Reframing the impostor phenomenon for Black college students

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ABSTRACT

Coined by researchers Dr. Pauline Clance and Dr. Suzanne Imes in 1978, the impostor phenomenon (IP) describes the experience of doubting one's skills, intellect, and talents despite one's many achievements. The phenomenon was originally studied amongst high-achieving White women from various professional fields and over time has been conceptualised as an internal psychological experience. As a result, recommendations to address IP have mostly focused on intervening at an individual or micro level. More recently, research on IP has expanded to include racially marginalised populations, including college students who identify as Black/African American. While more research needs to be done around how Black/African American students experience IP, recent studies have indicated a relationship between IP and experiences of racial discrimination for Black/African American students. Taking into consideration the collective history of racism, discrimination, and exclusion that Black students have faced within higher education institutions in the U.S. and abroad, and that they continue to currently face, the experience of IP may be more than just an internal psychological experience. The purpose of this paper is to provide a reframing in the way that IP is discussed as it relates to Black/African American college students. This paper argues that for Black students, the experience of IP is more than just an internal reaction but is instead a byproduct of structural racism and white supremacist norms that continue to be present within higher education today. Recommendations for how higher education institutions can begin to address IP at both micro and macro levels will also be discussed.

Keywords: impostor phenomenon, Black/African American college students, higher education institutions

Introduction

While U.S. colleges and universities have become more racially and ethnically diverse over recent decades, incidents of racism and discrimination unfortunately still occur across college campuses today. Examples of these hostile experiences include both explicit and implicit forms of racism, such as the police being called on Black students, White students throwing racially-themed parties on campus or participating in Blackface, an increase in the amount of White supremacist literature circulating around college campuses, and experiences of racial microaggressions perpetrated by both peers and faculty members (Anti-Defamation League, 2018; Bonilla-Silva & Peoples, 2022; Byrd, 2018; Castle et al., 2020; Victor, 2018). As a result, White students tend to perceive their college campuses as being friendly and not racist whereas Black students, particularly those attending predominantly White institutions (PWIs), tend to view their campuses as less welcoming and more hostile (Bernard et al., 2020, Foxx, 2021; Rankin & Reason, 2005; Stone et al., 2018).

The most common and insidious form of racism that Black students tend to face while on their college campuses are microaggressions. The term microaggressions was coined in 1970 by Harvard professor and psychiatrist Chester M. Pierce, who described microaggressions as dismissive behaviors, denigrations, and slights experienced everyday by African Americans (Pierce, 1970). Over time, scholars such as Derald Wing Sue have defined microaggressions as "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental

indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color" (Sue et al., 2007, p. 271).

Often automatic, unconscious, and subtle in nature, microaggressions can manifest in one of three ways: as microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations (Sue et al., 2007). Microassaults are purposeful and explicit assaults that are meant to harm an individual. They can be verbal or non-verbal and are often inflicted through name-calling, racial slurs, or purposefully discriminating against an individual. Calling someone a racial epithet or deliberately calling on White students to speak first while ignoring Black students are examples of microassaults. On the other hand, microinsults are rude and insensitive comments that are subtle in nature but serve to demean a person's race or identity. They can be verbal, such as the telling of racial jokes or implying that a person of colour was only given an opportunity due to affirmative action. However, they can also be non-verbal, such as a professor having low academic expectations of Black students. Similar to microinsults, microinvalidations are also subtle in nature, but they serve to dismiss or negate the feelings, thoughts, and racialised experiences of people of colour. An example of a microinvalidation includes Black students being deemed oversensitive when sharing their experiences of racism.

