

# **HBCUs Respond: Social Justice and Social Work Education in a Trump Era**

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**Abstract:** Given the current political climate following the election of Trump to the White House, it is important to ensure that Schools of Social Work are responding in a way that is promoting social justice, advocacy, and opposition to any form of oppression. This reflective narrative discusses how three assistant professors who are faculty in Schools of Social Work at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) engaged their students in transformational learning to embrace the aftermath of the election results. This is a reflection about empowerment and preparing future social workers to address social justice issues.

**Keywords:** HBCUs, Historically Black Colleges and Universities, social justice, advocacy, oppression, Morgan State University, Clark Atlanta University, Johnson C. Smith University, Black Lives Matter, transformative learning

## **Introduction**

This article is a reflective narrative of three social work educators at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) and their responses to the campaign and election of Donald Trump. There are some that would argue that teaching at and attending an HBCU provides a buffer from the “typical” impact of racism and discrimination. This would be a true argument if everything operated in a vacuum and faculty and students were not affected by outside influence. However, outside influences and experiences oftentimes shape the views, opinions, and beliefs of faculty and students who attend HBCUs. One such topic that has traditionally sparked ongoing discussions in the social work profession is politics and its impact on the larger community.

One such occasion that we could all vividly recall was the campaign and even more exciting election night of November 4, 2008. This was no ordinary election for us because an African American man named Barack Obama was running for the office of the President of the United States of America and was making significant progress towards being elected. We all sat in front of the television as the election results came in hoping and praying for his victory; for his success was all of our success. As we sat around and discussed the current state of politics and our political leaders, we remembered the feeling of hearing President Obama’s acceptance speech. It was like all of the black community was on a never-ending natural high. President Obama winning the election was more than just another person becoming an elected official. He was the first African American president and for many a solid indication that changes within the community were on the horizon. President Obama represented hope and provided a positive outlook on the future of minority communities.

For eight years, we were able to witness and benefit from progressive policy making as a result of President Obama and his leadership. Consequently, his term as president came to an end as did the era of hope and optimism. Just as we have never forgotten the positive election results for

President Obama, we will never forget our devastation at the election results for Donald Trump. Since the beginning of his campaign, Donald Trump ran on a platform of nationalism, isolationism, xenophobia, racism, Islamophobia, and proudly disparaging behaviors and attitudes toward women, people with disabilities, LGBTQ people and many other minority communities (Anderson-Nathe, & Gharabaghi, 2017). His campaign and subsequent election demonstrated a side of America that many of our students at our respective HBCUs have never seen. While some of our students expressed that they experienced covert racism and/or discrimination, they were primarily experiencing a shift in society where the ongoing rhetoric included sayings such as “racism is over” (Arroyo, Palmer, & Maramba, 2016) or the belief that things were “better” since we had an African American president (Wade, & Younge, 2015). Since Donald Trump’s “rise to power,” those beliefs have been tested. Students are experiencing in real-time the effects of hate speech, alt-right influences, white privilege, and questionable politics and their impact on the American way of life. Moreover, these experiences are occurring at much faster rates due to instant access to information through social media (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, etc.) (Wells et al., 2016). As these real-time experiences spill over into the classroom, we as social work educators have to address them head on and adapt our teaching curriculum while also balancing our own emotional responses to these political happenings (Robbins & Singer, 2014).

### **History and Importance of Historically Black Colleges and Universities**

As a critical component of our reflection, and more recently an ongoing topic within the media and the Trump administration, is that of Historically Black Colleges and Universities. Recently referred to as “pioneers of school choice” by Betsy DeVos who was appointed Secretary of Education by Trump, we felt it was necessary to discuss the history and importance of HBCUs within the context of politics and social justice. Following the volatile political climate of the U.S. Civil War, HBCUs emerged and were established as a consequence of segregation towards formerly enslaved African Americans (Arroyo, Palmer, & Maramba, 2015).

