Supervising Grads and New Professionals of Color: Teaching Strategies to Survive and Thrive in White Institutional Culture**

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Here's a scenario you might be familiar with:

You're sitting around with a group of student affairs professionals of color and talking about navigating campus culture/hierarchy/politics. A few strategies surface in the conversation that seem to be effective in managing power dynamics, getting the job done, or promoting one's professional interests. Your group realizes, however, that these strategies come right out of the playbook of hierarchical, dominant systems and, if utilized, will simply contribute to the perpetuation of those very systems. Buzzkill.

One of your social-justice-savvy colleagues channels Sister Audre Lorde and points out that this vicious cycle boils down to "using master's tools to dismantle master's house"…and that hasn't gotten us what we want in the past. So, your discussion takes a critical theory turn and you deconstruct the numerous ways in which "success at work" really amounts to a series of compromises, in which authentic components of your identity or ideology are sacrificed in order to make marginal strides within a hegemonic university system. Double buzzkill.

The whole dialogue comes to a morbid crescendo when your group concludes that there are no answers and that hegemony usually wins. Then, you talk about the number of people of color you know that have left the profession because they couldn't figure out a pathway through this labyrinth. Life goes on.

In the ten years that I've worked as a student affairs professional, I've been a part of this conversation countless times. I would hazard a guess and say that if you carry a social justice lens throughout your work, or if you hold a marginalized identity that has shaped your experience of university life, you've also had this conversation in one form or another. As a person of color, a social justice educator, and a director of a mid-sized department, I've worked to try and address this problematic over the years. It's not enough to simply flex our deconstructive chops and tear things apart; we have to spend time and energy building something as well. 😁

In my department, we overtly discuss "survive and thrive" strategies for navigating White institutional culture so that our grads and new professionals of color can be part of a safe, but challenging, learning process that can empower them to actually stay in the field past that dreaded entry/mid-level choke point. Let me be clear about my intentions: the end result of this process is that greater number of empowered staff of color remain on our campuses to engage the critical work of supporting college students, which is what we are supposed to be doing in the first place. In an effort to get a broader

dialogue started about how we overtly support grads and new professionals of color, I thought I'd list a few core strategies that we focus on in my department for you to consider. I'd love it if you wrote back with strategies you have either employed yourself or that you have taught others so that we can grow this list!

Survive and Thrive Strategies for Grads and New Professionals of Color in White Institutional Culture:

1. Own that university systems and culture were not originally set up for us. An important part of navigating a system is knowing exactly what you are dealing with. In my department, we talk about the importance of the personal-as-political. Your identity matters and it informs everything you do. However, the university is not necessarily a "safe space" for you to bring the full weight of your personal/political self into every setting. Navigating White institutional culture takes balancing your personal/political with the reality of hegemony and a keen focus on the endgame: the students we are here to serve. As our field continues to invest in concepts like authenticity and vulnerability, it is also critical that we help grads and new professionals of color become equally adept at navigating the realities of systemic Whiteness, hierarchy, classism and patriarchy that are endemic to university life. Another way of framing this dual investment is that we have to strike a balance between our emphasis on "Be the Change" and "Know What's Up."

2. Understand that higher education is a business. Thinking about higher education as a business can help explain many of the choices that our institutions make that might deeply frustrate us… they are often made because the "Chief" and "Executive" officers of the institution are thinking about the university as a business. Your Board of Trustees/Regents definitely thinks about the university as a business! For staff of color, having a university-as-business lens allows for a more accurate analysis of what battles can be fought and won outright, what challenges will require compromise, and what issues might not be winnable in the context of your university system. To be clear, having this understanding does not mean that one walks away from any challenges that are not completely winnable, but it empowers us to use our advocacy voices responsibly and strategically in order to achieve our long-term goals.

3. Nuance your network. We all talk about networking – all the time. But, for staff of color in White institutional culture, it's important to actually have two networks. You need a set of colleagues who can help you get your job done more efficiently and effectively. These colleagues might not share the same worldview as you or subscribe to a liberatory social justice ideology. 😃 But, they can grease the wheels of your institutional bureaucracy and make things happen. It is important that we support new grads and professionals of color to build this network so they can be successful on the job. Your second network, however, is just as important. These are the people that help you recharge and build *you* back up. These are folks that "get it" or "get you" – and they may be totally different folks than your first network. If we are lucky, we might have some overlap between our two networks, but you can't expect that. Too often, staff of color are taught to either have the first network *or* the second network. I think we need both if we are going to be effective and if we

are going to sustain our engagement in White institutional culture.

4. Code switching…with integrity. Whenever I talk with undergraduate students of color at my institution about code switching, I try to take an asset-based approach to the topic and state that we all already possess the necessary skill to do this and have quite a bit of practice doing this. In my experience, people of color learn to code switch early in life in order to survive school environments and professional environments that require them to enact different codes to be successful. This code-switching journey does not end for grads and new professionals of color in higher education. If we want to be effective student affairs educators, how we talk/behave has to change depending on the audience we are trying to engage. I think this message is widely disseminated in our field. At the same time, we need to overtly emphasize that you don't have to give up your home culture in this process. Code switching with integrity is about adding tools to your toolbox, not assimilating wholesale to White institutional culture. Grads and new professionals of color have to be supported in their learning process if they are going to code switch effectively. Remember Point 1 on this list? Universities weren't set up for us in the first place. 😃 I often speak with upper level staff in student affairs who expect that grads and new professionals of color know how to code switch so they can be effective in university settings, but where are these skills being taught?

Hey, this list is just getting started! My intention with this post was to start an important conversation and share action-oriented strategies that we can put into play immediately. I hope that you share comments that contain other strategies for grads and new professionals of color to survive and thrive in White institutional culture.

** Notice that I didn't use the term "Predominantly White Institutions" or PWIs? The term PWI implies that Whiteness is tied to the actual number of White people at an institution. This is erroneous, as institutions can embody Whiteness with absolutely no White people present! Some of us might actually work at institutions that are over 50% people of color…these institutions can still be typified as having a White institutional culture, regardless of the lack of a White demographic majority.