Studies have shown that Black/African American students experience racial microaggressions that are related to negative stereotypes that are held about them in society. For example, Black students tend to experience racial microaggressions related to their levels of intelligence, assumptions of academic inferiority, and assumptions of criminal status (Reiter & Reiter, 2020; Sue et al., 2008; Williams et al., 2020). In addition to experiencing microaggressions, Black students have also reported other negative experiences in relation to their race while attending college, particularly at PWIs. For instance, in a study that examined the experiences of 10 Black Master of Social Work (MSW) students using focus groups, Hollingsworth et al. (2018) found that the students experienced racial microaggressions from White peers, as well as a lack of support from White faculty when faced with microaggressions from others. Similarly, Vakalahi et al. (2014) investigated the experiences of four female African American MSW students attending a PWI. Participants described experiences of not feeling seen or heard in the classroom by White faculty and classmates, especially when challenging what they perceived to be "one-sided presentation[s] of certain materials and information in the classroom" (p. 422). In addition, these women reported feeling isolated, as well as experiencing less interactions and connections between themselves and their White faculty members due to race. As a result of these racialised experiences, Black/African American college students may experience feelings of isolation, tokenisation, a diminished sense of belonging, and feelings of being an impostor (Mwangi et al., 2018; Rankin & Reason, 2005; Winkle-Wagner & McCoy, 2016).

What is the Impostor Phenomenon (IP)?

The term impostor phenomenon (IP) describes the experience of individuals who do not believe in their own intelligence and abilities. Individuals with IP believe that they are not smart, skillful, or capable, and that they are undeserving of any recognition or accolades for their accomplishments. Instead of attributing their success to their own capabilities and intelligence, those with IP attribute their success to external factors, such as luck, charm, and having the right connections (Clance & Imes, 1978). Ewing et al. (1996) described individuals who experience IP as those "who despite objective evidence of competence, feel that they have fooled everyone into thinking they are smarter or more capable than they are in reality" (p. 54). Due to feeling like they have tricked others about their intelligence or capabilities, individuals with IP also experience a persistent fear of others discovering that they are a fraud.

The phrase was first introduced by Dr. Pauline Rose Clance and Dr. Suzanne Imes in 1978. The clinical psychologists used the term to describe why high-achieving women in various career fields felt a persistent feeling of fraudulence and inadequacy despite their accomplishments. In their study of 150 high-achieving women, Clance & Imes (1978) interviewed middle-to-upper class White women from various career fields, such as nursing, counseling, teaching, anthropology, law, and social work. Despite their success, the women described feelings of not being intelligent and feeling like they had fooled everyone around them into thinking they were. They attributed their success to factors, such as "hard work, luck, knowing the right people, being in the right place at the right time, or to interpersonal assets such as charm and the ability to relate well" (Clance & O'Toole, 1987, p.1). The women also feared that others would discover that they were not as intelligent or capable as they demonstrated themselves to be. Consequently, they felt like they were impostors who did not deserve their success.

In 1985, Dr. Pauline Rose Clance created the Clance Impostor Cycle Model as a way to describe how individuals experience IP. According to Clance and O'Toole (1987), the Impostor Cycle begins when an achievement-related task, such as a school-related assignment or project, is given. Individuals with IP may respond to this task with feelings of anxiety, self-doubt, and worry over whether they will be able to successfully accomplish it. As a result of these feelings, students may choose to either work extremely hard and over-prepare, or to procrastinate and then prepare in a frantic manner. Students who choose to over-prepare may believe that the only reason they are successful is because they invest an extreme amount of effort and time in their endeavors (Young, 2011). Consequently, they may study harder or work longer hours on an assignment than what is actually necessary because they feel it will increase their chances of doing well. Alternatively, students who choose to procrastinate may be trying to avoid the intense feelings of anxiety, self-doubt, and worry for as long as possible. Procrastination also provides students with an excuse if they are not successful in accomplishing their task. For example, if a student procrastinates and is not successful in their task, they can attribute it to waiting until the last minute. However, if students procrastinate and are still successful, this can actually reinforce their feelings of being an impostor. They would feel undeserving of their success because they would know that they did not give their best efforts, which would then reinforce their belief that they fooled others into believing they were capable (Young, 2011).

