

Women in Maryland Higher Education

Fall Luncheon

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KEYNOTE SPEECH – Kumea Shorter-Gooden, Ph.D.

It is wonderful to join with you at the Fall Luncheon of Women in Maryland Higher Education. I applaud you for the important work that you are doing to promote the advancement of women in the academy. And what a great theme: "Unleash Your Potential: Cultivating Ingenuity in Women Higher Education Leaders across Maryland and Beyond"! I feel privileged to have the opportunity to share some of my thoughts with you today.

In 1970, I matriculated at Princeton University -- in the second year of co-education. Women were perhaps one-fourth of the undergraduates, and there were about 200 African American students out of about 4500.

I had done well in math in high school and on the Math Advanced Placement test, so I enrolled in an advanced Algebra class in the Fall of my first year. There were about 50 students--maybe 15% were women, and I was the only Black student.

Math had always been one of my favorite subjects, but that all changed in this class. I looked around at the other students and felt very different from them. I didn't make any effort to connect or to join a study group. And no one reached out to me.

The course material was really difficult. I'd always had a lot of confidence in my math abilities, but that collapsed pretty quickly. I felt like I was in over my head. The professor -- of course, a White male -- seemed nice enough, but somehow I was too intimidated to seek him out outside of class -- to ask for help or guidance. I felt alone, alienated, and out of my league. I scraped my way through -- disenchanted and disengaged -- glad to eke out a C+ at the end of the semester. Never to take a math class again.

This experience was emblematic of my life at Princeton. Though I ultimately managed to excel academically, I never felt like I fully belonged or like it was really my university.

Forty-four years have passed, and although my Princeton experience was distinguished by the fact that the university was largely male and very White, my experience back

then is mirrored by far too many women students, staff and faculty today. And of course, these difficulties are exacerbated for women of color, for women who are sexual or religious or ability minorities, for women from economically disadvantaged or working class backgrounds.

Now, it's true, we've made significant strides in academia. We've come a long way since 1970.

Nationally, 58% of undergraduate students are women.

Women students earn better grades than men.

We are more likely than men to complete college.

And we're earning 59% of master's degrees and 49% of doctoral and professional degrees.

BUT women students continue to be underrepresented in the STEM disciplines, particularly at the graduate level.

AND women undergraduates report higher levels of stress and lower levels of self-confidence than men. The gap in confidence is already in play as men and women enter college, and it only widens during the college years.

In terms of faculty, nationally, women are now half of the full-time faculty in 2-year public colleges; 41% in 4-year and master's level institutions, BUT only one-third in research universities.

AND women faculty are poorly represented in the physical sciences, computer science, math, and engineering, YET significantly overrepresented in non-tenure track positions, which are less secure, pay less well, and are less prestigious.

A quarter of US college presidents are women -- up from 10% in the mid-80s, but progress in this area appears to be slowing.

Women continue to face rampant sexual harassment and sexual violence. One in five US college women report having survived rape or attempted rape. And it's only recently that colleges and universities are waking up to the epidemic -- forced by a few horrific high-profile stories and threats from the federal government to stop sweeping this under the rug, to stop re-victimizing the victims, and to cease the traditional "boys will be boys" approach to sanctions.

This is a time of great contradictions:

Forty-some years after the Women's Movement of the late 60's and early 70's, we have gained tremendous ground. On most college campuses, women are in the majority, but trouble persists.

Women sometimes contend with overt, in-your-face sexism, as in sexual harassment or as in Lawrence Summers-type pronouncements. Remember the former Harvard president's 2005 remarks about the under-representation of women in science and engineering being due, not to socialization or discrimination, but to the "different availability of aptitude at the high end"?

But these days, more often than not, it's not so blatant; it's not so overt. Instead, it's subtle – just below the surface, sometimes not even noticed, because it's accepted, "normal", customary. Let me spend a little time talking about this.

Subtle gender bias, sometimes called "modern sexism", is less dramatic, less showy than the blatant form, but it can still be very damaging.

Subtle sexism is often manifested in the culture and climate of the university -- in women's experiences of marginalization or dismissal or exclusion. It may not be any one thing that any one person says or does on any one day. Instead, it's part of the landscape.

