

Essay

# Give Yourself Permission to Rest

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**Abstract:** Black women in higher education have always been under pressure to prove that they belong in their positions, and often have taken on more work to prove this. The events of 2020—the COVID-19 global pandemic and the racial and social unrest that swept through the country increased this pressure on Black women in higher education. Historically, Black women have taken on the roles of mother, professional, and caretaker of all who were around them. The events of 2020 added to those roles for Black women faculty, working from home, homeschooling online, checking on the welfare of students, and addressing the emotional needs of their families who have been stuck indoors for months. Self-care is more important now more than before for Black women faculty. To employ these self-care strategies, Black women faculty must first give themselves permission to need them.

**Keywords:** black women faculty; roles in higher education; self-care strategies



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## 1. Introduction

The COVID-19 global pandemic created unprecedented changes in higher education, some of which will have long lasting implications on how we deliver instruction at colleges and universities across the country. Black women faculty in higher education faced increased physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the racial and social unrest that swept over the US in the summer of 2020. This article will provide an examination of the pressures unique to Black women in higher education which this author has experienced first-hand and were magnified by the events of 2020, and how Black women in higher education can create a space for themselves to heal and rest.

## 2. Black Women in Higher Education

For years, Black faculty and other faculty of color have been underrepresented in higher education. A study published by the *Hispanic Journal of Law and Policy* reported that colleges and universities in the United States, from 2013–2017 collectively have not seen substantial growth in racial diversity among their faculty members (Heilig et al. 2019). In higher education, a greater percentage of Black women have doctorate degrees than Black men (Harris 2019). The data for the Survey of Earned Doctorates show that universities in the United States conferred 54,641 doctorates in 2017, of these, 3661 or 6.7 percent were awarded to African Americans (National Center for Education Statistics 2019). Black women earned 68.4 percent of all research doctorates and 64.5 percent of all professional practice doctorates that were awarded to Black Americans in 2017 (National Center for Education Statistics 2019). If you examine the data from 2002–2017 (National Center for Education Statistics 2019), the percentage of all doctoral degree recipients who are Black have increased ever so slightly each year, less than one half of a percentage point each year. Less than six percent of full-time faculty members at all colleges and universities in the United States are Black (Harris 2019). What this data shows is that Black women are disproportionately represented as full time faculty members at college and universities across the country. Faculty of other races and genders are more likely to be offered

positions in higher education, particularly tenure-track positions. This disproportionality could explain why Black women in higher education feel the need to take on more work to prove that they belong there. This disproportionality can also be reflective of the disproportionality that exists in US society at large where Black women are often found on the bottom rung of the social hierarchy ladder. Racial inequities exist in institutions of higher education just as they do in society.

In the spring of 2020, most, if not all colleges and universities had to quickly pivot to online learning due to the COVID-19 global pandemic. Any person who was teaching in higher education during this time can tell you how stressful and challenging this pivot was. Most schools had to make this change within a matter of weeks to continue moving forward with the spring semester. As the virus continued to sweep across the country, the data began trickling in about which population groups were being impacted the most—poor people, seniors, people with pre-existing medical conditions, and Black and brown people in high population density areas of the country ([Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2020](#)). Those groups of people who were located at the bottom of the health and financial brackets in the US were the groups who were most likely to be adversely affected by the health and financial crises. One of the consequences of COVID-19 is that it has magnified the systemic inequalities that exist and persist in the United States ([Kaur 2020](#)). Without access to their school's counseling centers, many of these Black and brown students (students who identify as Black, African American, Latino, Non-White or as a person of color) were turning to their faculty who look like them to help them through this crisis. Black women who serve as faculty and staff in higher education not only had to navigate shifting to a virtual environment for teaching, but they also became the go-to people for the Black and brown students at colleges and universities who were now facing these serious issues because of the COVID-19 virus. No one should have to bear the burdens that come with these systemic inequities, but it seems especially unfair that many Black and brown students must do this while they are trying to earn their college degrees.