Regardless of whether students engage in overpreparation or procrastination, there is a huge sense of relief after the task is completed. However, that sense of relief is short-lived because even if students receive positive feedback regarding their task, they are unable to internalise it. Those who over-prepare will tend to attribute their success to their Herculean efforts. Those who procrastinate will tend to attribute their success to luck. Because of this, students may experience feelings of depression, anxiety, increased self-doubt, and feeling like a fraud. When presented with another high-achieving task, the cycle then repeats.

Recognising that the Clance Impostor Cycle did not capture culturally relevant experiences of Black students, Stone et al. (2018) conducted a qualitative study with 12 Black graduate students regarding their experiences with IP while attending a PWI. Using themes that emerged from the data, Stone and his colleagues proposed a more culturally relevant version of the Impostor Cycle for Black students called the Culturally-Informed Impostor Phenomenon Model. According to the Culturally-Informed Impostor Phenomenon Model, Black students attending PWIs may develop IP due to socio-racial factors, psychosocial costs, and psychological vulnerability. Examples of socio-racial factors Black students face at PWIs include being aware of the lack of Black students and faculty at their institutions others questioning the presence of Black students on campus; outgroup expectations (e.g. negative assumptions from non-Black students

about the intelligence of Black people); and self/ingroup expectations (e.g. expectations from other Black individuals regarding their roles in the Black community and high family expectations about pursuing a doctoral degree). These socio-racial factors can lead to psychosocial costs among Black students, such as a sense of racial isolation, otherness, and a need to prove themselves by either avoiding commonly held stereotypes about Black people or trying to prove those stereotypes wrong. Socio-racial factors and psychological costs can also lead to psychological vulnerability among Black students, making them more susceptible to questioning themselves and their intellectual ability. In doubting their own intelligence, Black students may attribute their success to external factors, such as rechanneling their oppressive experiences into motivation to work harder, seeking social support from their family, community, and peers, and believing in the power of faith or divine intervention. However, attributing their success to these external factors may also cause Black students to continue doubting themselves.

The Culturally-Informed Impostor Phenomenon Model expands upon the Clance Impostor Cycle Model by including experiences of racial discrimination and marginalisation, and how these experiences can lead to IP among Black students. There are minor differences between the models regarding what students attribute their success to (e.g. instead of attributing their success to luck, Black students may attribute their success to rechanneling their negative experiences, their social support, and their faith). However, Black students may still engage in overpreparation or procrastination, as demonstrated in the Clance Impostor Cycle, in response to their feelings of self-doubt, anxiety, and worry. Rather than viewing both models as separate, the Clance Impostor Cycle and the Culturally-Informed Impostor Phenomenon Model should be used in conjunction with one another in order to fully understand how IP is experienced among Black/African American students.

IP amongst Black/African American students

Although research on IP has expanded over time to include students of colour, the number of studies focused on students of colour and Black students in particular is limited compared to studies using White samples. Even so, studies have shown that IP is prevalent among students of colour and that students in racially minoritised groups tend to score higher on measures of IP (Cokely et al., 2013; McClain et al. 2016; Parkman, 2016). In addition, research has demonstrated that amongst Black students, IP is associated with high levels of psychological distress, such as anxiety and depression, and tends to be related to instances of racial discrimination (Clance & O'Toole, 1987; Parkman 2016). While more research needs to be done on the impact of IP on Black mental health outcomes and the relationship between IP and experiences of racism, we can infer from these studies that experiences of discrimination, and both overt and subtle racism, can lead students of colour to doubt their intelligence, academic capabilities, and achievements, all of which are characteristic of IP. These feelings, in turn, may then lead to serious mental health outcomes for Black students, such as heightened levels of anxiety and depression.

