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White Silence as Violence

White academics and administrators cannot abdicate responsibility for leading antiracism efforts in higher education, write Sydney Freeman Jr. and Wendy Bruun.

By [Sydney Freeman Jr.](#) and [Wendy Bruun](#)



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Both of us have experienced in our own way the damage created by white silence. For example, many years ago, one of us, Wendy, worked for a large, complex department at an institution in the West that had a history of recruiting Black employees. She would often hear rumblings about the discontent and mistreatment of them through colleagues. Yet in her position as a midlevel employee in the

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Black employees, as well as to explore opportunities for her department to make transformative change.

Wendy and others in that department prided themselves on hiring Black, Latine, Indigenous and LGBTQ+ employees, as well as people with disabilities. But they did not examine why they hadn't retained many of those employees or promoted them to leadership roles—they simply accepted that Black folks coming into the department and quickly leaving as “just what happens.”

Looking back, Wendy sees that her silence enabled the culture of the department to sustain white power and leadership while diminishing and discounting the experience of her Black colleagues. With more learning, understanding and empathy, along with a desire to do better, she can now reflect upon that experience, interrogate what and why that happened, and see the impact of her silence on colleagues and employees.

For his part, the other of us, Sydney, has often had conversations with Wendy about navigating higher education as a Black man. Out of those discussions, we decided to write this article in hopes of illuminating the issue and impact of such silence while offering strategies to counter its violent and harmful effects.

Sydney has struggled to continue to push for advancement of racial justice in higher education and against various forms of anti-Blackness. Colleges made a number of promises toward that end after George Floyd's murder, yet Sydney has seen a rollback of the policies and commitments once made, especially in light of recent rulings by the [U.S. Supreme Court](#) and [state lawmakers](#). He's observed a strong movement by many people to get back to the status quo, and even those who are liberal show signs of fatigue when it comes to fighting for racial justice.

Indeed, he increasingly encounters white silence in various higher education settings.

people address the non-racial justice topics and ignore the racial component. He experiences it as a form of violence, an indication that he doesn't belong and that his feelings and experiences are not valued.

More recently, Sydney has experienced situations where white allies are willing to provide platforms for discussions about racial equity and justice, but that is where it ends. They have rarely, if at all, committed to mobilizing their influence or to using their positionality and power to engage in making tangible institutional cultural and policy changes. It appears they expect people of color to take the racelighting, isolation, demotions and so on—the metaphorical equivalent of the water hoses, fire bombings and German shepherds—that come with speaking truth to power when it comes to issues of race.

We also hear frequently now of leaders of color leaving chief diversity officer positions in droves because they are not feeling heard and supported. At the same time, such positions are increasingly being occupied by white leaders and challenged by state lawmakers, which has a direct effect on language and nomenclature that impacts this work. For instance, an emphasis on “first-generation students” terminology rather than addressing specific racially and ethnically marginalized populations could be deemed language of appeasement—terminology that does not threaten the white power structure. While initiatives like the first-generation movement can be thought of initially as aligned with a “rising tides lift all boats” ideology, they often work to recenter whiteness and white people.

Silence shows up in many ways and can be both positive and negative. It can be a reflective space, allowing people to consider new knowledge and perspectives and to reconcile them with prior experiences. But it can also serve to repudiate and dismiss “the other.” What's more, it can cultivate passivity and a lack of concern, as if higher education leaders do not need to examine and challenge anti-Black policies,

The Impact of Silence

Silencing behaviors can have both overt and insidious implications. For example, employees often depart due to the behavior of supervisors who are more interested in preserving the status quo and protecting their own jobs than retaining the creativity and talent of employees who could offer transformative change to their institutions. Thus, supervisors, leaders and managers must examine their own fears, biases and behaviors that contribute to silence.

We also see resources allocated to initiatives that aren't inclusive and don't account for the needs of underserved and underrepresented populations. For example, Black students may lobby for their institutions to hire additional Black faculty and administrators so that they can learn in an environment that facilitates a greater sense of belonging and academic success. Yet the administration will invest in other strategic hiring programs that do not address the Black students' demands.