Sometimes subtle sexism takes the form of micro-aggressions or micro-inequities – little, needling everyday interactions where women are treated differently, dismissively.

Some examples:

- Being seen as annoying for asking probing questions, yet similar behavior by men is viewed as a sign of their curiosity and forward thinking
- Seeing the disappointment in your supervisor's face, not when you say that you need to leave early, but when you mention that it's because you need to pick up your child. Meanwhile, your male colleague is lauded for his devotion to his children.
- Being called by your first name, even though male colleagues are called Mr. or Dr. This was my experience a couple of years ago at an accreditation site visit.
- Getting attention for your physical appearance –getting the message that your beauty is more important than your brains. I bet you that Hillary's tired of the analyses of her hairstyles and I'm sure that Michelle's weary of the ongoing discussion of whether or not she should wear sleeveless tops.

Individually, once or twice, none of these micro-inequities is horrible. One might ask: "What's the big deal?" Well, there's evidence that the accumulation of these micro-inequities can cripple us. It's the torturous drip, drip, drip – the cumulative effect. It's the quiet yet insidious message that's conveyed about our capacity, intellect, and contributions.

Ironically, subtle, ambiguous sexism can be particularly stressful: "Am I overreacting? Making a mountain out of a molehill? Maybe he treats everyone -- men too-- with a lack of respect. But no, something feels gendered here. But I can't be sure..." Not being sure -- the uncertainty -- is emotionally taxing.

What also makes subtle sexism so challenging is that it's often a reflection of the person's unconscious biases. Subtle sexism is often perpetrated by well-meaning men AND women, serving well-meaning institutions, who absolutely believe that they are egalitarian and that they support the full development and inclusion of women.

If they're called out on their micro-aggressive behavior, they're likely to tell you that you misunderstood them, that you got it wrong, that they don't have a biased bone in their body. Or that you're just overly sensitive -- another hysterical woman! Alternatively, they might be so mortified, so ashamed, that the opportunity to unpack the incident and learn from it is lost. This is what makes subtle sexism so pernicious.

But subtle sexism doesn't only live outside of us. It also shows up inside us -- when we diminish our own talent, skills, and capacity --when we come to believe that we're not good enough, that we don't have anything to contribute, that we can't excel. Or we sometimes see this when we as women subtly sabotage each other.

Claude Steele, a social psychologist, has studied the impact that negative stereotypes have on women. In a now classic set of experiments, he brings in women and men undergraduates who have done equally well in equally challenging college math courses, and he asks them to take a math test. The women on average perform more poorly than the men.

However, when Steele brings in another group of women and first tells them: "On this math test, there are no gender differences in performance; women do as well as men". The result? The women perform as well as the men. Why is this?

The explanation is what Steele calls "stereotype threat" – that when marginalized groups are aware of negative stereotypes, for example, the notion that women aren't good at math, that this awareness consumes their attention and gets in the way of their performance, thus confirming the stereotype. Parallel studies have found similar effects

with African American students -- for example, when Black students, aware of the negative stereotypes about Black intelligence, take a test of cognitive ability.

Stereotype threat focuses our attention on what Steele calls the "threat in the air". It's not a specific, discrete act of sexism or racism or heterosexism or religious bias; it's the impact of living in a land where stereotypes and biases are rife -- they're floating all around us AND we're breathing them in.

"Stereotype threat" may help to explain my own difficulty in the math class at Princeton.

The decline in performance in response to "stereotype threat" is a form of *shifting* -- a term that my colleague Charisse Jones and I coined. *Shifting* has to do with the various ways that people from marginalized groups respond to bias and discrimination.

Several years ago, Charisse and I conducted the African American Women's Voices Project to learn about how Black women experience and navigate racial and gender bias. We surveyed and interviewed women from ages 18 to 88, from all walks of life and regions of the country, and we found that most Black women expend significant psychic energy to manage and respond to the negative stereotypes about Black women.