Other signs of IP amongst Black students may also include them avoiding taking risks for fear of failure, hesitating to participate in class due to a fear of being perceived as unintelligent, confrontational, or aggressive, and overworking in order to prove to themselves and to others that they deserve to be at their institutions (Campbell, 2021; Husbands et al., 2024; McGee et al., 2022; Perkins & Durkee, 2024). These feelings may be particularly strong for Black/African Americans who have a unique history of racial oppression in the U.S. and abroad, and are the targets of negative stereotypes around their intelligence because of their race. Internalising these racialised messages may cause Black/African American college students to feel like impostors who did not earn their opportunity to be in these academic spaces, and

therefore, do not deserve to be there. Therefore, for Black/African American students, IP may be a form of internalised inferiority that is influenced by social factors like racism.

Racism in higher education: A brief history

In order to have a better understanding as to why IP may be present amongst Black/African American students in academia, it is important to take into consideration the racial history of higher education in the U.S. The founding of American higher education can be traced back to the colonial era. Higher education was originally developed as a way to educate and prepare White men for the clergy and to become leaders in religious societies, as well as to pass down European culture and Christian values to future generations (Dancy II et al. 2018; Museus et al., 2015). During this era, American colleges and universities were also financially invested in the slave trade. Many of these institutions used or owned enslaved Africans, and conducted research that supported theories of inferiority among individuals of African descent as a way to justify and perpetuate slavery (Savas, 2014). Academic disciplines, such as religion, history, and other subjects, were used to support slavery from a moral, economic, and political perspective (King-Jordan & Gil, 2021).

After the Civil War, higher education institutions excluded Blacks/African Americans from enrolling. In the South, Blacks/African Americans were not allowed to attend White institutions due to legal segregation. In the North, quota systems were used to limit the number of Black/African American individuals who could enroll (King-Jordan & Gil, 2021). Even with policies that tried to increase access to institutions of higher learning for Blacks/African Americans over time, racial disparities and discrimination continued. For example, the Morrill Act of 1862 was a policy that provided federal funding to each state in order to increase land grant colleges (Museus et al., 2015). Because several segregationist states at the time excluded people of colour from their colleges, the Morrill Act of 1890 was enacted to provide more funding so that students of colour who were previously denied access to PWIs could have the opportunity to gain a college education. Many historically Black colleges and universities were established under the Morrill Act of 1890. According to Harper et al. (2009), the Morrill Act of 1890 "led to the establishment of 17 Black state-supported institutions, which joined the list of existing private Black colleges and 54 institutions founded under the first Morrill Act" (p. 395). However, although the second Morrill Act provided more opportunities for students of colour to receive a postsecondary education, it also helped sustain racial inequality and endorse the idea that Blacks/African Americans were not as intelligent as Whites and therefore needed to be educated in separate institutions (Museus et al., 2015).

In 1954, the Supreme Court ruled that racial segregation in public schools was unconstitutional in the landmark Brown v. Board of Education case. However, there was a lot of pushback both legislatively and at an individual level. Not only did Southern states fight against desegregation through lawsuits, but Black students who attended newly desegregated schools faced harassment, threats, and acts of violence from White protestors who were opposed to desegregation (Fine, 2004). Some universities also demonstrated their resistance to desegregation. For instance, in 1954, the University of Texas named a dorm after one of its first law school professors, William Stewart Simkins. Simkins was a founder of the Florida Ku Klux Klan and was known to encourage the use of violence as a way to enforce segregation (Harris, 2015). Blacks/African Americans also faced racial attacks on campus, such as being on the receiving end of racial slurs, hate mail, and violent physical attacks (Equal Justice Initiative, 2018).

