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Submitted by Amelia Gibson on February 15, 2019 - 3:00am

I'm told that American academic institutions care about "diversifying the academy" -- reducing their disproportionate and overwhelming whiteness. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, only 4 percent of the assistant professors ^[1] in the United States in 2016 were black women. As we look higher up the ranks, our numbers thin out even more: only 2 percent of full professors are black women. The numbers were lower for Latinx women and Native American people of all genders.

People hold all sorts of opinions about the purpose of campus diversity initiatives. Are those programs really intended to push institutions to embrace the culture, experiences and perspectives of underrepresented students, staff members and faculty members? Or are they meant to recruit an acceptably sized minority who are expected to assimilate -- to become silent, malleable, docile and more like our more traditionally privileged, white colleagues? Does "diversity" leave us room to inhabit our full selves and speak our own languages without fear of "unintended consequences ^[2]"?

As a black female assistant professor, I maintain a healthy dose of skepticism about "diversity" programs that focus on increased recruiting and advising while avoiding changes to broader campus culture in ways that support and value those of us who are here now. Recently, Melissa Harris-Perry -- a full professor and director of the Anna Julia Cooper Center at Wake Forest University -- tweeted that provost sent her "an email 'inviting' me to eliminate the @ajccenter as a university entity and offering a 'goodwill' payoff" after she

called out her university's labor and pay practices during a [Martin Luther King Jr. Day speech](#) ^[3]. (*Editor's Note: Wake Forest disputes this characterization.*) Reading her tweets from down the road in Chapel Hill (where [we've had our own challenges as of late](#) ^[4]), I felt indignation rise. I thought about all of the times I've been labeled "difficult" or "argumentative" for giving my perspective in an academic context. Reading exasperated tweets and private messages from fellow faculty of color, I could see that I was not alone. This story is familiar and infuriating.

Unless you're on an HBCU campus, black female full professors are few and far between in North Carolina. The mistreatment of one of our full professors, and one who was hired as a griot -- a well-respected and incisive truth teller -- seemed obscene. And the potential loss of the Anna Julia Cooper Center -- which fosters regional discussions on race, class, intersectionality and social justice -- extends beyond the internal politics of the Wake Forest campus. It plays a vital role in the ecosystem of research on equity in the state.

But more important, Harris-Perry is tenured. The prospect of being asked to shut down a center because she expressed a politically unpopular idea -- the very thing tenure should protect against -- plays into the idea that, once again, institutional structures designed to protect our peers would provide black women with no shelter. If a scholar with the reach, depth and fame of Melissa Harris-Perry is being treated unfairly, what hope do the rest of us have?

In the wake of this most recent conflict, I find myself wondering if campus administrators know that young academics of color pay attention to how institutions behave toward our predecessors. When you are taught to lift as you climb, you also learn from your elders and watch the road ahead for dangers. Junior faculty members observe how tenured faculty members are treated. Doctoral students do, too. We look to our senior colleagues and divine our futures. Are they silent, docile and temporarily secure? Or intellectually and morally honest, challenging, and precarious? We see their work

dismantled and held as bargaining chips for compliance -- and it is discouraging.

Diversifying the academy doesn't just mean letting us in the front door while kicking us out of the back. It means respecting, supporting and promoting the students, staff and faculty of color already living, learning, teaching and researching on our campuses. It means recognizing that we are not interchangeable. It means not tokenizing us. It means questioning the assumption that more than one or two of us signals a lack of rigor. It means examining whether your campus is a safe space for us to do the work that we have been hired to do as our full selves, or whether we are meant to be seen and not heard. It means reckoning with the question of whether faculty of color exist to be consumed -- to be experienced by our white peers as interchangeable avatars of "diversity" regardless of the effects on us -- or whether we have inherent value.

If we are allowed to remain only as long as we are perceived as an obvious net advantage to our institutions, then Melissa Harris-Perry is correct: academic freedom is dead, and academic institutions will have lost their ability to grapple with difficult, uncomfortable, unpopular questions. We all will have lost.

I have been fortunate to land in a place that has been good to me. It is not perfect, by any means. My institution, like many others, has its share of struggles. I've found myself within a university that has been supportive and among colleagues who have done their best to contribute to my growth (as I have to theirs).

But that goodness is always laced with a racialized and gendered precarity -- the fear that speaking too loudly or being too critical could cost me everything I've worked to achieve. When someone like Melissa Harris-Perry is given the choice between silence and success, it makes me wonder whether accomplishments, such as the development of a program or a center, just become something to be held hostage over. I wonder if, even among all of

these good, well-intentioned people, I might find myself singled out as “not good” or “difficult” and shown the door. And that isn’t a future I want to contemplate.

Section:

Diversity ^[5]

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[1] <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=61>

[2] <https://indyweek.com/news/durham/duke-megan-neely-chinese-students/>

[3] <https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2019/01/28/professor-says-u-didnt-her-mlk-day-comments>

[4] <https://www.dailytarheel.com/article/2018/09/letter-black-faculty-silent-sam-0907>

[5] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/focus/diversity>