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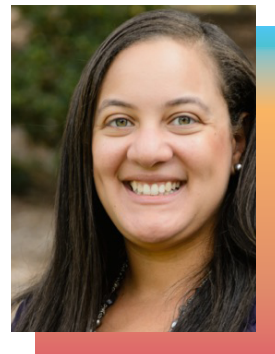
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My Presence is my Protest



Stacey D. Garrett
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As a Black woman in higher education, my presence is my protest.

I believe in the power of education to increase one's social mobility and ability to pursue life, liberty, and happiness. Currently, access to higher education is limited and remains out of reach for some students. The disparaging underrepresentation of students of color in higher education continues to be an issue facing this nation. Unfortunately, the Black community is delving into a debate over whether or not our Black students should be at predominantly White institutions. It is no longer enough to go to college, but now Black students have to defend what kind of college they attend.

As I watch, my presence is my protest.

The idea that Black students can only feel "at home" at an HBCU is part of the problem with why they are not treated like family at PWIs. I see this every day at my

own institution. My southern, public university prides itself on being known as a family with membership extending to alumni, faculty, staff, and students. Unfortunately, some people are treated like family while others are treated like the estranged cousin or relative that you're friends with on Facebook but would never invite to your wedding. I walk across campus knowing I earned the right to be there. Yet, I go to work and to class in a building named for a man who believed my ancestors should have been slaughtered on sight rather than be free and educated.

As I work, my presence is my protest.

Despite the current debate, I refuse to give into the separatist mentality that Black students should only go to Black schools and will be better served at Black schools. While HBCUs are masterful at developing and producing some of the nation's brightest Black leaders, I do not believe that being Black means you are meant to attend an HBCU. Every student has the right to attend the school that best fits their needs, personality, and goals. Every school is not right for every body. We

cannot say that a PWI is not right for a Black student, or any other student of color, just because they are not White. We cannot say that a White student is not suited to attend an HBCU.

Personally, I did not think an HBCU was right for me. I was not used to an all-Black environment. I was used to going to school and living in predominantly White neighborhoods. My high school was actually diverse in ethnic representation, but I was still used to being the only Black girl in my honors and AP classes. I was used to being the only Black girl in my close circle of friends. In middle school, I was cornered in the bathroom by a couple of Black girls I did not even know and asked if one of my parents was White. When I told them no, they didn't believe me and assured me that one of my parents had to be White. That was their only explanation for my long hair and hazel eyes.

My PWI gave me a space to surround myself with Black students and explore my Black identity. I did not want to go to an HBCU and find out that I still was not Black enough. I knew that if something went wrong, if my Black peers didn't accept me, if it turned out that I wasn't Black "enough" I knew I could make friends somewhere else. I'd done it before. But where would I go if the Black kids at the all-Black school decided I wasn't good enough, Black enough, cool enough, down enough?

As I write, my presence is my protest.

As a Black woman, despite the barriers and limitations society tries to place on me, I am privileged. I proudly hold two degrees from two different PWIs and I am working on a terminal degree from a third. I refuse to allow myself, or anyone else, to be limited in their achievements because of who they are. I stand as one example of a student of color that succeeded, and is succeeding, in an environment that society is trying to tell me is not for me. But I'm fighting back. I am changing the conversation. Yes,

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I'm tired of being a token, an exception, or a novelty because of my race

and gender. But, if I don't fight to make a change and make it better for the next generation, then who will? Why not me? Maybe I will always be one of few instead of one of the many, but my students don't have to be. My future colleagues don't have to be. Others fought for me, and so now, I fight for those who are to come. I will not be shut down. I will not retreat. I will not back down.

As I rise, my presence is my protest.



Image by Natalie Battaglia