

*The Review of Higher Education*

Summer 2018, Volume 41, No. 4, pp. 645–656

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**2017 ASHE PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS**

# **Dismantling Racialized Power Asymmetries and Reversing Socialized Pointlessness in Higher Education Research**

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Acknowledgements: I sincerely thank Lori Patton Davis, my best friend and the first Black woman to serve as ASHE President, for everything over these past 25 years. I am also grateful to Provost James Soto Antony (who generously served as program chair for the 2017 ASHE Annual Meeting); Kim Nehls (the Association's then-executive director who helped make my presidential year an extraordinary success); Kresge Foundation and Teagle Foundation for their generous sponsorship of my 'We The People' presidential symposium series; and everyone who came to Houston to help me advance a vision of using research to restore Power to the People. I also appreciate the legendary Vanessa Siddle Walker, my favorite historian and wise AERA presidential predecessor, for offering the difference-making rationale that ultimately convinced me to publish my 2017 ASHE Presidential Address; I otherwise would not have.

**Abstract:** In his 2017 ASHE Presidential Address, Shaun Harper first named some historical, compositional, curricular, and editorial manifestations of white power in U.S. universities and in the study of higher education. He then talked specifically about the preservation of white property rights and racialized socialization norms in our field. President Harper concluded by urging attendees to remember what compelled them to become researchers; to abandon the pursuit of pointless research topics; to ask more ‘people-approved’ questions; and to conduct studies that will do more to address racialized power asymmetries, inequities, and injustice.

**Keywords:** White Supremacy, Racial Equity, Power Asymmetries, Graduate Student Socialization, Early Career Socialization

One goal of my yearlong Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE) presidency was to use that leadership platform to speak truth to power, to give permission to those of us who have long been powerless in academia, and to ignite a paradigmatic shift in the study of higher education that ultimately restores power to the people.

Many of us saw white power on full display at the University of Virginia in August 2017. I went to Charlottesville seven days after the crisis erupted there. Helpfulness was the aim of the speech I was invited to deliver to UVA faculty, staff, and administrators. I asked the employees who attended to do the following: “Raise your hand if you were horrified and disgusted by the white supremacy that poisoned your campus a week ago.” By my account, every hand in the packed auditorium was raised. I then told those colleagues that we cannot and we ought not be selectively disgusted by only particular manifestations of white supremacy – we must reject it in all its forms.

White supremacy is not just tiki torch-carrying white nationalists marching on a college campus – there are numerous other manifestations of it. There is white supremacy and the abuse of white power in academia, including in the study of higher education. They show up in numerous persistent and pervasive ways; there are far too many to name here. I therefore highlight just four.

## **WHITE POWER IN U.S. UNIVERSITIES AND IN THE STUDY OF HIGHER EDUCATION**

Higher education was racist and exclusionary from the start. My people were enslaved when the idea of a college was imagined in our country. There was an attempted genocide of Indigenous peoples when the blueprint of higher education in the U.S. was conceptualized. I therefore first maintain that one manifestation of white power is embedded in white people’s historical determinations of what a college was to be, how campus culture would be shaped, and how the institution would be arranged and governed. For

centuries, people of color had no say in the architectural framework that was created for U.S. postsecondary institutions. That permanently cemented white power and white supremacy into the places at which we work, and certainly into the institutions that we study as higher education researchers.

The second manifestation of white power that I am naming here is compositional. Ours has always been an overwhelmingly white profession. Universities overall and our social-justice-minded field of higher education remain overwhelmingly white. Given the compositional realities of our faculties, it is white people who get to determine who gains access to become graduate students and professors. As another form of architectural determinism, it was white people who determined the metrics of access and deservingness for a seat at the table. They maintain that power in the contemporary university.

Third, white power is curricular. It was white faculty members who initially determined what was worthy of being taught and learned within academic disciplines. They continue to maintain the power to decide whose voices, epistemologies, and histories are worthy of deep integration into the curriculum. In most places, professors of color have never had enough power to shape the curriculum beyond what is taught and learned in our individual courses.

