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Why We Should Provide More Support for Women of Color in Academia

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WHY WE SHOULD PROVIDE MORE SUPPORT FOR WOMEN OF COLOR IN ACADEMIA

March 15, 2021 • by [Silvia Chairez-Perez](#) • [comment \(1\)](#)

My experience as a woman of color in higher education is not unique. In this piece, I will share my own story and discuss challenges women of color face to succeed in academia and how their absence in these spaces negatively affects the success of female students of color. Additionally, I will describe methods institutions of higher learning can implement to hire more women of color and how having women of color teachers has impacted my educational journey.



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MY EXPERIENCE AS A WOMAN OF COLOR

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diploma, and began taking classes at the local community college. My mother endured many surgeries, but ultimately lost her battle to cancer when she was twenty-seven. My father stopped going to school to provide for my sister and me.

Growing up as both immigrants and women of color in the United States meant that we faced significant hurdles just to "make it." Most of the schools we attended were underfunded and overcrowded. The most alienating educational experiences I faced growing up were in middle school. We moved to an affluent neighborhood, and attended a better funded school; a Whiter school.

I vividly remember being in geometry class and being told by my teacher that the principal wanted to see me. I was an honor roll student. I played soccer, wrestled, ran track, and cross country. My first thought was that the meeting was sports related. I walked into an empty room and was told to "open up my backpack." I stood there as the school resource officer and the principal looked through my belongings. I was shocked. Confused. The principal stated "Someone informed us they saw you opening your back pack and selling something." Drugs. They thought I was selling drugs on campus. This is but one of a litany of incredibly alienating encounters I endured in the American educational system.

FOUNDING OF INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

First celebrated in the United States on [February 28, 1909](#), [International Women's Day](#) is now [observed annually on March 8th](#). In 1910, a [Conference of Working Women](#) met in Copenhagen to discuss women issues. The conference of over [100 women, from 17 countries](#), included women of many backgrounds. The congregation was made up of union representatives, working women clubs, and the first three women [elected to the Finnish parliament](#). [Clara Zetkin](#), a women's right advocate, [introduced the idea of an International Women's Day](#).

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The first [International Women's Day](#) was celebrated in 1911. Women and allies [marched](#) and rallied in Austria, Denmark, Germany, and Switzerland. On the eve of [World War I](#) Russian Women celebrated their first [International Women's Day](#). In 1914, all over Europe [held rallies](#) and protests to express their disapproval for the war and to express female solidarity.

There was [less activity](#) occurring for [International Women's Day](#) as we entered the new millennium. However, the battle to achieve gender equity was [being](#) fought. In 2011, women around the world celebrated [the 100 year anniversary](#) of [International Women's Day](#). That year, [President Barack Obama](#) declared March to be "[Women's History Month](#)." In the United Kingdom, activist [Annie Lennox](#) lead a march across a London bridge in support of [Women for Women international](#).

[International Women's Day](#) is a [United Nations-sanctioned](#) day to celebrate women's rights and inspire people to advocate on behalf of gender equity. There has been a [theme](#) to [International Women's Day](#) since 1996. This year's theme is "[Choose to Challenge](#)." People should [choose to challenge](#) biases and misconceptions in the interest of creating a more inclusive gender-equal world.

COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES MUST CREATE DIVERSE LEARNING