Black and brown college students make up a significant percentage of the population that can be categorized as essential workers, those who are working jobs to support the US during the global pandemic—grocery store workers, fast-food workers, factory production workers, delivery drivers, and restaurant staff ([Gould and Kassa 2020](#)). These students were now at home, dealing with the stress of being an essential worker in the middle of a global pandemic and trying to continue with their studies. Many of these students were thrust into primary caregiver roles for younger siblings when they returned home as their parents continued to work and had difficulty finding space in the home and time in the day to focus on their studies. There were also mental health issues related to anxiety, depression and suicide that developed in students because of the stress of trying to survive in a global pandemic:

“While less likely to experience serious symptoms of COVID-19, children and teenagers have been more affected by the isolation of a nationwide lockdown than adults. Young people are wired to rely on peer relationships to a greater extent than adults. With the boredom of remote learning, anxiety about an uncertain future, and the disappearance of summer jobs and internships, it is no surprise that young people are reporting major mental health strains as a result of the pandemic”. ([Quirk 2020](#), para 4).

Black women faculty became the ear that these students vented their troubles and frustrations to, and they became the finder of resources for these students.

### **3. Black Women and Social Justice**

The summer of 2020 also was hit hard by waves of racial and social justice issues and unrest. The murder of Ahmad Arbery by White residents in Georgia was compounded by the murder of George Floyd by White Minnesota police officers which sparked a surge of protests and demonstrations across the country. “Between 26 May, the day after Floyd's death, and 22 August, Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) records over

7750 demonstrations linked to the BLM movement across more than 2440 locations in all 50 states and Washington, DC" (ACLED 2020, para 2). Most of these protests were peaceful, but risky in the middle of a global pandemic. As with most all social justice movements in the United States, Black women were at the forefront of this new call for racial and social justice. Black Lives Matter—a national organization with 40 active chapters across the country, was founded by three Black women: Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi, and Patrisse Khan-Cullors (National Women's Law Center (NWLC) 2018).

"In cities across the United States, black activists are denouncing state-sanctioned violence and demanding radical changes to American policing. Black women leaders occupy a central role in these movements. Utilizing public spaces—such as city parks and streets—they are advocating for equality and justice and giving voice to historical truths many Americans find uncomfortable". (Blain 2020, para 5).

Anecdotal data show that Black women faculty members are also central to these movements on college campuses in our country organizing and participating in marches, demonstrations and protests along with the students and members of the community. Black women faculty members are primarily the faculty members that Black and brown students turn to feel supported in social justice and racial justice protests on their university and college campuses. Since Black women faculty are underrepresented on most predominantly White institutions (PWI) university and college campuses, these activities add to the reasons why Black women faculty are not getting rest.

#### 4. Black Women and Service in Higher Education

Black faculty in general at predominantly white institutions (PWIs) across the country often serve as the representatives of their racial groups. More than other faculty, they are called upon to be the race expert at their respective institutions. Black women in higher education are called upon more to serve on more committees (so they can be diverse), to teach the diversity classes/workshops/etc., and to mentor more students of color and student organizations related to populations of color (Matthew 2016). The challenge with taking on this extra workload is that often it can get in the way of or hamper their other responsibilities to the institution and to their research.

"All too often, when deans, provosts, and presidents call for panels, workshops, and university discussions, there's a faculty member of color who has to wrestle with how to contribute (or with whether or not they want to) while still doing the work their colleagues get to do without the same burden". (Matthew 2016, para 9).

The activism that has swept across this country has also swept across colleges and universities; one can equate it to a historical reckoning. Many colleges and universities are feeling pressure from the communities in which they reside, their alumni, important donors, and students to address their racist histories. For example, this summer at Princeton University, they removed Woodrow Wilson's name from their public policy school. In June, President Eisgruber at Princeton University;

"asked senior university leaders to examine all aspects of the school and develop plans to combat systemic racism. After an August meeting, he announced those efforts would continue this year and beyond, identifying priorities such as assembling a faculty that more closely mirrors the diversity of its students, addressing names and iconography on campus, and reviewing the university's benefits with an eye to enhancing equity". (Svrluga 2020, para 8).