A fourth noteworthy manifestation of white power in our field is editorial. Historically and contemporarily, most of the leading journals in our field have had white editors. Those colleagues work hard, they are good citizens of our field, and they are smart people. They are also really powerful. They have the power to determine relevance, rigor, and what is publishable. Along with their mostly white editorial boards, they wield enormous editorial power.

After accounting for only a tiny fraction of the historical, compositional, curricular, and editorial manifestations of white power, I declare that no one racial group should have so much of a stronghold on our field of study and on the enterprise that we call higher education. To be sure, these four are not the only ways that white supremacy and white dominance show up on campuses and in higher education scholarship.

### **POWER AND THE PRESERVATION OF WHITE PROPERTY RIGHTS**

Cheryl Harris' 1993 *Harvard Law Review* article, "Whiteness as Property," very much shaped my thinking about the four manifestations of white power that I just described. In the 85-page article, Harris so compellingly explained that it is white people in American institutions and systems who get to decide who is included and who is excluded, what matters and what does not matter, what has value and what does not. Harris (1993) had me thinking about a project that I took on many years ago. In many ways, it was a project of decolonizing the higher education cannon.

White people in our field have the power to exclude and to socialize. Before elaborating on socialization, let me first reflect on one of the two most widely-adopted textbooks in our field: *Student Services: A Handbook for the Profession* (also commonly known as ‘the green book’ because covers on every edition published since 1980 have been green). This textbook was assigned to me in the first higher education course I took at Indiana University as a master’s student. Classmates and I were told it was “the bible” of our field, a seminal text. Our professor made sure that we understood that chapters were written by the most influential and important student affairs experts.

I enrolled at Indiana just months after earning my bachelor’s degree at Albany State, a public Historically Black University in Georgia. Having just spent four years in an environment with so many brilliant Black professors, quite naturally I posed one reasonable question after being told that our field’s most important scholars comprised the green book’s authorship cast: how many of them are Black? It became instantly apparent to me that the book may be green, but it had long been the property of whites. That realization stuck with me as I read the book as a master’s student and later assigned it to my students as an early-career faculty member.

Five years after earning my Ph.D., I intentionally and strategically positioned myself to become one of three editors for the fifth edition of the green book (Schuh, Jones, & Harper, 2011). Disrupting the white dominance that had been evidenced in the four editions that preceded ours was my highest priority because I knew that white scholars were not the only smart people in our field. The fifth edition had unprecedented numbers of authors of color – more than three times as many as the edition that preceded ours. I knew this was possible without lowering standards or somehow compromising academic rigor. We increased the number of chapters and invited co-authored contributions instead of taking writing opportunities away from deserving white scholars. Frankly, I just could not imagine being part of a book project that continued to exclude people of color. I felt a tremendous sense of responsibility to give power to my people, to include our voices, and to affirm our intellectual participation rights. I had power and I used it in this way.

I understood that the green book had been a longtime resource used to socialize newcomers to our field. It conveyed to them who and what was important. Texts that whites deem seminal are among numerous socialization forces. Across all academic fields and disciplines, a mostly white faculty that was taught by a mostly white faculty pass on white-engineered norms, expectations, assumptions, and values. We refer to this as graduate student socialization and the socialization of early career scholars. Our field is not exempt from this. Again, it was a mostly white faculty who set the norms that we follow, replicate, and sustain in our classrooms, research, and in this Association for the Study of Higher Education. I am only the second Black scholar elected ASHE President, for the record.

Racialized socialization norms have a hypnotizing effect on people of color in academic fields, including ours. We are too often told: “that’s not scholarly writing; that’s too narrow; nobody’s really gonna care about Asian American and Pacific Islander students and other minoritized populations; you have to broaden your research questions; that’s too activist; your work is too flashy; you’re too loud; be objective; don’t waste your time being engaged with your people, you need to be in your office writing your papers; that’s not going to count for tenure.”

I am using the power of my ASHE presidential platform to give those of us who have been socialized in these ways permission to get out of the hypnosis, to be critically conscious, and to be free. I want you to be responsible to the people you represent – the people whose livelihoods depend on your findings, on your action, and on your advocacy for them. You have the power to reclaim the time that you have lost writing pointless papers for the mere adherence to white-engineered norms and values, for the sake of presentation at a national conference, for another journal article that only five other people are going to read, for another line on your CV. You have the power to reclaim your time. I am also giving you permission to reclaim your purpose; the purpose that brought you to an academic career.