Black women *shift* in a myriad of ways. Sometimes it's changing the way they talk or dress or style their hair in order to confound the stereotypes or to fit in. These sorts of shifts are external, visible. Sometimes, it's internal -- a shift in one's sense of self, self-esteem, or confidence. (This sort of shifting is particularly concerning to me as a psychologist). But *shifting* is not always accommodating or maneuvering around bias, it can also take the form of fighting back, filing a grievance, protesting, and even committing one's life to social justice.

Sometimes shifting is conscious, even strategically calculated; at other times, we're not even aware we're doing it. For some women, it can be seamless, effortlessly done, but for others, it's onerous.

And as a consequence, *shifting* is at times highly adaptive, enabling those who are outsiders to find a pathway in, to cross boundaries, to connect, to be taken seriously; but *shifting* can sometimes be maladaptive, eroding a healthy sense of oneself, compromising one's sense of identity, contributing to psychological symptoms like anxiety and depression.

But *shifting* is not unique to Black women. Living in a patriarchal society, all women have to shift. Anyone with a marginalized identity must shift -- and those at the intersections of multiple marginalized identities are particularly burdened. For example,

the Salvadorian immigrant lesbian from an economically disadvantaged family who's a graduate student in Business must contend with numerous marginalizing messages.

Higher education provides us with many examples of women's shifting:

Juliet Garcia, president of U. of TX at Brownsville said: "I have to tell you that I thought at first that I had to become like someone else. I had to look like, or act like, or talk like the models that were here before us. And if I could just dress like, look like, talk like them, whoever they were, then I had a chance for that type of position."

Dr. Tessa Martinez Pollak, the first Latina president of Our Lady of the Lake University in TX said: "When you're the first, there's enormous pressure to defy stereotypes. You have to overcome doubt that you'll be able to accomplish something. You always have to prove yourself and reverse doubt."

I'm a licensed psychologist and I used to have a therapy practice. One of my clients was an African American woman Vice President at a predominantly White university. She constantly struggled with how to present herself at work. She was tall and somewhat heavy and she had dark brown skin and she worried that she was too much for her colleagues -- too big, too strong, too Black. She was actually rather understated and mild-mannered in her presentation, but she sensed that the prevailing stereotypes of Black women "colored" (pun intended) how she was viewed by her colleagues. During one session we spent a lot of time talking about how she was going to dress for an important upcoming meeting that she was chairing. She wanted to wear a white pants-suit, which made her feel attractive and empowered, but her university was very much a dark-suit environment. She was concerned that she would stand out too much in the white suit, and yet she was sure that the suit was perfectly professional. At our session the following week, she came in buoyantly, reporting that she'd worn the white suit and that the meeting had gone really well. I knew then that she'd turned a corner in the therapy.

Sometimes in higher education *shifting* means avoiding being seen as an advocate for women's issues. Nannerl Keohane describes how she stayed away from women's issues when she first became the president of Duke, as she wanted "to be taken seriously as a major player". She waited until she'd established herself and had the "prestige and clout to turn to women's issues".

So what do we do? How do we deal with these gender biases? How do we make higher education a place that is truly inclusive? How do we move from simply having diverse colleges and universities, where women participate in substantial numbers (though not so much at the top where key decisions are made) to colleges and

universities that are fully inclusive of women? How do we create campuses where women don't have to *shift* so much in order to survive or thrive?

The western academy wasn't created for women. It was built for White men from the society's elite. So even though, women inhabit the academy in large numbers, it doesn't mean that we've created a space that works optimally for us.

I inhabited Princeton University for three years. I even excelled academically -- once I got out of that math class. But did I feel included, valued, appreciated as an African American woman? Not much. Did I see my values and cultural ways of being mirrored at the institution? Not so much. Did the university *shift* towards me, towards women, towards students of color? Not nearly enough.

So how do we get there? How do we create inclusive colleges and universities?

To do this, we need policy, programmatic, psychological, and cultural change. We need academic policies that will help to level the playing field and provide opportunities for women to excel on a par with men. As one example, legal support for affirmative action is being eroded, and this is deeply problematic. Yet gender equity has not been achieved. Racial equity is far far from our grasp.

