We Need True Allies: Working Beyond Performative Allyship Towards Collective Liberation

Feature article by Doricka Menefee, The Ohio State University

When the Declaration of Independence for the United States was ratified in 1776, Black people had already been within this country for 156 years, with shiploads of others being delivered frequently. Eighty-fives years after the Declaration of Independence, the Civil War was fought to determine whether we were to be considered property any longer. During the fight for our civil rights–rights White immigrants coming into the country were granted–Black people wore protest signs that read "I Am A Man" and "I Am A Woman" and "I Am A Child" to stress our humanity. So, the events that unfolded this past spring and summer were nothing new for Black America, though a new aspect was that everyone was forced to watch it under the microscope of a global pandemic. There was nothing to distract all of us from the videos of George Floyd's, Breonna Taylor's, or Ahmuad Arbery's murders. Black America had long been aware of the systemic racism that had been oppressing us since our African ancestors were first brought to this stolen land. This year's "racial awakening" (Worland, 2020) was another chapter in a centuries old struggle for true freedom.

Being aware of the atrocities that Black folk and other Black Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) have lived through might have been new for White Americans, but it wasn't for us, especially those of us within higher education. As an African American member of the BIPOC community, I am aware that academia has always had a love-hate relationship with all scholars of color. Departments love to say they have us within their programs; colleagues love to study our children; but the same departments and colleagues hate to give us the accolades for the work we do within our communities. Black people and other people of color became experts on oppression overnight as White colleagues scrambled to include anti-racist pedagogy into their syllabi for their summer and fall classes. The rush to become "woke," to be cognizant of the racial injustices faced by BIPOC living within this country, came in vogue for our White colleagues. Overnight, there was national dialogue and debate around the structures of racism, anti-black racism, and, more importantly, allyship.

As the end of the year is approaching, the momentum has since dissipated. Although life has started to creep back to normalcy, questions have remained from the rush to become woke: 1) How can Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and Asian students be supported within higher education? 2) What is allyship, and what is the role that allies play? And 3) How can White scholars (those who benefit from Eurocentric understandings of the world and Whiteness, including White privilege) make space for their BIPOC students to conduct meaningful research? These are pertinent questions this article will explore.

How can Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and Asian students be supported within higher education?

Last year, as a first-year Ph.D. student going to a predominately White institution, I felt as though I had been set out to sea. I was twelve and a half hours away from my family in a new city and a new state. If not for the relationships I made with some of my peers and then professors, I would not have made it to a second year. Usually when we are recruited to these higher ed programs, they are so excited to have us and work with us, but when we get in the space, we are left to navigate this new landscape alone. The first necessity for all BIPOC students starting our careers in academia is that we need you to remember us. We need you to keep the same energy you had when you were recruiting us. In many cases, we are far from home; we are first-generation students; and we are battling imposter syndrome. Please don't abandon us.

Simply, I am asking that you support us, materialistically and holistically. By "materialistically," I mean paying us what we are worth. BIPOC students should not have to flirt with poverty as they attempt to do the work and be a part of academia. Many of us BIPOC students are the first to make it to this level of education and do not always have the financial support of our families. In some cases, we are sending money back home to our families. In terms of holistic support, I am asking that you make an effort to see how our intersectional identities impact our realities. We are asking that you see every aspect of who BIPOC students are to support us mentally and physically as well. I ask that you take the time to support all of us.

What is allyship and what is the role that allies play?

Allyship, in its simplest form, can be explained in four ways. As to be noted, there are many conceptualizations of what it means to be an ally. These four explanations are a handful of ways of what I understand allyship to be (see officialmillennialblack, 2020; Woke Teachers, 2020):

1. Allies use their privileges to support, advocate for, and uplift BIPOC people.
2. Allies do their own work to understand BIPOC perspectives and do not put the onus on BIPOC people to teach them. They respect our knowledge enough to want to learn from those doing the work. This is also about sitting down, being quiet, and learning from the BIPOC people around you.
3. Allies do not center themselves. They instead bring in the narratives and stories of BIPOC people. They are aware that they are not building the movement but are amplifying the voices of the marginalized.
4. Allies accept criticism that is meant to call them in, not call them out.

Other aspects can be attributed to allyship, but these four constitute a decent starter guide. In all, we need allies, those who will work with us towards our goal of equity.

How can White scholars make space for their BIPOC students to conduct meaningful research?

BIPOC communities have been researched for decades by White scholars, and when we have researched ourselves, we are met with criticisms. Within the research itself, we have been poorly portrayed and studied within the systematic oppression of White supremacy. What I ask all White scholars to do is not to research us, unless you are researching with us. And when it comes to publishing, position yourself as secondary author on the byline. I am asking that you decenter yourself and your views to fully accept our views, language, and knowledge. I ask your help to make space for us to research our communities. Once again, I am asking for your authentic support, which means truly giving your BIPOC students the help they need to be successful. It means not using them for participants, quotas, or "ins" to research with certain communities. It means giving them the space they need to have the impact they wish to have with their scholarly work.

I will leave you, the readers, with this final point from James Baldwin's book The Fire Next Time written in 1963, in which he writes a letter to his nephew, also named James, on the eve of the one-hundred-year anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation. Baldwin (1992) writes,

> You were born where you were born and faced the future that you faced because you were Black and for no other reason. The limits of your ambition were, thus, expected to be set forever. You were born into a society which spelled out with brutal clarity, and in as many ways as possible, that you were a worthless human being. You were not expected to aspire to excellence: you were expected to make peace with mediocrity. (p. 7)

Black students know academia was not made for us. We know we can be considered statistical anomalies. We have not learned to temper our ambition and make peace with the station in life to which our ancestors were relegated. We stand on the foundation our ancestors built for us. I think all BIPOC people do the same. We are not only doing this for ourselves, for our families, or for our communities, but more for those who will come after us.

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