



Petty Principles: A Challenge to Higher Education Leaders in the Wake of a Social Injustice Crisis

Tanjula Petty, EdD • June 15, 2020

Often I find myself writing and providing leadership strategies to assist academic leaders on their respective journeys in higher education. Thus, now I find myself distraught as we operate in the face of an increasingly unbearable reality of social injustice. As higher education administrators we have a role and responsibility to model principles of civility, respect, and understanding for our faculty, staff, and students. Importantly, we must demonstrate these same tenets in our wider community. Countless college and university mission statements include the terms *community*, *collaboration*, and *diversity*. We must do more than use the terms; we must demonstrate these ideas through our actions as these terms alone do not allow institutions to stand boldly and support social justice for all marginalized groups.

Social justice is relevant to many facets of higher education institutions: academics, athletics, finances, facilities, career services, disability services—the list goes on. As academic leaders we must recognize that every aspect of our leadership principles affects social justice on our campuses. Moreover, it is our obligation to embody inclusivity, embrace diversity, and educate others about their power and their voices. As academic administrators we must do our due diligence to instill in our students an understanding about the basic rights to life and liberty that all people possess, regardless of race, religion, gender identity, sexual orientation, or ethnicity. We must position ourselves to fight for systemic change in our institutions to ensure a sustainable future for our diverse student populations and their successors. Our black students are due the opportunity to live in freedom and security, not in fear.

In the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd, many of our students are confronting a variety of emotions, including confusion, fury, outrage, pain, and sadness, as they seek clarity, sympathy, and understanding. They have watched as insular hate has driven the deepest wedge in this country that many of us have witnessed in our lifetimes.

At this point in my career, I am fortunate enough to have gained experience at historically black colleges, predominantly white institutions, four-year and two-year institutions. While all intuitions are committed to educating students, my experiences lead me to say that HBCUs must “move differently” to serve and support their students. HBCUs have a significant role as they were the first institutions to provide African American students with the opportunity to obtain full access to a college education, without barriers to entry. Today, HBCUs are still an integral part of the higher education experience for African American students. They provide opportunities of access to first-generation and disadvantaged students. They have been the lifeline for many students who would otherwise not have a chance to receive a postsecondary education.

Notably, HBCUs have been able to give a *breath of life* to many disadvantaged, first-generation, and underserved African American students. This breath of life consists of more than just educational opportunities and academic support; it also includes career pathways, national and international internship opportunities, and exposure to a culturally diverse group of faculty and students, which allows a person to flourish creatively, intellectually, and socially as part of a larger African American community. Unfortunately, this breath of life is also given in the country of “I can’t breathe”—the fateful and final words of both Eric Gardner and George Floyd, words many African Americans chant to bring attention to their social asphyxiation in the face of systemic racial injustice.

Although I and many others have immense pride in HBCUs—after all, we are products of them—it is immensely difficult to watch where we are as a country. For we work tirelessly to provide the breath of life for our students through testaments of encouragement and hope. Consequently, it is unfortunate they have to continue to witness the ugly face of racism rear its head over and over again, with no justice being served. Black people endure racism and discrimination that leads to their deaths year after year at the hands of white police officers, who take an oath to protect and serve. We can be murdered and justice not be served. Think of the names: Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Laquan McDonald, Tamir Rice, Walter Scott, Freddie Gray, Sandra Bland, Philando Castile, Botham Jean, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor—to say nothing of the many others whose deaths have not attracted media attention. These deaths are constant reminders of the discrimination, intolerance, and other barriers to social justice that have burdened African Americans for far too long. Incident after incident, year after year, “liberty and justice for all” escape us while we choke to death because we cannot breathe. There is much work to be done to address the racial injustices and inequities that African Americans face.

As the mother of a black man, I stop breathing every time my son leaves my presence. I choke and almost suffocate because I do not know what is on the other side of the door. As an academic administrator, each time we confer degrees and release highly educated black males who are ready to change the world, it should be a joy, yet I stop breathing. My heart stops each time I hear of another killing. Similarly, many of us in higher education, regardless of race, take quickly to our students. We grow to love and adore them. Indeed, they become a part of our extended families. They become our sons and daughters.

So I ask my colleagues in higher education: How are you using your voice to stand against the injustices that are happening across the country, in your states, in your cities, or on your campuses? As you are aware, our students are watching how we use our resources and voices to stand up for them against the injustices that are occurring. As leaders in higher education, we have more to think about than moving the needle on enrollment, retention, graduation, or growing our endowment dollars. We are being called on to place our integrity and values above all else. It is time to demonstrate that we care about our students and will stand up and defend their civil rights and their basic human dignity by any means necessary. If we are going to lead our universities and colleges through these atrocious times, we must stand together to support our students, so that they all can begin to breathe and live in a society that is not suffocating and killing them. I will leave you with this action item: How will you give your students breath? Isn't that what higher education is about?

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