
Why I am leaving St. Olaf College

Michelle Gibbs

To: stolaf-faculty

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Hello all,

As many of you know, this is my last year at St. Olaf. I accepted a position at Illinois Wesleyan University in the School of Theatre Arts. Professionally, this role is an excellent fit for what I do as a teacher and creative artist. I am excited for my next adventure. At the same time, this isn't the entire reason why I am leaving St. Olaf College.

In the wake of George Floyd's murder, white people in cities across the globe are using their privilege to stand up and with Black and Brown people to protest systemic and institutional racism. If you watch some of the peaceful protest footage in cities like Minneapolis and New York, white people are literally using their bodies as shields to protect Black and Brown residents from the police. Other white people are marching in front of Black and Brown residents during peaceful protests. All I could think about while watching was, "I needed some white people like that at St. Olaf."

I am leaving St. Olaf College because as a Black woman I don't have the full support of my white colleagues at the college. There are not enough white faculty and administrators willing to stand on the front lines to support us against a biased system that is set up to fail us as Black and Brown faculty. This past year, I taught in constant fear of my white students. I knew if I angered them, it could mean my job, or fear that they would come for my career. This type of white rage is real for many of us; yet, there is no discussion about it during review time, nor is it taken into account for how departments evaluate teaching and learning. They're not enough white faculty and administrators willing to publicly hold white students accountable for their racist behavior in the classroom. There are not enough white faculty and administrators willing to publicly teach white students how to hold themselves accountable for their racist behavior in the classroom. This unpaid emotional labor is often left to Black and Brown faculty who recognize it, feel it, and (all alone) are left to call it out. It is exhausting work, and doesn't win us any favors with colleagues and administrators. We are often looked at as moody, difficult, uncaring toward white students... the list goes on... and it all goes on our 2nd year... 4th year review...

I was being evaluated based on this invisible merit called Ole culture. It was my biggest hurdle at St. Olaf College. Rather than being acknowledged for bringing more diverse voices and my experience to the classroom, I was told (and sometimes inferred) "I wasn't appropriate," or the lesson wasn't "appropriate," or nothing was said to me at all, and I would get a check-in call from my associate dean at the time or the provost for a meeting about teaching and learning.

I attribute most of this to white rage in the classroom. Theater is not a spectator sport. It requires participants (student actors and audiences) to be actively engaged in the work in ways that are visceral and energetic to create compelling and engaging performances and experiences. I noticed early on that many of our students in theater were not used to being challenged in these ways. I brought that rigor to the classroom and rehearsal studio. However, learning can be uncomfortable. If you were the star in high school theater only to come to college and have a professor (a Black one nonetheless) tell you "no," that can feel uncomfortable. So, in the end, if I wasn't telling students "yes," then I wasn't "respecting students" or "being sympathetic to their needs."

This type of institutional racism is highly effective in higher education against Black and Brown faculty. It hides under the guise of "effective" teaching and learning. Who gets to determine "effective"? My white department. If I don't teach the way they understand or like, is it still effective? No. If theater students (who are mostly white) don't like an assignment or are upset with my method of instruction, who determines if my teaching is "effective"? My white students. If I don't teach in a way they understand or like, is it still effective? Probably not to them.

My differences as a Black female educator was a hindrance at St. Olaf College, not a gift.

When I was strongly encouraged to get a teaching mentor at CILA right around the same time I pissed off a group of students who promptly took their grievance to my department heads and then to the administration, I knew St. Olaf would probably never tenure me. But the straw that broke, was when a white colleague said that they knew what I was experiencing with white theater students was racism in the classroom. Yet, they did nothing to support me.

Despite the trauma I've experienced at St. Olaf, I still feel so sad that I'm leaving. This was my dream job. I am a person of faith, though. God blessed me with the opportunity to meet and work with good colleagues and talented students, and I choose to leave with that impression.

But, white faculty, I implore you to support Black and Brown faculty by participating in and doing antiracist work with each other. This work is hard and uncomfortable. The work will ask you to question everything you think you know about yourself and your relationship to white and non-white people. But, it must be done. Or, I won't be the last Black woman to leave the college. They will come (maybe), and more will leave. Once you learn how to be an ally, then you can teach white students how to be allies as well. Maybe then there will be space to include all types of teaching pedagogies from diverse bodies that aren't dependent on understanding Ole culture to be effective.

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Sincerely,

Michelle Cowin Gibbs, Ph.D. M.F.A.