Affirmative action was another policy that aimed to increase the representation of racially marginalised groups at PWIs after years of institutional racism and discrimination excluded people of colour from

participating. Introduced as a concept by President Kennedy in 1961 and passed as part of the Civil Rights Act by President Johnson in 1965, the goal of affirmative action was to increase representation of racially minoritised groups in higher education by relying on more than just test scores to admit historically underrepresented students (Alhaddab, 2015; Museus et al., 2015). However, before its recent overturn, affirmative action was often wielded as an insult against students of colour who were questioned by White peers as to how they were able to gain access to elite institutions (Solórzano et al., 2000; Vega, 2014). Underlying these sentiments was often the belief that affirmative action unfairly favored students of colour, in conjunction with the stereotype that people of colour are intellectually inferior to Whites, and that through affirmative action, they did not rightly earn their entry into institutions of higher education.

Negative stereotypes towards Blacks/African Americans regarding their intelligence date back to slavery and have been perpetuated over time by researchers who have theorised about racial differences in levels of intelligence. For example, in 1994, social researchers Herrnstein and Murray published their book, The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life. The authors argued that racial inequalities, such as high rates of poverty among Black families compared to White families, were the result of racial differences in intelligence. In addition to being intellectually inferior, other racial stereotypes that Blacks/African Americans have encountered in regard to their intelligence include not valuing education and not having a desire to take advantage of educational opportunities (Morales, 2021).

Unfortunately, histories of exclusion and discrimination experienced by Black students in the academy are not confined to the U.S. Institutions of higher learning in the UK and abroad are also deeply tied to colonialism and slavery. These historical ties continue to negatively affect Black students of the African diaspora today. For instance, many universities in the UK and Ireland benefitted from the transatlantic slave trade in various ways, such as through investments from companies, as well as donations from benefactors and plantation owners who made money from the slave trade (Davies, 2024; Gamsu et al., 2024). Universities in the UK also functioned as research centers that helped to legitimise the dehumanisation and supposed inferiority of enslaved Black and Brown people. A notable example of this is the University College London, where in 1904, Sir Francis Galton, the founder of the eugenics movement, established his laboratory and conducted studies that reinforced racist, sexist, ableist, and classist stereotypes about marginalised groups (Ackah, 2021; Gillham, 2001). The legacy of these histories continue to shape the experiences of Black students at these institutions today. Research indicates that Black university students in the UK and elsewhere often face both overt and subtle forms of racism, feelings of alienation and exclusion, and racial disparities in retention and graduation rates compared to their White peers (Ahmet, 2020; Bunce et al., 2021; Chonaill & Dublin, 2021). These experiences reinforce the harmful belief that Black students are not good enough to attend higher education, fostering a sense of IP among them.

Current manifestations of white supremacy in academia

Unfortunately, academic culture within higher education institutions continues to uphold norms, values, and ways of operating that are steeped in white supremacy and may contribute to feelings of IP for Black students. In an article titled, "White Supremacy: Still Here," Tema Okun highlights the various ways in which white supremacy culture manifests within organisations, including institutions of higher learning. Okun (2021) describes the term white supremacy culture as an "ideology baked into the beliefs, values, norms, and standards of our groups (many if not most of them), our communities, our towns, our states, our nation, teaching us both overtly and covertly that whiteness holds value whiteness is value" (p. 4). According to Okun, one of the reasons why white supremacy culture is dangerous is because it not only sets

"whiteness" as the norm and equates it with superiority compared to other groups, but it also offers a false sense of security to those who identify as BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour). As Okun (2021, p. 5) writes:

> White supremacy culture also promises to reward BIPOC communities and people who collude in an effort to survive; the encouragement to assimilate and adapt to these characteristics often promises the illusion of safety while in reality rarely doing so. Whatever safety is offered can be and is bought at the expense of authentic relationship with community and self. Whatever safety is offered is ripped away whenever a community or person begins to speak and act with integrity about the racist realities of white supremacy culture.

In other words, the culture of white supremacy often tries to convince BIPOC individuals that they will be safe, appreciated, and deemed worthy, as long as they adhere to a set of standards, values, and norms that causes them to devalue themselves and lose their authenticity in the process. In addition, white supremacy culture is often driven by fear and reinforces worries that individuals within BIPOC communities may have in regard to not being enough, not belonging, and being othered.

