
Observations

Lisa L Moore

Mon, Jun 15, 2020 at 4:23 PM

To: stolaf-faculty

Dear Colleagues,

As you all are meeting this afternoon to discuss and to address "what now" from the gift Michelle offered, I wanted to share some final observations. Michelle's letter is one that is not only a gift, it also offers valuable insights that are important to address. She showed up everyday, despite the challenges and gave it her all. She is beloved by so many students and her departure is one that many students, in particular Black and Brown students are feeling hard. Her experience is hers, yet it should absolutely be read as what is likely the most honest account you will get from a Black woman faculty about their experience at this college. Accounts from others, I fear, may have been dismissed.

Witnessing her experience and that of other Black women colleagues absolutely impacted how I experienced the institution, much more so than anything else to be honest. Her experience will absolutely make it harder to recruit Black women here for positions. Black women at St. Olaf, are often positioned as Patricia Hill Collins describes as "Mammies, Matriarchs, or Welfare Queens" (2002). There is an implicit expectation of care that is projected onto us from White students and faculty alike (mammies), we are expected to carry a certain way of knowing and gravitas/superwoman'ness' (why does it seem like the only time I see a Black woman on campus, she's a guest speaker versus a job candidate or consultant (matriarch), and labor that we engage to make ends meet has to be discussed with our deans and provost to insure we aren't taking advantage of the college's resources (welfare queen).

I will say that from the first day I met Michelle at her faculty orientation and I learned that the expectation was that she was going to deliver a baby, and be back in the classroom shortly thereafter and then also teach INTERIM, I was aghast. Witnessing her doing solo stage managing for POC ole theater was made me mad, why didn't any of her colleagues offer to help out? This was not a way an institution demonstrates support or concern for an eager junior colleague or any colleague for that matter.

Addressing the anti-blackness and racism Michelle brings to your attention in her letter means to look deeply at structures that we accept and rationalize based on fiscal decision-making and notions of "fairness" that are rooted in dominant narratives or traditions. It means going beyond thinking about how Black and Brown faculty can survive in the system and focus on changing the system itself. Systems change almost always means letting go of ways of functioning that are comfortable for the majority and those who hold power. Making those kinds of changes shakes the roots of institutions. It is why a place like St. Olaf or any institution wrestles with meaningful change efforts. It's why creating positions and developing educational programming and funding an array of projects is "easy" in comparison to addressing the individual, interpersonal, and institutional elements of racism meaningfully. Imagine how different experiences would be for Black and Brown faculty if that work happened BEFORE they arrived to campus? What if structures and policies did not assume that every faculty member had the benefit of familial resources, economic security, was able bodied, and had a familiarity with white christian US culture? Anti-blackness is insidious. St. Olaf embodies anti-blackness in a way that few places I have ever worked have, it's why I had to walk around with headphones on whenever I left my office, the whiteness of campus felt oppressive in a way that no other place I have worked has, the only space of comfort for me, ironically outside of my office was the classroom. It was my only site of power. If I hadn't had that I would have left much earlier. If the term anti-blackness is new to you, this op-ed does a good job introducing the concept: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/04/opinion/george-floyd-anti-blackness.html>

Many of us have seen and we know that when one centers perspectives and experiences of those

underrepresented and not privileged, the outcomes are better for EVERYONE. Yet, here there seems to be a real disbelief of this reality. This was evident in our GE process and I have observed it when I sat on FLC. I often have wondered how many people who are involved with the functioning of administrative structures can say that they have experienced working or attending school in a space where the Black and Brown faculty and students were relatively enthusiastic about the institution? I have, you won't find a place where it is ever unanimous or perfect, but I've worked and attended institutions, where we smiled more and cried a lot less, not many Black or White faculty or students can say that. If you are relying on a consultant for your data that is great, but not the same as listening to the people in your own backyard who have actually experienced your campus culture and can identify the texture of what makes an experience good. Capturing that is much harder in the context of a survey or focus group.

As one of the Black faculty preparing to depart, I will say that I came to St. Olaf and I could see its potential to be a truly great small liberal arts college that is inclusive and supportive of faculty of color. People seemed sincere, eager, and committed to making it a place that would work for me and it was appreciated. While it may not have an endowment as large as our peer across town, there are resources available at St. Olaf that made it an attractive place to work and to imagine a future professionally. It's why I worked multiple jobs (which I should note was something not really "approved" of at St. Olaf, again, a structural issue), trying very hard to make the lower salary I earned at Olaf work, I believed in the possibility of the institution, I liked my department, and had planned to move up to the cities eventually to insure my kids had more mirrors of themselves.

Typically we focus on the departmental cultures as defining and framing the experiences of faculty. I have to tell you, that no matter how good the department or bad the department at St. Olaf, it must look at the implicit aspects of its institutional culture, and LISTEN to people who have experienced places who "do" inclusion or "diversity" work better. Some of you may roll your eyes, but looking at Presidents like Freeman Hrabowski or Ruth Simmons is important. Looking at institutions where Black faculty have built careers and stayed is important, while many of us do end up at places with big endowments, because we simply can't afford to be at institutions that can't pay us more without having significant side gigs, many of us do not. Some of us remain at smaller institutions making less than what we are worth because we bring a commitment to the work, see the potential of the institutions, and experience **RESPECT** from colleagues and students.

Michelle, thank you again for sharing your brilliance with all of us, for being brave and stepping out when it wasn't required.

I wish everyone all of the best in your endeavors.

Lisa