Should we be considering factors like economic disadvantage, in decisions about who is selected for admission? Absolutely. In the US, for a long time, we've lived with the myth of classlessness -- that we're all middle class. The Occupy Movement, the increasing income and wealth disparities, and the stories about how higher education in many ways perpetuates the status quo (by providing opportunities for children of the wealthy at the expense of the children of the working class) -- all of this pushes us to acknowledge the reality of classism and to address it in the academy. Won't that mean that we can do away with affirmative action based on race and ethnicity? Not at all. While there's a correlation between race and socioeconomic status, they are not the same. They are not interchangeable.

You may wonder why I'm talking about racial and gender and class equity in the same paragraph. I do this because they are intertwined. (And I could add sexual orientation and gender expression and religion and ability.) As a bisexual African American woman once said to me: "Isms travel in packs". So, it's important that the policies that we as women put forth address the multiple identities of diverse women -- not just the experiences and needs of upper middle class White heterosexual Christian women. Equitable compensation, parental leave, affordable childcare are all critically important. Policies that create more recognition, security and a stable career ladder for non-tenure-track faculty (who are disproportionately women in comparison to the tenure-track faculty) must be developed.

And we also need policies and a reward system that acknowledges the important work that women do in the academy. Women faculty report more interest in teaching than male faculty. Women faculty are often engaged in more service than male faculty. Teaching and service are both critical in higher education. Yet, what tends to be valued far more highly, particularly in research-intensive universities? Research and scholarship. As Becky Ropers-Huilman puts it: "the University replicates the structure of a traditional heterosexual family, in which both the man and the woman perform tasks that are essential to the family's well-being. Yet the man's role as "breadwinner" is increasingly valued... whereas the woman's role as "caretaker" is decreasingly valued." We need to develop promotion and tenure policies that better acknowledge and affirm the important contributions that women are making.

We also need programs that support women's advancement. The work of WIMHE is a great example. We need opportunities for women to come together, discuss their challenges and strengths, engage in mentoring networks, share information and resources..... and exhale.

The University of Maryland, College Park has a National Science Foundation (NSF)-funded ADVANCE Program, which fosters the success of women in the professoriate. It has provided structured opportunities for junior women faculty to be mentored by senior women faculty, for women who are Associate Professors to meet and learn about strategies to be promoted to Full Professor, for women of color to gather and discuss their particular experiences and needs. It's been very successful!

And one of the ADVANCE Program's strengths is that it's not just a set of programs, there is also a policy piece. In other words, we have a goal of impacting the University broadly -- of creating systemic change. A year and a half ago when an NSF-site visit team came to visit, one member asked a good question: "Is your ADVANCE Program solely aimed at 'fixing the women'"? In other words, are we giving the institution a break by simply working to fit the women into it? Are the women the only ones who have to change, while the institution proceeds along as it always has? Programs are important, as a way of helping women now, today, to survive and thrive -- to *shift* in ways that work for them and don't compromise their integrity. But ultimately we need systemic change.

We also need to engage in psychological change. We need to heal ourselves of our internalized negative stereotypes -- of the negative or stereotypical messages about women that we, as women, have taken in. When my colleague Charisse Jones and I were at a book event talking about shifting, a young woman said "Name it and heal it". She said that she now realized how important it is to become aware of the ways in which she handles and responds to racial and gender bias -- to examine the strategies she uses -- to call them out, to shine a light on them.

We each can benefit from conducting a *shifting* self-assessment. How are we responding to gender bias and stereotypes? To biases related to our other identities? Is our strategy working for us? Or not so much? What alternatives do we have?

And lastly, we need to engage in cultural change. A number of studies have found that women and men are equally effective as leaders. Other studies have determined that women leaders are more relational, connected, collaborative and democratic than male leaders. Yet societally, men and women still tend to identify leadership with toughness, stoicism, and an authoritarian stance.

But given the complexities of 2014-- the many and diverse constituents inside and outside the university, the external pressures and demands, the constantly changing environment, the hard fiscal realities, the need to be more responsive to the communities we serve, the imperative to improve access and student success -- given all of this, perhaps it's time for us to re-imagine leadership. Perhaps it's time for us to re-think the attributes of excellent leadership in the academy. And perhaps it's time for us to re-shape the academy so that the traditional privileging of a kind of rugged male individualism is replaced by a culture that truly embraces all genders. We've got work to do!