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From Token, to Pioneer, to Crusader: Survival Strategies for Faculty of Color in PWI's

Abstract

As the only person of color in your workplace you may experience feelings of isolation and hopelessness. However, it is possible to survive this situation. To do so, you must go through an empowering developmental process. You no longer have to be a Token. Learn how you can become a Pioneer and a Crusader for social justice.

Mildred L. Rice Jordan

Associate Professor, Education and Multicultural Studies, Rider University, Lawrenceville, NJ

As the only person of color in my department, I have learned the true meaning of isolation. And, as I have incessantly struggled to understand the motives of my White colleagues, my mind persists in entertaining the same questions: Why is it that I am still the only one? Who besides me realizes that I am the only person of color here? Do my White colleagues know what they are doing? Are their actions a demonstration of White power and privilege, racism, or just unawareness of the importance of diversity? These questions continue to plague me as I am certain they do others in my position. They are my constant companion and the ones over which I ponder as I sit at meetings year after year, counting the number of White faces in the room. It is a lonely position to be in.

Yet, through all the pain of isolation, frustration, and anger, I have continued to survive

My years of isolation in working at a PWI have often been painful. I have wondered where I have found the strength to endure the loneliness and frustration. However, after reflecting upon my situation, I now realize that I have changed significantly as a person and as a professional. But only recently have I begun to unravel the mystery of my endurance. I attribute my strength to three developmental stages which I have undergone. These I describe as, the Token, the Pioneer, and the Crusader. Throughout each of them I learned survival skills and engaged in behaviors which clearly communicated to my White colleagues that I fervently object to their absolute lack of interest in or concern about diversity. Admittedly, by expressing my disapproval, I have made many of them uncomfortable-some even angry. At times, my developmental journey has been a hazardous one filled with many risks. In fact, at one crucial point in my career, my actions and my attitude almost cost me my tenure. It was one of the most challenging experiences I have ever faced. Yet, I emerged triumphant. I was only the second person in the history of this PWI to carry out such a valiant battle for my tenure. This ordeal only served to strengthen my resolve to continue my efforts to educate my colleagues about their legal responsibilities to hire persons of color.

After having passed through the stages of a Token and a Pioneer, I am now in a stage where I define myself to be a Crusader. A Crusader needs a mission, and mine is to change the complexion of not only the school in which I work, but also the entire university. Moreover,

although I now have tenure my journey is no less a hazardous one. Feelings of isolation are heightened by the knowledge that there is no one you feel you can trust. But dangerous though it may be, I am compelled to continue to take a stand by refusing to keep silent about racial injustices.

In my presentation I will not only share with my audience the experiences I have had in a PWI as the only person of color in my department, but I can also document these by providing many examples of correspondence that I have sent to my White colleagues. The initial examples of correspondence represent my attempts to heighten their awareness of the need for diversity in our workplace. In later correspondence, I take a resolute stand against discrimination and refuse to participate in any hiring procedures and practices that exclude people of color. My examples of memos, letters, and e-mails are very poignant. They do not, however, represent all of my forms of my activism. Other forms are my work with the university's Affirmative Action and Minority Affairs Committees and my involvement with faculty in other departments who share my interests in diversity. Currently, I have begun to work with the Black Student Union in an effort to help them fight for equal opportunities on the university campus.

To enhance my presentation, I will connect my personal experiences to recent works on White privilege which illuminate its character. The struggle for understanding, the struggle for survival, and the struggle to endure are all intertwined. They are continuous processes which enable one to find a balance that helps to maintain one's dignity and self-respect. Further, they help to keep you centered within your own cultural identity when feelings of isolation become overwhelming. Balance is achieved as one progresses from being a Token, to being a Pioneer, and finally to becoming a Crusader.

In sharing the story of my feelings of isolation it is my hope that others will learn many valuable lessons that they can apply to their own situations. I believe that everyone who is alone in a PWI situation will be inspired by my courage and the developmental processes that have helped me to maintain my sanity. And they will be enlightened by the strategies that I present to them for survival. Hopefully, they may realize that they, too, have the strength to survive, the courage to endure, and the power to make a difference.

Presenter

Dr. Mildred L. Rice Jordan is an Associate Professor of Education and Multicultural Studies at Rider University in Lawrenceville, New Jersey where she has been teaching for 12 years. In addition to her teaching responsibilities, she is also the coordinator of an urban field experience program that takes sophomore-level education majors into elementary schools in Trenton, New Jersey. Supervising student teachers is another one of Dr. Rice Jordan's professional responsibilities.

As an advocate for social justice, Dr. Rice Jordan has spent her own personal time attempting to bring diversity to the private university where she works. She is a member of the university Affirmative Action Committee, Minority Affairs Committee, and is also on the faculty of the Multicultural Studies and the Gender Studies Programs.

Dr. Rice Jordan is a community activist and a philanthropist. She has two scholarships in her name at her alma mater, Temple University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. One of her scholarship

funds is endowed fund, and the other is an active fund. Both of them are for the purpose of offering financial aid to education majors who wish to teach in urban communities.

Her other philanthropic activities include making it possible for incarcerated female juveniles to take distance learning courses from a community college, and working with Black middle school students in a mentoring program.

Dr. Rice Jordan has published several articles about multicultural education, and other diversity issues. Currently, she is working on a book about the mis-education of Black urban students in which she offers several prescriptions for educating them successfully.