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"Dear Colleague"

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Stories from the Front of the Room

How Higher Education Faculty of Color Overcome Challenges and Thrive in the Academy

Michelle Harris, Sherrill L. Sellers, Orly
Clerge, and Frederick W. Gooding Jr.

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LETTER 2

Dear Colleagues,

I suppose I should apologize.

Again.

I honestly did not realize that when I openly, but innocently, suggested that we maintain our standards when assessing job candidates for our new teaching position I would be yelled and screamed at—"I AM NOT LOWER-

ING MY STANDARDS”—by our senior white colleague. As I sat there mortified during our departmental meeting, I wondered what was happening. Why was this person literally shouting at me? Should I say something? How should I respond, as standing chair of the department? As we all listened to our colleague—aghast in stunned silence—after a minute or so, I calmly interrupted the rant by saying this person’s first name.

Surprisingly, I was shouted down. “NO, YOU LISTEN! I AM NOT LOWERING MY STANDARDS . . . AND YOU.” At this point, I realized this would not stop unless someone else spoke up or I raised my voice. I was acutely aware of the consequences of adding volume to my voice. I would be characterized as one of the worst epithets in academia for a person of color—the angry black man. Not wanting that, I looked down at my folders, as the outburst continued, and calmly said, “I am done.” Indeed, I had covered everything necessary in the meeting. So, I gathered my documents, rose from my seat, and left the room.

As you may know, this colleague followed me into my office wanting to speak with me. I felt forced to honor the demand of “talking” at that moment. Still bewildered from the department meeting, I quickly asked another senior-level colleague to join us in my office. Person X initially offered a half-hearted apology, but then proceeded to tell me many of my wrongdoings, stating that their only intent throughout my time as chair was to do what was best for the department. You may not know that two years before I became chair I met with this colleague (and, again, another senior-level colleague) to discuss another issue—at that time this individual told me that I seemed “angry.”

After the post-departmental meeting with the “ranter,” it was suggested that I send out an e-mail stating that we apologize for what occurred. Let me be clear, I do not have any remorse for advocating that we uphold our standards for all candidates. Briefly, my election as chair of the department happened during a critical juncture: there were several retirements on the horizon, we were discussing major curricular changes, and we had just had an external review of the department. I am proud that many of you felt that I was the right person to address these concerns. Indeed, I am the first person of color who has served as chair; I fully appreciate its significance.

Our external review pointed out several areas of improvement with “low morale” of junior faculty being one of the greatest concerns in my mind. At that time, I was untenured and privy to conversations with other junior colleagues regarding morale. Several felt that they were not allowed a voice in the department and that some senior colleagues dominated conversations around important issues. As the new chair, I sought to provide multiple opportunities for these individuals to be heard. However, as my own story illustrates, that was easier said than done.

I realized that our colleague's outburst created an uneasiness in the department; thus, after I sent out the apologetic e-mail to the department, I personally talked to just about everyone to address the situation and reassure all that I would serve out my chairship and tackle the issues raised in the external review.

Frankly, it was moments like these when I actually considered stepping down. At times it felt overwhelming and exhausting, especially from those who did not support—or showed outright hostility toward—me. But, I remained undeterred, confident that I would not let others dictate my actions or silence me. Indeed, I felt support from those who stated that there was not a need for *me* to apologize—I was *not* the person in the wrong.

As I analyze our colleague's behavior I came to the realization that my comment was viewed as a challenge or threat to this person's sense of entitlement, more precisely, X's white privilege. Here I am, this younger, black, male, junior colleague daring to speak his mind. I stepped out of my place and needed to be reprimanded where all could see and understand. My query was an affront to white authority that had already identified me as unfit for the position as chair—and "angry" on top of that. I later found out that this characterization had been expressed to fellow colleagues and even our university president.

In response, I met with our president (a benefit of working at a small liberal arts institution), requesting the opportunity to reply to my critics. I am not sure if this meeting changed the way I was defined.

In my mind, Colleague X's outburst illustrates the insidiousness of white privilege—it can, and often does, present itself as objective, innocuous, and legitimate, remaining hidden and unrecognizable even in plain view. Of course, we know this from the scholarship in this area. However, many people of color in academia recognize it at a personal level—my example, when a white colleague can, with impunity, yell and berate me. It was not a microaggression, but an act of aggression!

Despite this occurrence, I agreed to serve as chair of the department for a second term. This is only because of the immense support I received during my previous term. I thank you all for the countless supportive conversations and e-mails, the pats on the back, and the genuine encouragement. Although I was told this was a thankless job—oddly enough, by the person who screamed at me—I am very appreciative of colleagues who believed and backed me at key times when important decisions were made. I enjoyed the laughs and light-hearted moments I shared with most of you.

Now, I am in my last year as chair. It is somewhat less tumultuous; we don't walk around on eggshells. However, I think tension still remains. The "ranter" and I are cordial, but speak infrequently. Sadly, this is the resolution to the situation. As a department, though, we managed to address major concerns and accomplished what we needed to over these six years—made

talented and strong new hires, provided more venues and opportunities for our students to present their research, and strengthened our curriculum, among other changes. Multiple colleagues were recipients of teaching awards, and published books, book chapters, and journal articles. Several of our students went on to graduate and professional school, or obtained meaningful jobs. We have made great strides.

I do not envy the person who follows me. There remains much important work that needs to be done. I hope she or he will not have to face some of the problems I have encountered. Candidly, I believe the next chair may have an easier time if male and white. A historical inertia exists whereby this particular identity readily receives legitimacy and status in our profession. However, we are making slow advancements. Growing numbers of people of color in academe are coming through the pipeline. I hope we benefit from this growth.

Nevertheless, I again apologize. But know that even as my term as chair ends, I will keep fighting the necessary fight for my departmental colleagues and people of color. I just have to shake off the haters!

Sincerely,
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