In his song, *Power*, rapper and producer Kanye West says, “The system’s broken, the school’s closed, the prison’s open. We ain’t got nothin’ to lose.”<sup>1</sup> Many scholars came to the study of higher education because you know firsthand that the systems are broken; you were personally disadvantaged by those systems. One of the most extraordinary experiences of my decade as a University of Pennsylvania professor was creating the Grad Prep Academy, a national program that identified Black undergraduate men in their junior year of college and introduced them to research careers in higher education, education policy, teacher education, educational psychology, and so on.

Men who were a part of this experience subsequently enrolled in Ph.D. programs at Penn, Harvard, UCLA, University of Michigan, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Michigan State, Duke, and Northwestern, to name a few. Some are now tenure-track assistant professors. I have expanded the initiative to include Indigenous, Asian American, Latino, and Pacific Islander college juniors. Across five cohorts, nearly 100 of these brilliant men were socialized to ask important, people-centric questions that are responsible and responsive to their people and to their communities.

I often remind Grad Prep Academy Scholars of what they wrote in application essays when they were applying to the program. They said things like, “I am interested in getting a Ph.D. and becoming a professor because I saw the

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<sup>1</sup>Five years after delivering this presidential address, I publicly denounced the abhorrent antisemitic and anti-Black statements that Kanye West made on social media and elsewhere (see Harper, 2022).



effects of attending schools in a district where funding wasn't as abundant as the more affluent neighboring district." Similarly, every year that I participated in doctoral admissions at Penn State, University of Pennsylvania, and USC, I read application statements from very talented, very inspired applicants who wrote, "I want to pursue a Ph.D. because I want to do something for disadvantaged people; I want to make a difference in policy; I want to make a difference in practice; or I want to eliminate suffering among my people. Furthermore, in the introductory paragraphs of their personal statements, many shared examples of firsthand encounters with structural and systemic inequities. They went on to write, "This is why I would like to pursue a Ph.D."

Somehow, those very inspired doctoral applicants became doctoral students who ended up here at ASHE a year or two later presenting papers that have absolutely nothing to do with the kinds of things that they articulated in their statements of purpose. I strongly encourage them (and the rest of y'all, too) to reclaim the purpose that brought us to research careers in higher education. We all should find, read, and perhaps recommit ourselves to our original statements of purpose.

### **POWERFUL REMINDERS FROM OUR PEOPLE**

Willie Mae Williams was my mama's aunt, but in many ways she was like a great grandmother figure to me; her daughter Rosetta felt like my grandmother. Those two incredible Black women were significant encouragers of my educational attainment and scholastic success. Willie Mae was a truth teller – she was not shady, but she was notorious for speaking hard truths and telling it like it is. I will never forget a pivotal moment in my development as a scholar in my Ph.D. program.

I returned to my hometown for a holiday break; it took 12 hours to drive from Bloomington, Indiana to Thomasville, Georgia. I made sure to visit my mama's aunt during every visit home. She always told me how proud she was of me. She understood that I had moved so far away to learn how to study things at one of the most highly respected programs in my field. During this one particular visit, she asked specifically what I was researching. I described the topic and briefly summarized what my findings were showing. "You have to go to school for that?" Willie Mae asked. "I could've told you the answer to that and I ain't even go to school."

It might sound like my mama's aunt was discouraging me or being unsupportive – it was the exact opposite. She was encouraging me to ask more useful and relevant questions. I am not disclosing what the research paper was about that I was working on at that time because there are scholars today who are studying the same thing. What would Willie Mae say about our individual and collective investments into publishing pointless papers that are not going to deliver justice and equity to the people? What would my

mama's aunt say about us misusing the power of the scholarly platforms to which we have been afforded access to selfishly advance our own careers at the expense of the meaningful motives that inspired us to apply to graduate school and become researchers?

