

From: Tayler J. Mathews
Sent: Tue, 8 Jun 2021 11:46:09 -0700
To: T9PublicHearing
Subject: Written Comment: Title IX Public Hearing (HBCU Retaliation)
Attachments: TJM-HBCU Institutional Betrayal.pdf

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Greetings,

Please see the attached PDF that provides an example to support the need for Title IX to protect student survivors from retaliation and ensure education equity. The example is written from the experiences of a Black autistic graduate student at a Historically Black University.

Thank you,

Tayler Mathews



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Institutional Cultural Betrayal: The Loss of HBCU Pride

OCTOBER 26, 2017 BY FEMINIST CAMPUS TEAM [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)

Note: This is a guest blog from Tayler J. Mathews, a PhD student in political science at Clark Atlanta University. Her activism centers women, gender, and sexuality. This piece details Tayler's personal experience reporting gender discrimination and attempts to make sense of this experience as a student at a historically Black university. You can follow Tayler on Twitter [@FeministSnob](#).

Two months ago I filed a Title IX lawsuit against my historically Black University. After years of denied civil rights and numerous betrayals, the pride and affection I once held for my institution has been devastated.

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) are overlooked in the national discussion concerning campus gender-based and sexual violence. HBCU students, too, experience sexual harassment, including sexual assault and rape, as well as discrimination for nonconformity to gender stereotypes. These harms occur within a particular racialized context that can complicate how survivors make sense of their experiences and how they decide to move forward. Too many Black survivor stories have been buried, manipulated, criticized, and in the most reprehensible manner, used against them.

Although I am honored to be a graduate student at an HBCU, I cannot allow the love for my community to silence obvious and egregious harms that have significantly impacted my education and well-being. More importantly, I know that I am not alone in these experiences. I have recently decided to speak publicly about my experience reporting gender discrimination and encountering indifference, hostility, and extensive retaliation as a result. I hope that I can (re)emphasize the trauma that Black students confront, even on campuses that may be perceived as “safe spaces.”



Illustration by: Jaid Mathews, a freelance illustrator, comic artist, and writer. You can follow Jaid on Twitter [@jamstoy](https://twitter.com/jamstoy).

Endless Betrayals

When I first arrived at my HBCU, it was a refuge from the racial antagonism I encountered on the predominantly white campus I attended as an undergraduate. But while racism was muted, [heteropatriarchy](#) went unchecked.

I began experiencing sexual harassment the first semester of my PhD program. Not only did the perpetrator make unwanted comments of a sexual nature, leer at me constantly, touch me without my consent, and pressure me for dates, he also took pictures and video recordings of me without my permission. It felt as though I was always being watched.

At the time, I didn't know how to process what was happening, so I internalized blame and began to dress differently. Indeed, University staff “advised” me to stop wearing leggings if I wanted to prevent unwanted attention. When I knew I had class with the perpetrator, I intentionally wore clothing so that the majority of my body was covered. Later in the semester I moved to the back of the classroom, and for the most part I was silent.

After reporting this unceasing harassment to both my academic department and the University's Title IX coordinator, I eventually filed a complaint with the U.S. Department of Education after learning the University failed to investigate, and then closed my case without notifying me. As a further matter, my academic department refused to recognize my federal right to accommodations and threatened to reduce my funding and impede my ability to graduate. I would later discover that the perpetrator filed a counter-complaint with the University, as well as a "Cease and Desist Order" that threatened me with "serious legal action" (the complaint was later dropped). He also insisted that I apologize to him personally for my reports.

It has become clear that at least one faculty member assisted the perpetrator with his complaint in what appears to be a malicious and concerted effort to retaliate. In fact, this same professor once remarked that the University's decision to close my case "should have been a good lesson" for me.

As a result of my complaint to the Department of Education, the University has been under (at least one) Title IX investigation since 2015. I additionally acquired legal aid in order to mitigate further harm to my education.