White higher education leaders often act in self-serving ways that contribute to a culture of silence and violence. Wendy ultimately recognized that, in her loyalty to her white colleagues, she was protecting her employment, financial security and status and power in an academic leadership role. She also realized, as well, that doing that was becoming more important than engaging in ethical conversations to examine what isn't working for Black colleagues and make transformative change. After all, if the system of higher education is designed to privilege white people like her when it comes to access to research experiences, faculty networks or employment opportunities, what incentives do she and others have to change or undermine the status quo?

Speaking out in a white culture of silence can be frightening, but we encourage you to lean toward some level of discomfort and examine what you are willing to risk:

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Also, be clear on what you are not willing to risk: perhaps financial security of your family by getting fired if you are place-bound and job prospects are poor.

Also, determine what you are losing out on by not centering Black students/employees. White people often have a limited worldview and understanding of the lived experiences of Black students and employees because white voices, perspectives and understandings are viewed as the norm. Identify areas of interest convergence that you can leverage to bring change to your institution. Make the case, for example, that if an institution is perceived as unwelcoming to students of color, fewer will enroll, which will impact the fiscal health of the institution.

We should also recognize that environments and organizational culture impact our willingness to take risks. In spaces where the culture is driven by perfectionism, elitism, competition, power and control—where the perceived impact of our personal risk-taking may be severe—we may understandably be averse to using our voice to name problematic behaviors, policies and practices. In institutions with a culture of inclusion and belonging, where leadership welcomes multiple voices and critiques to improve the culture, we may be more willing to embrace the risk and speak the truth. Thus, all of us should work to cultivate such environments and to decrease behaviors that support a silencing culture.

Strategies for Countering Silence

We offer some specific strategies to push back against silencing behaviors, including centering people of color, moving from risk aversion to action and speaking up and finding accountability partners.

- Center marginalized and underrepresented students' and employees' voices and ideas. Those who have historically been underrepresented and marginalized

challenges and ideas first, demonstrating that what they say is valued and a priority. Move beyond merely listening and empathizing and take action by valuing these voices in everyday spaces—the meetings, committees, task forces and commissions on which we serve. Recommend offering employee support groups where people of color can gather, share their lived experience, help one another and make recommendations for institutional change.

- Demonstrate in tangible ways that you support colleagues of color. It is not enough to read books about being antiracist yet not put those recommendations into action, to tell a person of color that you agreed with them after the meeting yet not say it in the meeting, to host cultural events yet not address the toxic and problematic culture of your unit and institution. Advocate passionately and forthrightly for policies and practices that lead to equitable treatment of underrepresented colleagues.
- Move beyond risk aversion. With privilege comes responsibility, including the risk that comes along with speaking truth to power. If you feel uncomfortable speaking up for what's right, imagine what it feels to be the marginalized person, whose voice is not being heard in an uncomfortable and perhaps even culturally hostile environment to work and study. And don't just empathize. Let go of your fear of the consequences and embrace being an actor who helps create needed change.
- Speak up. Move from passive support to actively leading conversations when you see that being quiet in various situations is causing harm. Speaking up, even if feeling awkward or saying something imperfect, is almost always better than remaining silent. It is OK to make mistakes. Start with one-on-one conversations with colleagues and then move to small and larger group settings.
- Become an accomplice, ally and co-conspirator. Show up and be present. Lend

- Have others hold you accountable. When we try to do this work alone, our gaffes and missteps may lead us to disengage and remain silent. We need trusted others to hold us accountable to becoming better and do better. Find a colleague whom you know to be honest and willing to provide thoughtful reflection as you make this journey.

Now that Wendy is in a senior leadership role, aware of her positionality and power, she knows she must act in ways that diminish the culture of white silence and its resultant violence on people of color. She acknowledges her responsibility to lead and create an environment in which she models and invites others to fully participate, be heard and have their voices and perspectives valued and acted upon. She had learned to not just speak up for people of color in her unit but to also advocate for those not at the table. She knows that she's not perfect, but she strives to continually learn, listen, stretch and grow and do better.

Both she and Sydney invite you to take on that mind-set and join us in working to curtail the violence of silence at our institutions so they will be far better places for people of color.

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