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Failing to Mentor Sapphire: Obstacles Facing Black Women Who Seek Mentors

Abstract

Despite their best efforts, many women of color find themselves in a revolving door, going from one institution to another seeking information, opportunities and mentors to succeed. This talk will discuss the societal and institutional obstacles facing Black women who seek mentors and puts forth several suggestions to universities on how they can facilitate mentoring between junior Black women academics and the majority of white (and perhaps male) potential mentors.

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This presentation is derived from Professor Smith's article, *Failing to Mentor Sapphire: The Actionability of Blocking Black Women from Initiating Mentoring Relationships*, 10.2 UCLA WOMEN'S LAW JOURNAL 701 (2000). In particular, Professor Pamela J. Smith contends that failure to mentor Black women in academia is a form of discrimination that should be separately actionable under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. She argues that the failure to mentor Black women in academia stems in part from the social barriers created by the implicit stereotypes of Black women held by senior colleagues. For example, Black women are perceived as angry, threatening, and intimidating, qualities displayed by the fictional character Sapphire on the *Amos 'n' Andy* show. Further, Black women are viewed as incompetent. Together, these stereotypes prevent the facilitation and development of trans-racial mentoring relationships.

In addition to the social barriers that prevent Black women in academia from being mentored, institutional barriers hinder Black women from developing trans-racial mentoring relationships. One example of an institutional barrier is the failure to assign Black female academics to active and important committees by which they can interact with senior white colleagues in order to destroy negative stereotypes and thereby receive meaningful mentoring. Professor Smith believes that institutions will use their power to facilitate trans-racial mentoring relationships when personal stories of discrimination are effectively linked to these social and institutional barriers.

Presenter

Pamela J. Smith is an Associate Professor of Law (with tenure) at the University of Missouri-Columbia School of Law. She is also the Executive Director of the University of Missouri-Columbia Center for Digital Globe (CDiG). She teaches Software Law, Cyberspace Law, Patent Law, and the Digital Divide. In 1998, Professor Smith became a 1998 Visiting Law Fellow at St. Hilda's College of Oxford University, spending the trinity term of 1998 in Oxford. In 1998 she was also selected as a Visiting Fellow at Durham University (England). In 2000, Professor Smith was selected as a Fulbright Lecturer. She was hosted by Renmin (People's) University of China in Beijing, China. At Renmin University's School of Law, she taught Chinese students U.S. Intellectual Property Law, Patent Law, Software Law, and Cyberspace Law. During this same period of time, Professor Smith taught Chinese lawyers and judges Tort Law, Software Law and Cyberspace Law, as part of Temple University's joint international LLM program with China University. In the Fall of 2001, she joined the law faculty of the University of Missouri-Columbia as part of an interdisciplinary E-commerce Initiative. She became the CDiG Executive Director in January 2001.