Graduate students who [report](#) sexual harassment can face unsparing [retaliation](#) and risk jeopardizing their future career networks. In some cases, students must continue their education elsewhere due to hostile attitudes and threats to academic resources and opportunities. Essentially these students are *pushed out*, and while some may transfer, others choose to leave academia entirely.

Within the past few years I have confronted shameless instances of reprisal in which my University administration has been complicit. Since reporting to the Department of Education I've had to rely on legal counsel on several occasions to assist with *basic* academic functions, such as advising and registration. I've had a faculty member sit in on an advisement meeting as a "witness," I've been pressured to sign documents to agree to attend classes with perpetrators, and I've been refused information required for enrollment unless I conceded that my "issue" was "resolved."

During the summer of 2016, I was notified of a widely-circulated letter drafted by a professor that included misleading statements about my Title IX complaints. Among other things, this professor claimed that the Department of Education closed my case and that allegations of sexual harassment were merely being used as an excuse to skip class. The professor also maintained that he would not concede accommodations that are guaranteed under Title IX. Not only are these mendacious claims demonstratively erroneous, they also serve as a written admission of retaliation and refusal to follow

federal law.

Of course, I have attempted to notify administrators of such blatant discriminatory treatment. However, the University administration has been of little assistance throughout the years. On one occasion in which I attempted to report faculty for retaliation, an administrator not only denied the behavior but additionally added the professor to the email exchange. The implied message was clear: further reporting would not be promising.

Institutional Cultural Betrayal

I chose my HBCU to study for a master's degree in sociology. Initially, it felt like a safe haven; a space that affirmed the inherent value of my Blackness. Moving from a majority white to a majority Black educational space introduced me to professors who cared for me, affirmed my intelligence, and treated me like family. I met my first Black women professors at my HBCU. I had never had a Black woman teacher in my entire K-college education – I had never been taught by someone who looked like me. I felt visible for the first time, and it is because of these positive experiences that I fell in love with my University and decided to remain to study political science for my doctorate.

As I've tried to make sense of my experience, I've realized that in addition to the trauma of sexual harassment and retaliation, I've also been grieving the loss of my HBCU. At some point I had to accept the betrayal facilitated by University staff, who not only failed to help but equally perpetrated harassment and retaliation themselves. Yet it was difficult to identify this betrayal because of the psychological and emotional attachments I had to my University. Not acknowledging the betrayal allowed me to momentarily preserve a false sense of a love and community.

My denial also helped preserve a fleeting sense of hope that my University would step in and stop the discrimination, even after it was beyond evident that they would not. I assumed that my existence at an HBCU was enough to warrant protection. However, I overlooked how gender obstructed this. The devaluation of my humanity at an institution that one would assume inherently values Black life has been utterly destabilizing.

I understand the complexity of my experience as an illustration of *institutional cultural betrayal*. Institutional cultural betrayal is the fusion of two psychological theories (institutional betrayal and cultural betrayal trauma theory) that examine interpersonal and institutional aspects of betrayal trauma. Betrayal traumas can induce numerous psychological consequences including, but not



The author, Taylor Mathews. Photo credit: Hyosub Shin

limited to, anxiety, PTSD, depression, hypervigilance, and shame.

According to Drs. Jennifer J. Freyd and Carly P. Smith, [institutional betrayal](#) occurs when a university fails to prevent, acknowledge, or remedy harms, effectively compounding trauma for survivors. We see institutional betrayal when universities cultivate predatory environments, fail to hold perpetrators accountable, trivialize sexual misconduct, and blame

survivors for sexual victimization. However, this theory alone doesn't quite capture the particular type of betrayal I feel defines my experience.

The particular type of betrayal I have experienced has occurred at an institution that primarily serves and is (ostensibly) governed by persons of my racial community. Although HBCUs can serve as "safe spaces" against overt racial hostilities, they are not immune from reproducing systems of oppression that support domination and injustice. Moreover, campus culture cannot be separated from the internal politics that dictate how the Black community addresses intraracial gender violence. The love and affirmation I received from my University quickly evaporated after I broke the community code of silence – speaking up about intraracial gender injustice. The racial context of my experience cannot be minimized or overlooked.