While Okun lists various ways in which white supremacy culture can show up within organisations, there are ones that are specific to Black students in academia and can lead to experiences of IP, particularly perfectionism, individualism, and defensiveness and denial. Within academia, perfectionism manifests as there not being any room for mistakes to be made, certain groups being held and measured by a higher standard of excellence than others, and as errors being viewed as a personal reflection of an individual rather than an external occurrence that can offer an opportunity for learning and growth. For Black students, the pressure to adhere to perfectionism is often demonstrated through the belief that one has to work "twice as hard" in order to be seen as equal to their White counterparts, and can show itself in behaviors such as overworking or holding one's self to extremely high standards in order to achieve perfect grades, to disprove negative stereotypes around intelligence, and to prove that one has rightfully earned their spot as a student at their institution.

Individualism within academia is often manifested as valuing competition rather than collaboration. For Black students, individualism can result in feelings of having to constantly prove oneself, one's worthiness, and one's capabilities as well as in feelings of isolation, loneliness, and not belonging. It can also pose a dilemma for Black students. On one hand, they may be viewed as inferior and not being capable of successfully accomplishing things on their own if they desire to work as part of a team. One the other hand, Black students may also be perceived as not being collegial or "team players" when they may prefer to work on their own.

Finally, defensiveness and denial within academia shows itself through lack of accountability and responding to harmful incidents of bias and discrimination with feelings of defensiveness, denial, and criticism. For Black students, this often results in a sense of hesitancy and fear of speaking out against the experiences of racism they face on their college campuses due to white fragility, being dismissed or not believed by others, and those in power not addressing the harms that Black students endure at their institutions for fear of being labeled "racist." This can result in a campus climate where marginalised groups are silenced.

These examples of white supremacy culture in academia are norms that are often taken for granted, but that can cause harm and contribute to Black students experiencing IP. Coupled with the collective historical experience of discrimination within higher education institutions, it is clear that IP for Black students is

more than just an internal experience, but that institutions of higher learning also play a role in the development and maintenance of these impostor feelings for Black students.

Reconceptualising IP for Black/African American college students

Taking into account the collective history of racism and discrimination by Black individuals within higher education, and the ways in which white supremacy ideals, norms, and values continue to be perpetuated to this day within the academy, it is imperative that the experience of IP be reconceptualised for Black/African American college students. IP tends to be viewed as an internal experience that happens within an individual because of their own thoughts and low self-esteem. As a result, IP is often understood from a deficit-focused perspective that is the responsibility of the individual to remedy. However, considering the ways in which white supremacy has been and continues to be active within higher education and the impact this has on Black students, IP should be viewed instead as a real and valid reaction to external structural inequities, such as racism and discrimination, which gives the message that certain individuals are not qualified and are frauds, either implicitly or explicitly. In other words, for Black students, IP is in actuality a result of racist institutional structures that uphold white supremacy and that make Black students feel like they are inferior.

When considering Black students, their experiences of IP should be viewed from a more macro perspective that takes into account the racialised contexts of institutions and society. Instead of asking what is wrong with Black students who have IP and how they can fix it, institutional leaders and stakeholders also need to ask themselves and reflect on the following questions: (1) How are institutional and societal attitudes about racially marginalised groups contributing to feelings of the impostor phenomenon among Black students?; (2) How do values rooted in racism and anti-Blackness contribute to feelings of impostorism among Black students?; and (3) What institutional changes to academic culture and climate can be made to address impostorism among Black college students? In addressing these questions, higher education institutions can take accountability for the roles they play in creating an environment of true belonging and inclusivity for all students.

