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October 2000

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"WORKING WHILE BLACK: CONTOURS OF AN UNEQUAL PLAYING FIELD"

Barbara Marshall, Ph.D.

Director of Affirmative Action

Boston College

This presentation examines an emerging lexicon that benchmarks the sites of employment for African American workers in predominantly white institutions. More significantly, it advances recommendations for counteracting the effects of Working While Black forays into the workplace.

Contours of the contemporary workplace pose peculiar challenges for African-American workers. While employment policies supporting affirmative action, desegregation and mandated federal court decrees have facilitated the opening up of labor market portals and the enforcement of anti discrimination laws have muted the prevalence of overt, blatant and obvious forms of employment discrimination, barriers to the full participation of Black Americans in places of employment are becoming increasingly more entrenched, pervasive and in some instances, more elusive but yet remain unnamed. While high profile discrimination cases and litigated class actions asserted by Black employees chronicle and amplify the scope of disparate and adverse treatments that fall outside the reasonable boundaries of law, the literature is generally silent on the system of treatment that has effectively limited and restricted the participation of Black employees in institutional mainstreams. By identifying the peculiar and predictable structures underpinning this system's architecture, ways in which Black employees at all strata of the labor market are disadvantaged may be codified. From such an analysis, survival strategies may be constructed for those affected by these intractable phenomena. Indices for gauging degrees of organizational inequality and equality may also be deduced from such examination. More significantly, structures which contort the playing field may be more strategically dislodged if their codes and currents are named.

Racial tensions emerge at the intersection of race and employment. Perspectives proffered on this social phenomenon include those of Elis Cose, Derrick Bell, Patricia I. Williams, Otis Graham, Bruce Wright, Paul M. Barrett, Samuel L. Myers, Jr., and others who have illuminated the peculiar tenors and conditions of employment that situate African Americans in the invisible margins of institutional cultures. The phenomenon of Working While Black not only suggests that forms of racial profiling exist in the workplace but it also calls attention to predictable tenors and conditions of employment that function to set Black workers apart and may signify correspondingly degrees of their marginalization, exclusion and subordination in American workplaces. Working While Black manifests typically as a form of racial profiling in the American labor market. It takes place in work contexts in which perceptions of Black workers are distorted and where Black employees and applicants are targets of a regimen of stereotypes and biases that function to exclude, disadvantage and other disqualify them in the competitive labor market of the United States.

Working While Black or W.W.B. in the American labor market is the quintessential

corollary to Driving While Black or D.W.B. in the American criminal justice context. If those affected by D.W.B.'s are perceived as suspects, criminals, and potentially dangerous, then African Americans victimized as W.W.B.'s in the workplace are assumed to be unqualified or incompetent, considered difficult to work with, and are treated as consummate outsiders. In such instances, the terms of engagement for Black Americans confronted in work environments or on the nation's highways will be undoubtedly influenced by rampant societal racial stereotypes and antiblack biases.

This presentation will examine an emerging lexicon that benchmarks the sites of employment for African American workers in predominantly white institutions. More significantly, it will advance recommendations for counteracting the effects of Working While Black forays into the workplace.

Presenter:

Dr. Barbara Marshall is the Director of Affirmative Action and lecturer in the Graduate School of Social Work at Boston College. She holds a doctorate from the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, Massachusetts and graduate degrees from Johns Hopkins University and Antioch University. She has completed postdoctoral studies at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Harvard University, Columbia University, and Cornell University's School of Labor and Industrial Relations. Dr. Marshall has worked as an EBO administrator, teacher, academic advisor and senior level administrator in a variety of academic settings.