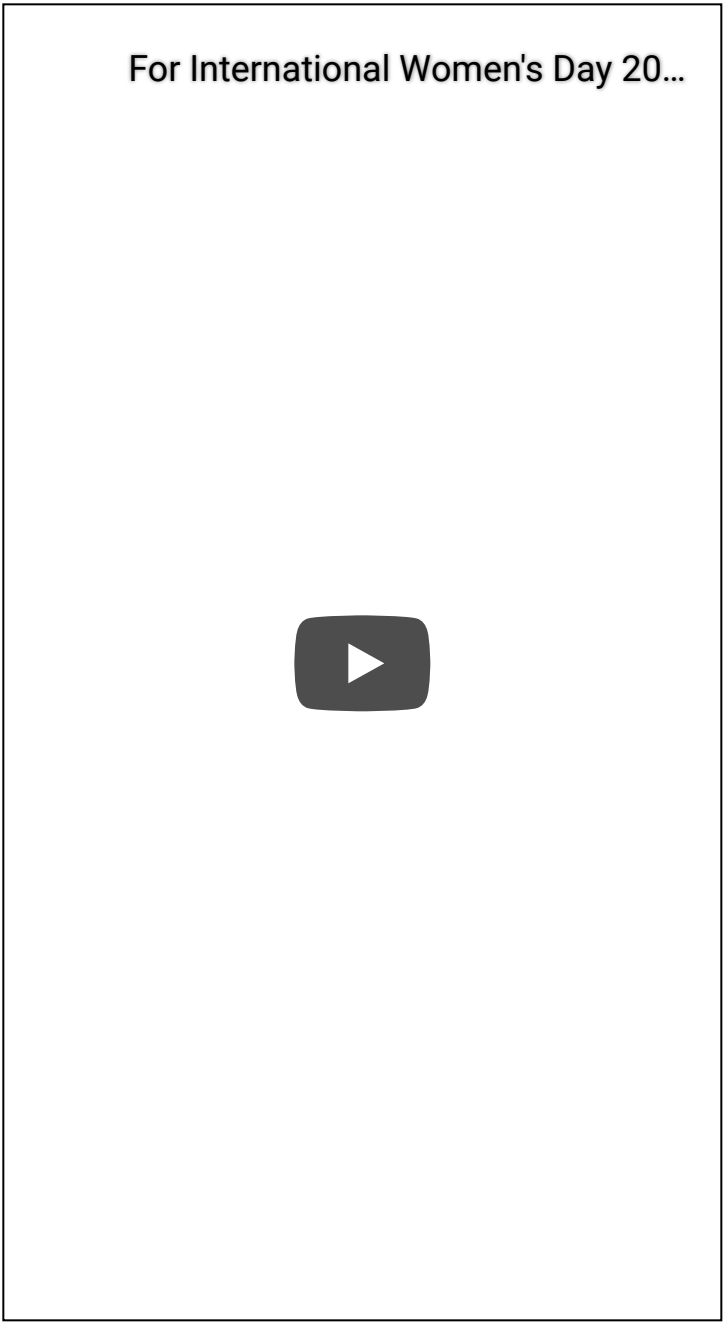
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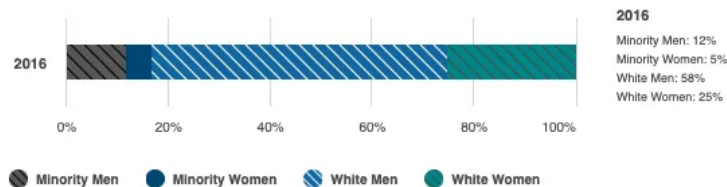
educational leadership. Approximately **forty-five percent of undergraduate** students in the United States are students of color (Hispanic 20%, Black 14%, Asian 7%). However, only **seventeen percent** of college presidents are racial minorities, and only **five percent** of college presidents are women of color.

Women of color must be given tenure-track positions, so they can later be considered for higher positions within their respective university. A **tenure-track** position gives professors permanent employment at their respective university, and protects them from being fired without cause. When women of color are given leadership positions in executive committees for universities, it is usually as **Chief Diversity Officer**. Black and Latinx women make up **fifty-two percent** of Chief Diversity Officers in the nation. Other positions such as Chief Financial Officer and President are **overwhelmingly occupied** by white men.

When women of color earn leadership positions in colleges and universities, they tend to be **put on the glass cliff**. Being put on the **glass cliff** means a woman was elevated to a position of power, such as President, when a company is underperforming. This means that their **likelihood of success** is significantly lowered. While some



Minority Presidents by Gender: College Presidents, by Gender and Race/Ethnicity



*In this study, presidents who identified their race as other than white or who identified their ethnicity as Hispanic or Latino(a) were classified as a minority.

Source: www.aacupress.org/article/2017

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come the institutions ongoing challenges.

Women of color are underrepresented in the candidacy for leadership positions in higher education because they have **not been promoted** to full professorship or tenure. Black women hold **3.8%** of tenure-track positions and **2.3%** of tenured positions. Latinx women hold **3.1%** of tenure-track positions and **2.6%** of tenured positions. Asian Women hold **5.3%** of tenure-track positions and **3.5%** of tenured positions. More women of color need to be given opportunities at tenure-track positions in order to diversify colleges and universities at the leadership level. Diversifying the leadership level of colleges and universities would diversify hiring managers and allow a more equitable hiring process.

FEMALE FACULTY OF COLOR AND FEMALE STUDENT OF COLOR INTERACTION IS SCARCE

As a result of the absence of women of color in higher education, interaction between female students of color and female faculty of color **is lacking.** When walking the halls academia students are surrounded by **white imagery.** Pictures and statues of white men flood the hallways. These images and the lack of diverse professors, taken as a whole, send a message. The message articulates what it means to belong in higher education.



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Many students of color come from communities with a strong sense and value of **community interaction.** Providing students of color with a mentor **helps them stay actively engaged** in their learning process. The results of a **research study** by [Jeanett Castellanos](#) and [Alberta Gloria](#) emphasized the need for Latina's in college to have a strong support system. It is vital for Latinas to feel like they belong to their collegial community in order to expand their scholarship identity beyond their degree.

