

# THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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ADVICE

## Ready to Be an Ally for Black Academics? Here's a Start

Twelve ways that white faculty members can better support Black academics in their department and across the campus.

*By Ebony O. McGee*

NOVEMBER 11, 2020



Black academics find ourselves in an unexpected new reality. When white faculty members speak up about us, we're used to hearing questions like, "Why are you always complaining?" and "And can't you smile more?" But this year, we are finally at a point where many white professors are singing a different tune: "We see your pain. How can we help?" For me, as a Black faculty member at a historically white university, that's music to my ears.

Hard work is a prerequisite of faculty work — teaching, research, publishing, grant writing, campus and national service. But if you're a Black faculty member, or from another demographic underrepresented in academe, you have all of those work obligations plus more. Often we are:

- Expected to educate dominant communities — and some communities of color — about diversity, equity, race, inclusion, microaggressions, and culture.
- Overlooked as potential dissertation advisers by white graduate students. (I know Black professors in largely white STEM programs who have never had a white graduate student as an advisee.)
- Burdened by negative teaching evaluations (especially Black women faculty members), usually resulting from students' unconscious and conscious bias.
- Expected to engage in extensive service work — often prefaced by, "If you don't do it, we won't have anybody of color on this diversity initiative [committee, project, task force, event, search committee]." Yet we often face white colleagues who, come promotion time, *devalue* service work that promotes diversity, equity, race matters, inclusion, and culture. Their lack of interest creates narrowed networks of collaboration. Moreover, the administration may not fully appreciate the time and energy needed to do such work.
- Judged with shameless suspicion for publishing in any journal that has the words "diversity," "equity," "race," "inclusion," or "culture" in its title.

There have been many excellent examples of courageous allies in academe. However, I want to reveal some of the things that Black and other faculty members of color discuss among ourselves — mostly because we don't believe that our white colleagues can handle this level of truth. But since y'all are ready, I might as well give it to you straight:

1. **Acknowledge how power (meaning white supremacy, often described informally as “academic politics”) operates at our institutions and work, long term, to dismantle it.** That means adopting specific, measurable ways to identify power and how you plan to be accountable and participate in campus change. Short-term, this process means teaching us how to navigate these dynamics. As studies ([like this one](#)) show, few Black, Indigenous, and other people of color hold positions in upper administration, which means that we are not even in the room when conversations are happening and decisions are being made that affect Bipoc faculty members and students. We need to be included in those conversations and decisions.
2. **Reject standardized testing.** Lead the elimination of the SAT, ACT, GRE, and other structurally racist assessments and admissions policies that keep the number of Black and other racial-minority students low.
3. **Count our service work toward promotion.** Advocate that Black faculty members receive credit toward tenure for recruiting, mentoring, and retaining students of color. Black academics and staff members are the reason that most Black students stay at predominantly white institutions. We should be rewarded for our student-retention efforts — and so should Black staff members (who are miracle workers).
4. **Stop playacting that you are clueless about your own privilege.** Don't forget about implicit bias, but let's focus on the ways in which you are collaborating in the [white, male, heterosexual, abled-bodied, middle-to-upper-class ideologies and systems](#) at your institution. Acknowledge that you are sophisticated about your racism. You're not fooling anybody. We see you, so stop it. Acknowledging privilege, biases, and/or racism is

the first step toward being an ally. But taking that step while still knowingly and tacitly supporting, enforcing, and maintaining those problems is an even more insidious matter.