Recommendations

In addition to reflecting on the questions about IP mentioned above, higher education institutions also need to take action in order to challenge the white supremacy norms that lead to/create feelings of IP among Black students. The following recommendations for action include:

Understanding the historical context of IP and its manifestations in the classroom

Higher education professionals can play an important role in helping Black college students alleviate feelings of IP. On a micro level, faculty and staff should understand the historical context of IP for Black students. This includes learning about the histories of colonialism within their own institutions, the ways in which Black students have been impacted by colonisation and historical racism within and outside of the academy, the current ways in which educational institutions continue to perpetuate harm against Black students, and how IP is a manifestation of that harm among Black learners. In addition, faculty should also recognise the ways in which IP can manifest for Black students in the classroom. Being aware of what IP looks like among Black students can help lessen the chances of IP characteristics being mistaken for other factors that reflect negatively on Black students themselves. For instance, for those unaware of the signs of

IP amongst Black students, procrastination or not speaking up in class may be mistakenly attributed to students not being engaged in the learning process or not taking their education seriously instead of anxiety about starting a new task or not wanting to speak due to fear of being misunderstood.

Centering the voices of Black students

Another way to address IP is for faculty and staff to create inclusive campus environments in which the voices, thoughts, feelings, and experiences of Black students can be heard. It is important that Black students be in campus and classroom environments where they can show up authentically and fully as themselves, and where their inherent strengths are valued and affirmed by their professors, advisors, and their peers. Centering the voices of Black students can occur in a myriad of ways, such as supporting and celebrating stories of Black joy, upliftment, empowerment, and success, not just exclusively stories around Black trauma and suffering; not treating Black students as a monolith or tokenising Black students so that they are treated as the representative of all Black people; and recognising that the experiences of Black students are not to be conflated with the experiences of other students of colour. In addition, Black students should be invited by leadership to share their feedback, concerns, and recommendations around institutional policies that impact them so that they can have a sense of agency in regard to their educational experiences. Faculty and staff should also consider engaging in trainings that teach them how to effectively respond when they commit a microaggression or when they witness a microaggression being committed by others so that there can be an effort to address harms and restore trust.

Decolonising course curricula

In addition, professors and other stakeholders can work on decolonising course syllabi so that course content and materials are more reflective of anti-racist and anti-oppressive frameworks (Sadat Ahadi & Guerrero, 2020; Mintz, 2021; Zidani, 2021). Re-constructing course syllabi so that it interrogates whiteness, speaks to the histories and current experiences of people of marginalised identities, addresses issues related to power and equity, and reflects scholars and contributors of knowledge from all backgrounds and identities are but a few ways to confront educational practices that are steeped in white supremacy and to help students of marginalised identities feel more represented and welcomed.

Cultivating the courage to re-imagine

In order for true change to occur, higher education institutions also need to re-imagine what kinds of institutions they want to be for Black students. If institutions are committed to being places of learning where Black students can feel supported in their educational journeys, leaders and stakeholders at various levels need to recognise the ways in which they may contribute to feelings of impostorism among Black/African American students through incidents of subtle and overt bias and racism. This involves not only examining the ways in which white supremacy and anti-Blackness are ingrained in academia, but it also means creating and engaging in opportunities to continuously reimagine what it would mean and look like for institutions of higher learning to challenge white supremacist norms and then actively working to dismantle those norms and values. Creating policies and campus cultures in which principles of anti-racism and anti-oppression permeate throughout all levels of policy and practice is one way to change the status quo, but it also involves a deep level of commitment to change, thinking outside of the box of white

supremacy, and having the courage to dream without limits of what a world free of white supremacy would look like.

Conclusion

The impostor phenomenon (IP) among Black/African American college students goes beyond being an internal struggle. It is a reaction to the pervasive cultural norms of white supremacy embedded in both societies at large and within the structures of higher education. To address this issue, colleges and universities must be willing to undergo a profound cultural shift—one that actively dismantles white supremacy and builds a new system where the voices and experiences of marginalised groups are prioritised, valued and respected. It is only through such a transformation that higher education institutions can become an equitable space for all students to thrive.

Biography

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