[Cultural betrayal trauma theory](#), formulated by Dr. Jennifer M. Gomez, examines the betrayal that results from intra-group abuse in diverse populations. This theory posits that *societal trauma* (e.g. racial oppression), *(intra)cultural trust* (e.g. attachment, loyalty, love) and *cultural betrayal* (e.g. racial betrayal) can affect how marginalized groups experience psychological trauma. Sociopolitical context is central to this theory as (intra)cultural trust results from a shared history and present experiences of societal discrimination.

In the Black community, (intra)cultural trust (more commonly known as racial solidarity) has gender dimensions. As Drs. Johnnetta B. Cole and Beverly Guy-Sheftall explain in [Gender Talk](#), speaking publicly about sexual victimization is sometimes a greater community infringement than the abuse

itself. We see this when “Black feminists are...targeted for particular scorn because of their public pronouncements and writings about...sexism within Black communities.” This kind of backlash encourages what Gomez has labeled as *(intra)cultural pressure*, or the pressure to remain silent about certain issues to protect the larger community.

(Intra)cultural pressure explains the ambivalence I’ve had to negotiate about bringing negative attention to my HBCU. Despite the abominable (in)actions of my University, HBCUs remain precious institutions that must be protected and defended, but not at the expense of individuals who are facing real injustices at the hands of these schools. In *Black Feminist Thought*, Dr. Patricia Hill Collins reminds us that “Black community organizations can oppose racial oppression yet perpetuate gender oppression, can challenge class exploitation yet foster heterosexism,” and hence display continued allegiance to systems of domination that do not even recognize our collective humanity.

Fortunately, I have met other student advocates for justice within my unique campus community, composed of various [HBCUs](#) on the westside of Atlanta, Georgia. It is possible that these positive experiences from other HBCU students helped prevent total disengagement and de-identification with HBCUs; though I have lost affection for my University in particular. Since I am still a student at the University, I still have to engage with professors, administrators, and other students who have made it very clear that my presence is unwanted. The institutional denial of my Title IX complaints contributed to an *othering* process in which I was disbelieved, disparaged, and pushed away from social membership within my program. Indeed, a professor once specified that I was to blame, grumbling that I had not “adjusted” to his “leadership.”

When a person is sexually harassed, they are expected to tolerate the mistreatment without complaint. A faculty member even suggested that I learn how to deal with such instances privately because, “it will happen again.” Evidently, there was no expectation that the hostile environment would, or even should, change. I was the one who needed to “adjust” accordingly. I did not. I continued to report discrimination.

I Don’t Owe My University My Silence

Despite the historic role of HBCUs in the struggle against racial injustice, the civil rights that prescribe equity in the interest of gender have yet to be fully defended. One of the reasons I filed suit against my HBCU is because I wanted the (in)actions of the University to be public record. I want it to be known that by simply asking your University to observe your federal civil rights, you are effectively risking your

future, and it shouldn't be this way.

This is why it's important for the U.S. Department of Education to *thoroughly enforce* Title IX, instead of systematically stripping away guidance that protects *all* students. The systemic nature of [cisheterosexism](#) makes it nearly impossible to attend or work at a university without encountering some manifestation of gender discrimination. (e.g. the professor who remarked that although I was "cute and charming," I should not expect to pass my exams on my looks alone. This same professor implied his interest by informing me that if he were younger he wouldn't hesitate to date me.)

HBCU advocates have a responsibility to be more outspoken about these issues. As an HBCU alum and current student, I am speaking out as a form of resistance and a clarion call for HBCU advocates to step up and join the movement against campus gender-based and sexual violence.

I understand that to highlight these issues is to potentially invite hostilities from the community one loves so dearly, and may potentially excite those who relish in our discord. Nevertheless, we must prioritize human life over institutional reputations. And, as [I've said](#) before, we must remember that there are [Black students](#) fighting for [Black lives](#) on [HBCU](#) campuses, too.

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