5. **Sponsor us, boldly.** Discuss our achievements when we are not around, and don't feel shy about letting "them" know that we truly are just as brilliant as you describe us to be. In some instances, just get out of the way and let us do what we are well prepared to do.
6. **Mentor us.** Recognize that if you recruit Black faculty members, you are responsible for guiding us toward a successful tenure bid. That means proactively figuring out how to award tenure and/or promotion to Black academics, and documenting that process as a template moving forward. As antiracists, we believe that structural discrimination embedded in campus systems is what should be blamed for ineptness in demanding equity.
7. **Stop making a big deal about "pioneerism."** Being the first Black faculty member hired or tenured in X department, and breaking the racial barriers, is stressful and should not be celebrated as if it's a big institutional achievement. In my first year as an assistant professor at Vanderbilt University's Peabody College, a white colleague rushed up to me and said, "Do you know that *if* you get tenure, you will be the first Black woman to earn tenure at Peabody College? Isn't that great?" Hell, no, that's depressing! Don't get me wrong, I was gratified to earn tenure in 2017, but I know I was not the only Black woman qualified to earn tenure. What about all the Black women who didn't?
8. **Look in your own backyard.** When you learn about the history of racism and our current racial-caste system, which you must do, don't forget to investigate your family's history, your school's history, your job's history, your neighborhood's history, or your own property as part of that racist past as well. You are likely to unearth something about our ecosystem that has benefited from white supremacy.
9. **White women, this is just for you: No more Karens.** The racially charged, passive aggressiveness of Karens [creates tension and anxiety](#). Reflect on your own poor behavior, change it, point out when you see other Karens

on the rampage, and challenge them to modify their bad behavior. Some white women may feel some form of gender allegiance with Black women, but the sheer number of Karens we've seen this year shows that white privilege is alive and well among white women.

10. **No more hiring a lone Black academic every four to five years.** Employ [cluster hiring](#) as the model for recruiting and retaining Black faculty. Just like white faculty members have their crew, we need our posse as well. Hire three or more of us at a time. A critical mass of Black faculty members across each of the three academic ranks is crucial, but minimally, large departments need at least one full professor (one with an endowed chair would be even better), one associate, and one assistant professor. A built-in mentoring model to guide the careers of Black academics will help facilitate the tenure-and-promotion process and will lead to more-inclusive spaces.
11. **Show us the money.** A [2017 study](#) revealed that Black faculty members earn lower salaries, on average, than white faculty members — approximately \$10,000 to \$15,000 less a year. Reveal your salary and come ready to fight for ours. Let's go to the chair or dean together and jointly make the case for fair and equitable salaries.
12. **Ask us whether we consider you allies.** A 2013 op-ed, "[10 Things All Allies Need to Know](#)," provides a great list of traits of an ally. It also suggests that majority members can't decide if they are allies. Only Black academics can determine if we are being effectively supported by white faculty members. So ask us. And believe what we say.

Now, of course, after these 12 points become part of your ally lexicon, I'd be delighted to provide 12 more. Consider this list the preamble.

*We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please [email the editors](#) or [submit a letter](#) for publication.*

FACULTY LIFE

ADMINISTRATION

LEADERSHIP

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## RECOMMENDED READING

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**Ted Cruz** ✓  
@tedcruz

The University of Chicago  
for 2 yrs, it is ONLY accept  
Black Studies.



**Thomas Chatterton Williams** 🌍 🎧  
@thomaschattwill

I am obviously interested in black literature. But being  
strong armed into studying it??

The English department at the University of Chicago believes that *Black Lives Matter*,  
and that the lives of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade, and Rayshard  
Brooks matter, as do thousands of others named and unnamed who have been  
scholars, we attend to the histories,

EQUITY & DIVERSITY

**Wait, Can They Still Study Shakespeare?**

*By Megan Zahneis*

The University of Chicago's English department announced that it will only accept students next year who wish to focus on Black studies. Some critics rolled their eyes, while a number of scholars deemed it bold and overdue.



RACIAL JUSTICE

## **A College Says It's Fighting Racism. Critics Say It's Failing.**

Are Texas Christian University's efforts doing more harm than good?



# The Staff Are Not OK

*By Lee Skallerup Bessette*

It's time higher education started paying attention to the health and well-being of the staff members whose work has pulled campuses through the Covid-19 crisis.



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