At Clemson University in South Carolina, thousands of students marched for racial equality and justice prompting the schools' trustees to vote to ask the permission of the South Carolina Legislature for permission to restore the name "Main Building" to the current Tillman Hall—named for the former governor of South Carolina Ben Tillman who was proud and vocal white supremacist. Princeton University and Clemson University are

just two examples of the many institutions who are currently going through this historical reckoning.

In an ideal situation, all members of a college or university would embrace the goals of racial and social justice and equity and would equally share the workload that will be required to achieve these goals. This racial and social justice work more often than not falls to the Black women faculty. “We are asking black faculty to partake in the enormous task of educating the world on race while still maintaining their personal lives and their careers” (Klugman 2020, para 4).

### 5. Expanded Roles and Expectations

Black women faculty have taken on expanded roles on their campuses and with students of color both when the global pandemic hit and when the racial and social unrest began. There is no hard data on this available right now amid the pandemic, but this is what is currently being shared anecdotally among Black women faculty across the country on message boards and other social media platforms. When COVID-19 began to shut down college and university campuses across the country, Black women faculty members took on the roles or caretakers for their students, for their families, and for their communities. This has certainly been the experience of this Black woman faculty member. From the time that we are young girls, Black women are taught, expected, and pushed to be caretakers for everyone around us and if there is enough time after that . . . for ourselves. Black women faculty members while their work responsibilities were expanding, were also balancing their own families, work, and personal needs. They were tasked with doing their work from home, with homeschooling their own children (if they had any) online, managing the household chores, ordering or procuring groceries, addressing the emotional needs of children who have not seen their friends in months and cannot go anywhere, all while preventing and reducing anxiety in fear in everyone around them, including themselves. Some were even doing this while dealing with major life transitions like motherhood or divorce. Some were even dealing with recovering from COVID-19 themselves or helping a family member to recover from the virus.

Typically, in the life of academics, the summer brings some relief in the daily pressures and day-to-day responsibilities of the academic year. This was not the case in the summer of 2020. Along with their usual responsibilities as faculty members, during the summer Black women faculty (and Black men faculty) were asked throughout the summer to head up racial justice panels, lead book clubs, participate in racial and social justice workshops, host racial reconciliation talks, lead healing circles for students and for their communities, and to appear as experts on local news programs and cable talk shows. In the summer of 2020, I was a keynote speaker on racial reconciliation for one school, served on three panels about racial bias and oppression for two other schools, led a racial healing group for my church, and was a guest speaker on a podcast about overcoming racial bias and discrimination. These expanded roles parallel the many expanding roles Black women are expected to take on in American society—mother, income provider, now quarantine homeschool teacher and community protest organizer.

On top of the physical toll that these new expectations and demands can take on an individual, there is the emotional and mental toll that must be accounted for. There is the fear and uncertainty that comes with having to move around in public spaces during a global pandemic. There is the anxiety, worry and concern about your family, friends, and students because they represent the population that is being impacted the most by the COVID-19 virus. Then, there is the trauma that comes from seeing the spectacle of Black death in public spaces—meaning Black and brown bodies brutalized and murdered on video that is shared publicly for all to witness which essentially amounts to modern day lynchings. There is clear evidence that that these videos cause emotional harm and can catalyze racism by helping to spread the already growing racist ideas about Black people, and racism can cause Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Williams 2020). The research shows that for Black people, frequent exposure to the shootings of Black people can have

long-term mental health effects and take the form of Race-Based Traumatic Stress (RBTS) (Carter 2006). Race-Based Traumatic Stress is different from PTSD in that the criteria for it emotional pain and associated reactions—recurring thoughts, avoidance, and irritability along with anxiety, anger, rage, depression, shame, guilt and low self-esteem—reactions that reflect injury, not a mental health disorder (Carter 2007).

It can be hard to watch my White peers seamlessly move through their days like nothing has happened. It can be frustrating that the inequity in our country does not appear to phase them or interrupt their lives the ways that it does ours. White peers do not appear feel the anger that we do and that can hurt just as much as the inequity itself. Many Black women faculty must deal with this frustration and anger while continuing to work in spaces with our White peers.

