By obligation and by choice:

Taking on extra responsibilities during COVID-19 and the Black Lives Matter Movement

Tenisha Tevis

Oregon State University

Abstract

The summer of 2020 yielded unprecedented hostility for my lifetime as the COVID-19 pandemic escalated and Black Lives Matter protests intensified around the country. Due to a global shutdown, our now undivided attention was forced to deal with the pervasiveness of anti-Black racism, not only socially and politically but within the confines of historically White institutions with their racist legacies and lack of inclusive infrastructures. As such, I was invited by various leaders and stakeholders to participate in conversations and to take on extra projects that addressed institutional bias and racism on my campus. This reflective essay recounts my experience having taken on extra tasks, both by obligation and by choice, particularly as a Black woman pre-tenure faculty member. In doing this work, I show how my experience aligned with the intersectional reality for Black women in academia; I reflect on this season of now, as an extended presence rather than a fleeting moment; and I conclude this essay by offering recommendations to address the lack of institutional support, and the insufficient infrastructures at my institution.

Keywords: COVID-19; Extra Responsibilities; Institutional Support; Black Women; Pre-Tenure

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COVID-19 and the Black Lives Matter movement

During the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, not only was I unaware how this contagion would cause a global standstill, I also did not imagine how the pandemic, compounded by racial unrest, would shift my workload and stretch my capacity. Entering year five of my tenure track position, I planned to complete a handful of research projects, with room to answer any calls for submission that aligned with my research agenda, wrap up a new course-prep, and begin to prepare my dossier for tenure. Like many Colleagues of Color, I am situated within a historically White institution with its racist legacies and lack of inclusive infrastructures. So in the midst of my many fifth year tasks, as the pandemic escalated and Black Lives Matter protests intensified around the country, I was invited by various institutional leaders and stakeholders to participate in conversations and take on extra projects that addressed institutional bias and racism.

On the one hand, I believed these invitations were rooted in my research area—broadly, institutional practices that impact historically disenfranchised students and the confluences of leadership and identity. On the other, I perceived these invitations were, quite frankly, because I am one of very few Black employees on my campus; specifically, a Black woman tenure track faculty member in the College of Education. So, I felt obligated, imposed on by my institution (which is often the intersectional reality for Black women in academia), to take on these extra projects. At the same time, I also recognized that I was making a choice, a decision to act because I saw this as an opportunity, not only to facilitate change, but also to put my expertise into practice. The invitation to engage in professional activities that would challenge the various

ways in which Whiteness and anti-Blackness are manifested on my campus was not beyond the

scope of my work. Therefore, with only modest institutional support, I proceeded, but with

caution and some angst, mindful that I took on these tasks at a vulnerable juncture in my

career—pre-tenure.

In the midst of the shutdown for the pandemic, once again, a horrific act of police

violence forced our now undivided attention to the nation's terrible, not-so-secret secret—anti-

Black racism. America's ongoing high tolerance for Black suffering, inequitable healthcare,

police brutality, and the race-baiting and fear-mongering of a U.S. President who refused to

condemn White supremacy, left me feeling a great sense of loss, sadness, and fearfulness. These

feelings were made worse as I became painfully aware of my institution's shortcomings.

While, I had always worked remotely and independently, feeling connected to my

department and to my colleagues, the disruptions of the pandemic and protests to my regular

schedule brought to my attention that I am one of approximately 100 Black faculty and staff

employed by my institution and the only Black employee in my College. Learning this was

disheartening. The program for which I am pursuing tenure is diverse; completely led by

women, two of whom are of color, all with varying research agendas. But it took the recent

inescapable spate of anti-Black racism to direct my attention to my own institution.

The struggles of the pandemic and the protests moved me from a space of remoteness,

which was my norm, to a state of isolation, which was not my norm. Though I had come to

understand that being immunocompromised and contracting this virus could be deadly, I was

struck by the realization that being Black (living in a state founded on the principles of White

supremacy) could be deadlier. Because I run like Ahmaud Arbery, invest in my future like

Breonna Taylor, and am of similar stature as George Floyd (minus a few inches in height), I

recognized my own vulnerability and my aloneness in my College. So, as Black women do in the academy, I felt the need to take on more responsibility (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002). In order to take up the work of dismantling systems of oppression on my campus, I needed to push past my fear, and do so with the desire to heal my heart, uplift Black community, and advance my College and the University now and past my time here.

