

5 ways higher education can be seen as hostile to women of color

July 13 2020, by Amy Bonomi

In 2019, Amy Bonomi, a women's studies scholar, co-edited "[Women Leading Change: Breaking the Glass Ceiling, Cliff, and Slipper](#)." The book examines the perspectives of 23 female leaders on issues of leadership and the challenges of confronting structural racism, bias and discrimination at colleges and universities. Here are five takeaways that Bonomi offers from her book about how higher education can be hostile toward the women of color who serve as college and university leaders.

1. Not reflected in leadership

Only [30% of college and university presidents](#) are [women](#). Although nearly 40% of Americans are people of color, according to a [2017 study](#), just 5% of [college](#) and university presidents are women of color. This 5% is even more striking when you consider how [approximately 45% of undergraduate students](#) in the United States are [students of color](#) (Hispanic: 20%; Black: 14%; and Asian: 7%).

In addition, while top administrative roles, such as chief diversity officer, are [occupied by a large proportion of Black and Latinx women \(52%\)](#), other positions, such as chief financial officer and facilities manager, are overwhelmingly occupied by white men. Taken together, this suggests that women of color tend to be reflected in diversity-related positions and may not be cultivated for other types of leadership positions.

2. Put on a 'glass cliff'

When women of color do occupy leadership positions in [higher education](#), too often they face "[glass cliff](#)" scenarios. That is, they are elevated to leadership roles when the organization is in crisis and their risk of failure is high. For example, Vasti Torres describes in [my book](#) how she was handed a memo her first day as dean at the University of South Florida to cut spending by US\$2 million. This happened despite her asking for—but not being given—specific information about the budget status during her interviews.

3. Denied full professorships

Women of color are underrepresented in the pool of leadership candidates by virtue of not being promoted to full professor. This is the most senior academic position in colleges and universities. [Black and Latinx women](#) hold only 1.6% and 2.1% of full professorships, respectively. This compares to [34.3% of full professorships held by women more generally](#). When considering that [Black women represent 15.2% of total women](#) in the U.S., it is even more concerning that they are so invisible at the full professor rank.

Some of the challenges faced by women of color in their rise to full professor can be explained by the "[minority tax](#)." More specifically, in "[Women Leading Change](#)," Dionne Stephens, associate professor of psychology at Florida International University, and Layli Maparyan, professor of Africana Studies at Wellesley College, describe how women of color are frequently asked to take on additional duties in colleges and universities, without compensation.

For example, Patricia A. Matthew, associate professor at Montclair State University, notes how [women of color are frequently asked](#) to

"diversify" campus committees, support students of color and represent the views of a variety of diverse groups across settings. As Dionne Stephens and Layli Maparyan argue, when it comes to advancing to full professor, this work is not "counted" in the same way as publishing or securing grants.

4. Surrounded by white imagery

When you walk the halls of colleges and universities, you are likely to see portraits of white men. Similarly, colleges and universities have an abundance of statues in honor of white men, as well as building names and named professorships. Taken as a whole, these symbols of whiteness send a message about what it means to belong in higher education.

University of Michigan education professors Vasti Torres and Tabbye Chavous—both women of color – [argue how such visual markers and symbols of whiteness](#) reflect overt examples of patronage and historical bias. Ultimately, they argue, these things delegitimize women leaders of color in colleges and universities.

5. Publicly shamed

Public shaming of women leaders of color happens. After being hired into a glass cliff scenario as a department chair, Yolanda Flores Niemann, a professor of psychology at the University of North Texas, describes in [my book](#) the contentious backlash she faced from men in her department. This came as she proposed more rigorous standards in annual faculty reviews. In response, men in her department organized groups of students to [publicly oppose her](#). Similarly, in the case of Nelia Viveiros, interim vice chancellor for diversity at the University of Colorado Denver, certain perhaps well-meaning university factions questioned Viveiros' credentials for the diversity role. The questions came despite the fact that Viveiros had more than two decades of direct

experience overseeing diversity and equity work in colleges and universities. In Viveiros' case, several other interim appointments of white women into equivalent leadership roles went unquestioned by the same faculty.

Doing away with hostility—whether blatant or unintended—that women leaders of color face in higher education requires an examination of historical biases that privilege whiteness, and especially male whiteness. In my view, there's an urgent need for uncomfortable yet critical conversations.

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