only to discover that UVM was not the utopia I envisioned. In the time between the flag-raising video and my arrival on the UVM campus, the Black Lives Matter flag was stolen from the flagpole. The message that radiated from the hostile act made Students of Color feel unwelcome and unsafe. Student activists formed a group called NoNames for Justice with the goal of fighting for equity and inclusion of all marginalized peoples. NoNames led the charge in drafting demands for the administration—demands that were eerily similar to the still unanswered and unaddressed demands written by UVM student activists 30 years earlier.

The onslaught of racism and violence against communities of color continued into February 2018 when messages that promoted white supremacy and attacked Communities of Color were found around campus, prompting student activists to amplify their demands for justice. NoNames for Justice begged the administration to stop ignoring the problem and start addressing their demands. Staff members across campus rallied behind the students, organizing their efforts and supporting in any way possible. Fed up with the treatment of Communities of Color at UVM, one staff member went on a hunger strike to demand that the administration take action. The hunger strike made headlines in local newspapers, drawing more attention to the demands of Students of Color at UVM. Still feeling ignored, NoNames for Justice held their “Done with the Bullsh*t” rally in the Waterman Building, home to the offices of many upper-level administrators including the

president, provost, and academic deans.

Overexertion of emotional labor, compassion fatigue, burnout, and racial battle fatigue created a powerful force that felt insurmountable. As a graduate student and higher education professional, I had the language to articulate what racial battle fatigue meant. However, no class, study, or article could prepare me for navigating the phenomenon myself, while guiding my Advisees of Color through their own experiences of fatigue and the intense emotions they felt throughout these tumultuous times at UVM.

Feeling frustrated and burnt-out amidst the protests, I walked into an executive board meeting for the student organization I advise, the UVM Program Board. Many of the Students of Color within the organization were leaders and prominent organizers in NoNames for Justice. As the advisors and executive board discussed how to support Students of Color within our organization, one advisor contributed, “This fall, Alexa and I talked about holding an affinity space for our Students of Color. What if we did that?” The folks around the table nodded and offered verbal support of the idea before timidly waiting for my response. I looked around the table. Everyone was white. Everyone had demonstrated their commitment to being an ally. Everyone would understand if I said I did not have the emotional capacity to take on this initiative right now. Everyone knew that if I did not hold this space for our Students of Color, it would not happen. A living, breathing picture of cultural taxation (Padilla, 1994). Everyone waited. I took a moment to breathe, steadied my voice that had been shaky and on the verge of tears for days, and summoned the last bit of energy in my tired, weary, discouraged, Brown body. “Yeah, I can do that.”

Resistance can be proactive or responsive. Sometimes resistance is exerting force and taking action, and other times resistance is withstanding external forces and holding one’s ground in the process. When I was asked to facilitate a space for Students of Color, racial battle fatigue had depleted my ability to exert force. My heart was tired. Spending hours at a protest with little administrative response was taking a toll. I had to find a more sustainable form of resistance—for me and my students. With aromatherapy kit supplies, coloring pages that read “F*ck this Sh*t,” candy, and Spotify’s “This Is: Chance the Rapper” playlist, I transformed the UVM Program Board office into a space of healing and self-care for Students of Color while a live stream of the NoNames protests that occurred during admitted student visit days played silently in the corner. I knew that I could not completely shut out the outside world and ignore what was happening on campus, but I let my students know that for the day, our office space was being converted into a refuge for Students of Color. As Audre Lorde reminds us, “*self-care is not self-indulgent, but an act of political warfare.*”

Resilience: Persisting in the Face of Adversity

Throughout the day, Students of Color trickled into the office to talk about their fears, process their sheer exhaustion, and take care of themselves in a place where they felt safe. Students ate, napped, and stayed nourished—literally and figuratively. The office became a community space where Students of Color squeezed each other’s hands, hugged before leaving, took deep breaths and reminded each other that self-healing in and of itself is an act of resistance. As I revelled in the beauty of Black and Brown resilience, I vowed to work harder to create these spaces proactively, not just in reaction to adversity. The American Psychological Association (2018) writes that the primary factor in developing resilience is having supportive relationships. I wanted my students to be able to lean into relationships that surrounded them with love, trust, role models, and affirmation in a way that would strengthen their resilience. From that desire for affinity, reassurance, and supportive relationships, the UPBeans of Color group was born. In this group, I get to be a leader, a mentor, a rock, and a caregiver while receiving and celebrating the leadership, mentorship, rock-solid support, and care of my students. The existence of UPBeans of Color brings me joy, provides me with community, and overwhelmingly reaffirms my passion and purpose in this work. I am continually learning that creating connections and building relationships sustains and supports me so that I can continue fighting for equity and inclusion for my Students of Color.

Rebuild: Build Something Again After It Has Been Damaged

I put together the pieces of who I am. I familiarized myself with the different faces of resistance and have become more in tune with what my soul needs in order to continue fighting. I found and created community that aids in bolstering my resilience. The next step of my journey is about rebuilding. It is about remembering the clarity that came with building, channeling the anger and passion that came with resisting, and amplifying the strength that came with resilience. Construction may be slow, there may be unexpected halts in the work, the blueprints may change and update, but I am committed to rebuilding the world that our students so greatly deserve.

When I began the HESA program, I knew that my purpose was to support Students of Color in higher education and, at the time, thought that meant working in an identity center. Although the mission has not changed, this experience with my students has given me a clearer picture of how I can fulfill my mission most effectively. In my time in HESA, I have had the privilege of working with and advising the UVM Program Board, Orientation leaders, and the Fraternity & Sorority Life community—all predominantly white. I have seen firsthand how transformative proactive identity development work and continual space for critical reflection can be for the overall organization, the individuals on the team, and for

me as a Womxn of Color advisor.

My presence as a Womxn of Color leading these predominantly white organizations matters. My intentional implementation and facilitation of identity salience work in Orientation, Student Programming, and Fraternity & Sorority Life matters. It matters to my Students of Color who get to see a leader that looks like them where they may not have been expecting it. It matters to my white students who are given the space and call to action to think more critically about identity, power, privilege, and oppression. The relationships I build, the support I provide, the tough conversations I initiate, and the holistic development I advocate for will instigate change. Change may manifest as a life-changing epiphany or the unnoticed planting of a seed. The hope of transformation, no matter how small, is the foundation upon which I will rebuild.

Dear Womxn of Color

To the Womxn of Color reading this article: your stories of resilience, resistance, and rebuilding are invaluable in this field. Your passion for your work pushes you through times of being unseen, unheard, intentionally silenced, and overly exhausted to a place of resilience and resistance. I deeply admire those qualities about you. Do not forget to give yourself time and space to be vulnerable, to ache, to step away and heal. Find your people. Revel in your community. Cherish your own brilliance. And remember the words my friend and mentor Heather Lou once shared with me: *“Your love heals, womxn of color. It transforms.”*

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