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# Epilogue: Why Women of Color Matter in Higher Education

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# **Epilogue: Why Women of Color Matter in Higher Education**

Mary Wardell-Ghirarduzzi

As a practitioner scholar who has made it my life's purpose to create pathways to success by advancing and facilitating the growth, development, and genius of others toward their highest and fullest potential, I can think of no better platform to enhance and shape individual greatness than higher education. Our students, faculty, staff, alumni, and external communities need us to be here and to thrive. Women of color truly matter for higher education.

As I think over the 20 years I have worked in academe, the many students, faculty, and staff who have taught me so much about being a good leader encourage me. Much has changed over the course of time that has informed and shaped my development and experience as an African American executive woman in higher education. Yet one thing I know and am sure of: We need more women of color in higher education today, working across all areas of our campus than ever before. My lens is that of a higher education leader who has been engaged in student development, access, equity, retention, and community engagement for students and faculty for over 20 years in a California higher education context.

In 1993, I worked at a mission-centered public university with a system charged to provide access and support for the enrollment and graduation of a diverse population of residents. State-level resources were allocated to academic-student affirmative-action programs that gave educational access in the form of advisement, aid, and other support for children, youth, and adults who had been left out of the promise of higher education and who were also some of the most marginalized and underresourced members of our community. My work took shape through the following engagement:

(a) Addressing the needs of the children and youth of migrant workers primarily from Mexico or Central America who experienced

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frequent education disruptions due to their families' migratory labor demands and who had little or no engagement from others who would prepare them for college; (b) working with tribal communities and their leaders and parents to reduce student attrition and drop out among Native American teens, finding ways to keep them in school and improve their secondary outcomes and achievement; (c) developing outreach and advisement opportunities for Pacific Islanders, specifically Samoan teens, who had some of the poorest college-going rates among all Asian Pacific Islander groups, and finding ways to promote their college enrollment; (d) finding educational pathways for the alarming number of young teen mothers in the community who were nearly all girls and young women of color and poor, encouraging high school degree-completion programs and moving them into the local community college; and (e) improving the overall enrollment, retention, and graduation rate of college-ready African American and Latino students who were prepared for college entrance yet needed ongoing institutional support in the form of financial aid, and campus life and advising programs to flourish at the university.

We were not focused on student success alone. There were programs in place to support the educational and professional opportunity for scholars of color and women with tuition benefits that would encourage their enrollment in doctorate programs and, upon their completion, opportunities for placement into a university tenure-track appointment. There was an understanding among higher education leaders, even more than 20 years ago, of the importance of investing resources in scholars and women of color, and knowing the return included their important intellectual scholarship, and whose presence, through lived experience and cultural and other identities, was critical to the university community.

Since that time, support for higher education has shifted, as public policy and legislation eliminated targeted support (such as Proposition 209's banning the use of race in student-access programs). As the current model of higher education continues to shift, with public divestment and financial responsibility shifted to students and their

families as well as individual universities, a commitment to mission by leadership is what keeps current diversity efforts in place for students, faculty, and community-engagement initiatives.

The good news is that we here in the academy, women of color, are leading and serving every day to advance our campus missions; in the professorship we are focused on teaching, research, and service; in student development, we serve through student-affairs leadership. Also, we are leading in administrative areas such as business, finance, technology, fundraising, human resources, alumni relations, and legal affairs. I have been fortunate to work with many talented women of color in academe across all areas that literally make a university run, and I know the important contributions and difference we make to our campuses.

Our (women of color) presence and voice is critical and necessary for the 21st-century mission-centered university, as we have historically moved our institutions forward on issues of equity, diversity, and inclusion, and we continue to remind our institutions that a commitment to excellence involves an engagement of diverse individuals who bring new ways of thinking and knowing.

It is through our collective lived experience and combined history that women of color promote an understanding of inclusion that goes beyond current practice or popular rhetoric, and it is our shared narrative of enduring an often life-long engagement with systemic bias and challenges, yet thriving in spite, that can and does advance our campuses toward extraordinary excellence and goodness. We risk rank, position, and reputation to advocate for campus environments that are more just for all. Thus, we lead our institutions—through our presence, performance, and productivity—to more kind, fair, and whole places for teaching, learning, service and social justice.