Willie Mae had long been disadvantaged by structural and systemic racism. She was taken advantage of by banks in our small, racially stratified town that preyed on her limited financial literacy. Even though it was a fun, cozy place for family, community members, and me, Willie Mae's house was rickety. It looked like poverty from the outside, despite all the love indoors. After we had that life-changing conversation there about my research, I said to myself, "There is no way in hell I can waste my time writing stupid, pointless, unimportant papers when there are people who live in houses like this one; when there are people who are systemically and structurally disadvantaged like my people."

### PEOPLE, NOT POINTLESS STUDIES

I am using my power as ASHE President to call for a focus on people, as opposed to pointless studies. My personal metric is, "What would Willie Mae say?" Other scholars must determine what it is for them. But more of our research has to be about restoring and delivering power to the people. The people need power to be more equitably distributed. The people need and deserve justice. The people demand respect and deserve opportunity. As scholars, could we do a better job of upholding our commitments to the statements of purpose that brought us to the study of higher education? We live in consequential times that call for consequential questions. It is time out for pointlessness and stupid CV-building studies. In lots of ways, the world needs us to ask better questions and to do better by the people.

Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) is under attack. We have people in this association who are doing really important and consequential work on DACA. It is one example of what I wish others of us would do in service to the people. A month before the conclusion of my presidency, I informed the ASHE Board of Directors that one of my final tasks and responsibilities to the Association and to our field would be to establish a Presidential Commission on DACA and Undocumented Americans.

Thankfully, these six leading scholars who study immigration policies and write about undocumented people generously accepted my invitation to be on this Presidential Commission: Susana M. Muñoz (Colorado State University), H. Kenny Nienhusser (University of Hartford), Lindsay Pérez Huber (California State University, Long Beach), Roberto G. Gonzalez (Harvard University), Victor B. Sáenz (University of Texas at Austin), and Robert T. Teranishi (University of California, Los Angeles). They will advise the ASHE Board and provide guidance to the rest of us on ways that we as

higher education researchers can produce and use evidence to be more responsive to threats against undocumented peoples.

In our final board meeting of my presidency, the ASHE Board unanimously adopted the following statement:

*As college and university faculty members and researchers, we write in support of the preservation of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals immigration policies. Foremost, we urge lawmakers to respect the humanity of immigrants and their family members, including those who are and are not enrolled in institutions of higher education. Secondly, we call on lawmakers to appreciate and utilize the vast body of evidence that consistently confirms DACA recipients' accomplishments and their contributions to local, state, and national economies. Research makes painstakingly clear that ending DACA would diminish the livelihood of those protected under this policy and negatively affect our nation's workforce. Social science research findings, not unfounded or exaggerated assumptions about undocumented Americans, must guide policymaking at all levels. We, the undersigned, all highly value evidence affirming legal protections for this population. We insist that policy actors at federal, state, local, and institutional levels do the same.*

This statement will be sent to the President of the United States, every member of the United States Senate and House of Representatives, all 50 governors across the nation, and influential others. ASHE Board members were the first people to sign this statement. Others within and beyond the Association are invited to join us as signatories. This is one way that we are using our power as researchers to impact policy.

### NEW PEOPLE-APPROVED RESEARCH AGENDAS

Serving as ASHE President seemed like a real opportunity to use the power I have to ignite what I hope becomes a paradigmatic shift in the study of higher education. I wanted to give our field permission to ask more people-informed and people-approved questions in our scholarship. One way I attempted to do this was by inviting a mix of practitioner-scholars and higher education researchers to join me in what I named the 'We the People' presidential symposium series, which is generously sponsored by Kresge Foundation and Teagle Foundation. The title for this series is slang for this:

*We the people y'all write about and make decontextualized claims about and offer policy prescriptions for. We the people that y'all write about, but don't really talk to. We the people that only see you when y'all want us to fill out a survey or participate in one of your interviews or focus groups.*

Thirty colleagues, including some members of our inaugural Presidential Commission on DACA, generously agreed to lead 'We the People' presidential symposia during the 2017 ASHE Annual Meeting (see Table 1).



