



From Worriers to Warriors: Leading while Black in a Predominantly White Institution

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ABSTRACT

This manuscript captures the leadership development of two Black leaders at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) as they navigated their way through the whirlwind of decisions that needed to be made during the 2020-2021 academic year of the pandemic and social and racial unrest. The leaders were the chancellor and the associate vice chancellor of equity, diversity, inclusion, and support programs. The leaders serve at a regional comprehensive university in a state system in the Midwest with a population of 11,900 students, including a 2-year campus. During the 2020-2021 academic year, the leaders embarked on an investigation of Whiteness through the lens of Blackness as they developed programs, practices, policies, and protocols to assist students, faculty, staff, and fellow administrators with decisions during a time of conflict, criticisms, and crisis.

KEYWORDS: Black leadership development, understanding concepts of Whiteness, critical hope, healing justice, trauma-informed education, racial identity politics, race relations.

RUNNING HEAD: From Worrier to Warrior

Recently, I, as Chancellor Emeritus, presented at the American Association of Blacks in Higher Education Symposium on the topic of *Leading While Black in a Time of Racial and Social Unrest*. This presentation was inspired by world-changing events which affected our campus. These events included the Covid-19 pandemic, the killing of George Floyd, the Woke college students’ reactions to racial and social unrest, a contentious national presidential election that resulted in a riot against democracy, the rise of canceled culture, and oppositional stances on anti-racist teaching and critical race theory through the *1776 Commission’s Report* and the backlash of the *1619 Project*. These events affected our university through remote teaching, public rallies, Black Lives Matter stances and counter-responses, canceled culture investigations and the renaming of a building, enrollment decline, political posturing, budget inadequacies, and the resignation of the university’s first Black and gay chancellor.

During this time, there were five Black unicorns, the rarest of the rare, (chancellor, vice chancellor of student affairs, associate vice chancellor of equity, diversity, and inclusion; assistant vice chancellor of diversity and student success; and the dean of arts and communication) working together in solidarity, affinity, and vernacular to provide support and back up or as we said *Black Up* as we navigated the choppy waters of leadership in a predominately White institution (PWI). The Black leaders working vernacular consisted of words, expressions, and tonality

to capture our unique experiences as Black people of culture. We deployed our language for survival, protection, and affirmation. This was a period of constant bombardment as the coronavirus marched across the globe while at the same time, critical race and social incidents erupted in moments of both tragedy and triumph. It was truly difficult trying to combat racism while at the same time experiencing it as we shepherd our institution through the pandemic. Tre Johnson (2020) said it best, “When Black people are in pain, White people join book groups.” Although we convened our series of book groups, panel discussions, symposia, unity walks, and town hall meetings, we wanted to move beyond the symptomatic/situational to systemic solutions and change.

We wanted to move from worriers to warriors to combat the global pandemic and the national social and racial unrest. To be proactive, we implemented policies and practices about agency, advocacy, action, and accountability.

These four pillars grounded in social and racial justice activism were integrated into the portfolios of all Cabinet members with the guidance of the Associate Vice Chancellor of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion. Each Cabinet member was charged to create immediate, implementable programs and practices that focused on the four pillars as described and to move their units from agency to accountability:

Agency: Personal empowerment through knowledge acquisition and the expressive dissemination of this knowledge through advocacy and action. The channeling of angst and agitation into advocacy and action.
Advocacy: The act or process of supporting a cause, person, or purpose through sharing knowledge and championing worthy actions.
Action: The intentional accomplishment of initiatives that will solve problems, generate engagement, and elicit accountability.
Accountability: An obligation to accept responsibility and provide resources for actions that are meaningful, measurable, and sustainable



To guide our students from agency through advocacy to action, we worked with our WOKE students which we coined as *Working on Keeping Engaged*. In conjunction with the Vice Chancellor of Student Affairs, we created the Chancellor's WOKE Advisory Board. This Board consisted of student leaders from various BIPOC student organizations as well as representatives from the Student Government Organization. We wanted the Board to act with critical consciousness which is the ability to understand and intervene in systems of injustice. Together, we vetted issues and embarked on actions that were justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion (JEDI) informed. Creating spaces where students engage in complex explorations of power, identity, and action is not easy or straightforward, we recognized that sometimes we just needed space for listening and showing up as we sought healing justice (Venet, 2021).