These realizations illuminated two additional matters for me. First, there is little institutional support in place to address these problems; this is why I was asked to take on extra work. While I have a great deal of individually-sought out and departmental level support, university level support is lacking. The institution has most recently started to address these issues only because we are in a season of racial unrest that is, at last, recognized as seemingly intolerable by White people. And it is this recognition by White people, not the enduring cries and exclamations of the Black community, which has paved the way for, in this instance, expedited institutional support to resolve racism and anti-Blackness on my campus, even as infrastructure remains insufficient. Second, these disparities revealed my campus community's severe lack of understanding or blatant dismissal of this country's past, most notably as it pertains to the plight, and as a result, the unyielding perseverance of Black people. Though I should have offered a finessed *no* to requests to meet, to lead, and to develop, I acted out of both obligation and choice, to address these deficiencies with the hope that I could shift my institution's culture and climate, specifically for current and future Black colleagues and students.

My increased workload included, but was not limited to, informing the *Call to Action* initiatives for my College, helping to establish the President's Commission for Black Faculty and Staff (which I am now co-chairing), and co-coordinating and facilitating a five-day *Confronting*

Whiteness seminar for approximately 60 of my peers. I also found myself mentoring and supporting Black doctoral students who were not my advisees—students who shared that they had not benefitted from relationships with their program faculty (Guiffrida, 2005). Therefore, I engaged in othermothering (Collins, 2000; Foster, 1993; Guiffrida, 2005)—taking on the traditional practices of Black women in schools and communities, in this instance, to uplift these students for their own success. In doing this extra work, I made sure that my research agenda did not suffer, as this is the dominant criterion for tenure. Most of my scholarly activities wrapped up as planned, including submitting two new research proposals (which were accepted), and co-authoring a love letter to Black academia and the surrounding communities to center Blackness (Beatty, et al., 2020). To say the least I was exhausted, partially because I worked through my summer during a pandemic, which offered the illusion that I had more time, and was thus more accessible. I was also tired because I was doing work that had no infrastructure to retain it, which made a lot of these asks heavy lifts. Though I agree that every task I followed through on was warranted, it made me reflect on why now, and what my institution can do going forward.

Having taken on these additional projects, I had to acknowledge a few things. First, I acknowledged that we are in a season of *now*; not just a moment in time but a window of opportunity for change that rarely stays open this long. I have observed that now some White people (I am aware an overwhelming majority of the majority are not having difficult conversations, but some White folks, beyond protesting White Millennials, are fed up) are willing to risk their comfort to talk about race, are bothered by the rise in White nationalism, and have begun to recognize the unfounded and illogical nature of racism. Therefore, for me, *now* was an extended presence, rather than a fleeting moment, that offered a longer period of time to

engage in anti-racism work. Second, I was cognizant that I had to act past any anticipated political landmines in order to facilitate change.

It was not lost on me that, again, I am a Black woman and pre-tenure, which more often than not means I should play it safe (and to know me is to know, I believe in safety first). In this body (not to dismiss my humanity but to acknowledge that I am often reduced to my race and gender), I did not want more attention beyond checking the boxes for "potential for national recognition." Taking on this extra work meant that I needed to let my colleagues know of my fears, that my participation in this anti-racist work could be harmful to my career, and that my colleagues who were asking me to do this work would have to protect me. It is unfortunate that I was fearful, but it was imperative that I named it in order to feel safe as I advocated for policy and curricular changes, sought to ensure the well-being of those who identify as Black, and encouraged my peers across the University to think about how institutional practices may be marginalizing Students and Colleagues of Color.

I am aware that the asks of me to help address bias and racism on my campus were necessary and by some leaders welcomed; however, I am also aware they will only minimally, if at all, count toward tenure and promotion. This unfortunate reality means institutions like mine have work to do. My engagement does tie directly to my research. Institutional leadership, then, needs to value praxis, particularly, the impact and reach engaged scholarship can have in the field and on campus. That being said, institutions should expand their definitions and valuing of service and should provide informed formal mentoring. Greater diversity in hiring and advancing employees across all groups is also necessary; and maintaining the current dialogue between underrepresented institutional community members and institutional leadership is essential. Further, there is a need to understand racism as it has manifested differently across various

racial-ethnic groups and other forms of difference, such as gender. For example, Collins (1986) explained that my experience as a Black woman faculty member is not unique; it is shared across other Black women in the academy. Thus, institutional leadership must have an intersectional understanding of Black women's concerns and existence, and the ways we must shape-shift to navigate campus life. Many campus DEI efforts tend to aggregate People of Color and in so doing mask not-so-subtle differences. Thus, taking a disaggregated approach would make trainings much more substantive rather than performative. It may also be helpful if such efforts were centralized to offer more comprehensive support.

As I come to a close, I ask myself, *"Self, would you do it all over again?"* and the answer is likely yes. By choice, and by obligation, I would and will always actively support Black colleagues and students and other People of Color to inform practice and champion change. There is much work to do, and I hope what I have done plays a role, large or small, in disrupting anti-Black racism and empowering other faculty to act.

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