**TABLE 1.**  
**‘WE THE PEOPLE’ PRESIDENTIAL SYMPOSIUM SERIES**  
**POPULATIONS AND PARTICIPANTS**

<i>Population</i>	<i>Participants</i>
DACA and Undocumented Americans	Lindsay Pérez Huber Susana Muñoz H. Kenny Nienhusser Robert Teranishi
HBCU Presidents and Senior Leaders	Makola Abdullah Roslyn Clark Artis Felecia Commodore Jennifer Johnson Samaad Wes Keys Steve Mobley
Muslims and People from Underrepresented Faiths	Shafiqah Ahmadi Nina Daoud Khaseem Davis J.T. Snipes
Low-Income Students at Low-Resource Public High Schools	Ryan J. Davis Stella M. Flores Tiffany Jones Awilda Rodriguez Edward J. Smith
Formerly and Presently Incarcerated Persons	Joshua Abreu Charles H.F. Davis III Royel M. Johnson Miah LaPierre-Dreger Katherine Wheatle
Community College Students	Regina Deil-Amen Constance Iloh Cecilia Rios-Aguilar Adrián Trinidad J. Luke Wood
Trans and Genderqueer Teens and Collegians	Dane Ashton Brooke English Shaun Harper Nathan Johnson Crimson Jordan Hazel Marshall Deb Murphy J Peterson

Over months leading up to the conference, these colleagues first took stock of what has been written and what we know about their respective populations. In addition to stocktaking, each team reached agreement about questions that are in need of retirement; questions that have been beaten to death; and questions that will no longer do anything to improve the lives, educational outcomes, and experiences of the people.

I also invited them to imagine a new set of researchable questions that are not pointless, but instead are relevant, timely, and useful. They are writing new research agendas for the study of their respective populations. I asked them to have those research agendas peer reviewed by the people – meaning, actual folks outside of academia and ASHE. Furthermore, I urged the seven teams to see the people as peers who are best positioned and most qualified to say, “You got that right or here are things you are missing; add this to the agenda; here are other aspects of our lives, experiences, and realities that might not be well understood by researchers who genuinely want to help improve our circumstances.” It seems foolish of us as scholars to think that we know it all without input and insights from the people. I insist that they are most expert on themselves and their conditions.

### CLOSING<sup>2</sup>

An *Inside Higher Ed* article titled, “A September of Racist Incidents,” cataloged numerous racist occurrences on college campuses across the country (Bauer-Wolf, 2017). While these kinds of things are happening on college campuses, too many of us sit in our offices pursuing pointless, do-nothing research questions. I imagine that people at institutions highlighted in Bauer-Wolf’s article wish that we could do more in our research to help their colleagues and leaders first understand, then effectively respond to the racism that occurred. I acknowledge that some of you do not study race, racism, and racial equity. That is not my expectation. Instead, I am simply furnishing this one area as an example.

Campus shootings is another consequential topic in urgent need of useful research contributions. In the aftermath of a deadly tragedy at Umpqua Community College two years ago, 18 leading higher education research centers and institutes, including the one I founded and direct, issued a joint statement calling for rigorous studies and urging more foundations, federal and state governments, and entities on all sides of gun violence debates to sponsor research projects that expand knowledge in our field. We also presented some specific researchable topics. Given the prevalence of shootings that occur at colleges and universities in the U.S., researchers who choose to take this on surely would not be accused of pursuing pointlessness. Those

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<sup>2</sup>I voluntarily reduced the length of this closing for conciseness.

studies could play some role in informing legislation or mental health services that significantly reduce gun violence on campuses.

Like some others, ours is an applied field. Cancer researchers research things because they want to find a cure for cancer and they want to find effective treatments. Most of them do not conduct research merely to get papers published or to get additional lines on their CVs or just to be seen at the annual conferences of their professional associations. Those scholars are in search of a cure. Engineers research things because they want to improve infrastructures; they want to build things that are sound, safe, and make our lives better. Business school professors do research to help corporations become more profitable and more efficient.

If she were alive today, my mama's aunt Willie Mae would ask why you do research, what problem you are trying to solve, how you are aiming to make our world better, and what you are doing in service to the people. On its own, knowledge is not power. But each of us does have the power to ask more timely and useful questions in these consequential times. Collectively, we can fight the powers that fail to deliver equity and justice to the people.

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