## 6. Interventions

For many Black people and Black communities, for hundreds of years in America, we continue to remain resilient while facing constant, consistent and ongoing oppression, and discrimination. Morrison (1975) once said, “The function, the very serious function of racism is distraction. It keeps you from doing your work”. This statement seems to hold absolutely true for Black women faculty. Since racism has yet to be eliminated on our college campuses and in society at-large, what interventions are available to Black women faculty? Of course, there is professional help—especially during this time of COVID-19 and racial and social unrest, Black women faculty must be proactive in seeking professional help—therapy or counseling to help manage all that we are dealing with emotionally, mentally, and physically. We can even model this behavior for our students as well. “We are also developing treatments for race-based stress and trauma to enable those who are suffering to move beyond their painful experiences and become stronger, so they can re-engage in larger society” (Williams 2015, para 11).

A remarkably simple yet powerful intervention during this time of COVID-19 is to turn off the computer. Working remotely from home, I have found myself logging more 10–12-h days than I ever did when working on campus. This may be because it takes more effort to deliver and receive class materials in an online only format. Often when working from home, the boundaries between personal life and professional life get blurry. Research has found that people who work remotely are more likely than those who do not to go beyond the normal work hours and to put in more effort than is typically required of that job (Basile and Beauregard 2016). When these boundaries between work and personal life blur, the first thing that suffers is self-care. It also becomes hard to disconnect when where we live and where we work are in the same location. By turning off the computer, you are ending your work for the day, drawing a line in the sand that says, “I am finished for today”.

Another intervention that is available to Black women faculty outside of seeking professional help and turning off our computers is that we can also learn how to say “No”. Just because we are expected to take on all these roles and take care of everyone around, does not mean that we must. Stop trying to be everything to everyone, this is an impossible task. We can do what we can, but we cannot do everything. Black women faculty can also stop taking on more work than others to justify our presence in academia, we have just as much a right to be there as anyone else. Taking on more work than others to prove that we belong must end. We already do more work trying to figure out how to survive in a system that was made to exclude us, we do not have to keep adding to this workload (Ray 2020). What would really be most effective is if there could be a swinging of the pendulum away from accepting racism as a just a part of the American psyche towards a collective social consciousness that makes it so that even the smallest acts of racism are considered abhorrent and rejected by the collective (Williams 2020). Where every citizen takes the initiative to speak out against racism of all kinds and on all levels.

How are Black women in higher education dealing with this trauma of the global pandemic on top of the racial and social unrest and the secondary trauma that can ac-

company it? Time will tell. What we can do right now is to take care of one another—mentorship/sister support will be especially important to those who have been in higher education longer than those who are just coming in. There is a saying that goes, “a burden shared is less of a burden to everyone”. We must draw on this strength of our community. Black women faculty must begin to recognize the exhaustion that comes with being the “only” anything anywhere, especially being the one Black woman in an academic department. We must also look for opportunities to collaborate and share the additional work with one another. This work is too important to leave unfinished.

Self-care strategies in social work translate well to higher education. Self-care is an essential social work survival skill that is taught in every social work program across the country (Newell and Nelson-Gardell 2014). Due to the rigor, the physical, emotional, and mental demands of the profession, social workers are taught the importance of taking care of their physical and psychological health. They are also taught to identify those individual activities that will reduce stress and enhance their short-term health, long-term health, and well-being (National Association of Social Workers (NASW) 2017). Black women faculty should look to create lifestyle changes that will do more to manage the stress in their lives, and to honor their emotional and spiritual needs.

## 7. Conclusions

This work is more important now than ever before, the COVID-19 virus is still ravaging the country, the racial and social unrest is still high due to the recent decisions in the Breonna Taylor case and the White supremacist’s insurrection at the Capitol building in an attempt to suppress the election results. Black women faculty are still managing varying teaching modalities (online, hybrid, face-to-face) while juggling family responsibilities and commitments to our communities. When we are keeping ourselves healthy, we are positioning ourselves to be our best selves. The pressures unique to Black women in higher education have not decreased, in some cases they have increased, and it is imperative that Black women in higher education give ourselves permission to create a space for us to heal and rest—because no one else will. Audre Lorde wrote in *A Burst of Light*, “Caring for myself is not self-indulgence. It is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.” In these uncertain times, self-care particularly for Black women has never been needed more or been more important.

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