One of the actions was to centralize all of the disparate diversity units into the Division of Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Support Programs to focus on efficiencies and effectiveness. The coalescing of resources, talent, and opportunities, especially among our marginalized populations was necessary to maximize the tenets of our mission, vision, and strategic plan. Through the optics of one of our values, Social Responsibility, Diversity, and Opportunity, we created synergistic supports to advance our goals.

The departments that were affected by this divisional shift continued to have a single reporting structure as well as dual functionality in operation and tactics. This reorganization allowed for more transformative action rather than transactional responsibilities by allowing greater synergy amongst historically marginalized groups. These coalesced departments and offices included racial/ethnic identities, persons with disabilities, LGBTQ+ persons, veterans, international persons, and non-traditional learners. This new configuration gave greater voice and representation to the leadership of these departments which benefitted from greater intersectionality, increased connectivity between vulnerable populations, and a greater network of support. The new division was able to leverage existing resources, maximize talent, and forge new pathways to future success.

Another initiative was to review the history of campus monuments and buildings. The purpose of this review was to be proactive about the canceled culture by amplifying those names that were supporters of social justice and to seek changes in building names or the removal of representations of those who were discovered as historical oppressors of social justice.

This initiative was a joint effort with the history department and the library's archivist. The joint committee determined that it was not necessary to remove any monuments or names from buildings, but what was decided was to name the newest residential hall in honor of Native American culture. The committee also supported the Black Student Union's request to replace the name of another residential hall that was named after

a street to be named after a prominent, trail-blazing African American faculty member. The Cabinet approved these recommendations and sought and received approval from the Board of Regents.

A third initiative was to offset the stigma of Black athleticism. Often Black athletes in PWIs are viewed as trophies and were simply admired for their athleticism and not their characters and academic acumen. To counter these potential trauma-inducing experiences, the Chancellor charged the Athletic Director and the Associate Vice Chancellor of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion to form a collaborative partnership with the coaches that were reciprocal, intentional, and sustainable. They embarked on a series of initiatives that included rewriting the Athletic Division's mission statement and strategic plan to incorporate diversity and inclusion statements, using compliance meetings for diversity professional development, and monitoring more closely the retention and graduation rates of athletes of color.

The professional developments focused on implicit and explicit biases, microaggressions, and racial identity development. Some coaches were leery of the content and wanted to dismiss the concepts. The Athletic Director held the coaches accountable for demonstrative change and required that they established annual performance-based equity, diversity, and inclusion goals in their sports. The football coach was intentional about making justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion an integral part of his coaching regime. As a former history teacher, he knew that learning took place in the classroom, the locker room, and on the field. He used all of these spaces to lead sessions about race-based exploitation in college and professional sports as well as panel discussions around trauma and sports psychology about social injustice. These initiatives were acts of healing justice in which both the athletes of color and the White athletes stood in solidarity with dignity, respect, and unconditional positive record for one another.

As Black leaders, we moved from being worriers to warriors and guided our PWI through much turmoil, strife as well as racial and social unrest. As leaders of intent, we moved beyond what is referred to as the hokey or naïve hope and the belief that things would just get better. Instead, we focused on critical hope which is an analysis of power relations and how they constitute one's emotional ways of being. The agency, advocacy, action, and accountability framework allowed us to lead through a lens of critical hope and healing justice without despair because despair and cynicism only help those in dominance (Bozalek, V., Leibowitz, B., Carolissen, R., & Boler, M., 2013). These challenging times ended with a change in leadership through resignations, reappointments, and retirements. Even though many of the Black leaders have left the institution, the practices, procedures, and policies are still in place as the legacy of these leaders lingers.



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