The **enrollment of Black students** at private, primarily white institutions consistently falls short of meeting goals because Black students at those institutions view the campus climate as **hos-**

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campus community, and faculty of color mentorship opportunities to the success of students of color.

THERE IS NOT A LACK OF WOMEN APPLICANTS

The myth that there simply are not enough women of color applicants to consider needs to be retired. Decades of catalyst research has proven that systemic gender bias can seep into **talent management systems**, creating a vicious cycle that affects employees at every level. **Research** has shown that companies that prioritize creating a more diverse and inclusive environment, by, for example, hiring women of color, find reduced turnover and better business results.

University's that want to create a comprehensive diversity and inclusion strategy must make their **hiring process equitable**. Institutions can move towards a more **equitable hiring process** by refining their job descriptions, auditing their communications channels, requiring diverse slates, removing bias from the interview process, and **flipping the script**. When employers post job offerings the description needs to be created so it is **applicable to all candidates**.

Specifically, employers must **eliminate** racist and sexist wording from job descriptions. Employers can achieve this goal by screening for **stereotypical masculine terms** in their job postings. Words such as competitive and dominant **should be avoided**. Removing these terms from job postings will result in **more female candidates** applying for the position.



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Institutions should audit their websites, social media channels, and marketing images to **procure they are diverse**. These **channels of communication** should present employees of all races, genders, sexuality, and ethnicities. Diverse potential employees **visit these sites** to determine whether they want to work there. Requiring **diverse slates** will increase the chances of hiring diverse employees. Having **only one** woman of color applicant is insufficient. Research has shown that **if there is only one woman**

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in their job description when evaluating candidates. Then they can score each interviewee **immediately after their interview** to achieve the most accurate outcome.

Finally, employers need to flip the script. **Flipping the script** means taking action by using words that create inclusive environments where people feel valued. Hiring managers should note that statements such as "**we are color-blind in this office**" or "**you speak English so well**" to validate candidates of color, is unacceptable. When providing feedback, employers **should comment** on a person's actual accomplishments and attributes. Words matter. Employers **need to be intentional** when providing feedback.

HAVING FEMALE TEACHERS OF COLOR HAS POSITIVELY IMPACTED MY ACADEMIC CAREER

Women of color have uplifted me with their strength, encouragement, and kindness throughout my educational career. Attending a predominantly white middle school was difficult, but there was hope. The most impactful teacher I had, who consistently uplifted me, and seemed to be the only person who saw potential in me was a Black woman. She frequently told me I was smart when I felt the lowest. On a monthly basis, she sent hand written letters to my home informing my father how amazing and brilliant I was. She did not know it but I was at my lowest during these times. After losing my mother, I found a family with my neighborhood friends. When I moved to the more affluent neighborhood I felt so alienated, alone, and I profoundly struggled with my mental health. Her actions possibly saved my life. She made me feel like I belonged there.

When I first moved to said school in seventh grade they insisted on putting me in their English Language Development class. By this time I was twelve years old, so I had lived in this country for nine years. I felt like I was put in this class because they saw the school I came from, and just assumed I didn't speak English. I marched into then principles office, yes, I literally walked into her office, and told her I needed to speak with her. I told her I did not belong in this class because I knew how to speak English fluently. She, a black woman, told me I could be moved to a conventional seventh grade English class if I passed a test. I took the placement test and was moved to the conventional seventh grade English class.

In undergrad, I struggled enormously with my identity. There was not one Latina, or Black woman teaching in my department. As Karkouti's **research study** revealed, I found a sense of community through peer interaction. I joined a multicultural sorority and my sisters, Latina, Black, Asian, and

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rounds and **sixty-four percent** of them are women. I have had Latina, Asian, Black, and White female professors. Through the support of these women I have been able to become President of the Student Bar Association, Captain of my Ethics National Mock Trial Team, and now Founding Editor-in-Chief of Golden Gate University's Journal of Race, Gender, Sexuality, and Social Justice. Professors Jyoti Nanda, Alison Wang, Helen Chang, Kaitlyn Romey, Rachel Brockl, Jessica Barber, I stand on your shoulders. Your constant encouragement, support, and guidance will never be forgotten.

CONCLUSION

Growing up as a brown Latina in America has taught me to choose to challenge. I choose to challenge biases, racism, sexism, and inequities in my day-to-day life. Colleges and universities must also choose to challenge. Female teachers of color face significant hurdles to succeed in academia, and their absence in these spaces negatively affects the success of female students of color. We can help women of color be successful in higher education by creating more equitable hiring processes.

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