Among the more than 100 notable HBCUs, Cheyney State University founded in 1837 in Cheyney, PA is listed as the first Historically Black College/University. Other HBCUs established prior to the Civil War include Lincoln (1854) and Wilberforce University (1856). According to Bowles, Hopps, and Clayton (2016), “HBCUs were established in part because of denied access to traditionally White institutions, but primarily because of a thirst for higher education and social mobility of descendants of former slaves, they have played a critical role in the evolution of American society”(pg. 120). HBCUs have had a significant impact on millions nationally and globally with a universal purpose of offering higher education and upward mobility to people of color (Bowles, Hoops, & Clayton, 2016).

While originally established as a means to provide higher education to African Americans, the National Center for Educational Statistics has continued to report increased enrollments among non-blacks such as whites, Latino/as, and Asian Americans (Arroyo, Palmer, & Maramba, 2015). HBCUs are of immense importance as they have been a source for greater equality in their vision and teachings around cultural competence and understanding the impacts of oppression on society and various sub-groups. Consistent with their overall goals and mission

statements which are often rooted in social justice, HBCUs continue to uplift minority communities by consistently graduating more African Americans and people of color than any other universities (Chiles, N. 2017).

Following the 2016 election, the importance of HBCUs was further highlighted by President Donald Trump's requested visit from all of the HBCU presidents and leaders. The meeting, which took place on February 27-28, 2017 during Trump's first 100 days, was attended by a large majority of the HBCUs administrators and was followed up with an executive order called the White House Initiative to promote excellence and innovation at Historically Black Colleges and Universities. Several HBCU presidents and leaders spoke and sent out campus-wide responses regarding their ambivalence in participation in the meeting, but also expressed the need to be present for the discussion, as HBCUs have always been seriously under-resourced across disciplines, professions, and academic support, including library and archival services (Hopps, 2007).

### **Social Justice and Social Work Education**

Since the election of Trump, one of the areas that students began to focus on and discuss in the classroom was that of social justice and advocacy. While consistently discussed in social work education in general, many of our students began expressing a need to participate in social justice activities in response to the politics of Trump. Some of these social justice responses included both local and national protests as well as social media campaigns such as #BLACKLIVESMATTER (Johnson, 2017). As we discussed this increase in student involvement, it became more noticeable that the election of Trump was also a catalyst for students to become more active in their community and to speak out against things that are harmful to themselves and others. This change resulted in much more active classroom discussions as well as students that appeared to be more versed in current news and "trending topics" on social media. As social work educators, we were also faced with a teaching dilemma: How do we incorporate the current syllabus material with current happenings in politics?

One of the ways that we talked about addressing this immediate need of our students to discuss current politics and social justice issues was to engage students in a transformational learning approach: "Transformative learning is an approach to learning that generates new possibilities transcending the taken-for-granted status quo. This approach to learning is facilitated by encouraging creativity, 'the engine of imagination,' and problematization, which is 'expressed in questions'" (Witkin, 2014, p. 594-595). Using this process, we encouraged the students to relate the current news or "trending topics" to the current course content. We attempted to encourage the students to think about the larger context of the issues and how they cannot just affect one specific issue, but have larger further reaching consequences. Our hope was to assist our students in understanding social justice and advocacy from a social work standpoint and utilize these skills to formulate a position for their areas of concern (homelessness, substance use disorders, mental health, child welfare, school social work, gerontology, public health, etc.) (Adams, 2016). The following section will describe how we used transformative learning in our respective universities to foster and encourage social justice and advocacy in the era of Trump.

## **Reflections from Morgan State University School of Social Work Faculty**

Morgan State University is a historically black college (HBCU) located in Baltimore, Maryland. Founded in 1872 as a Bible institute, Morgan State University has undergone significant changes and is designated as Maryland's public urban university and the largest HBCU in Maryland. Consistent with the ongoing changes at the university level, the School of Social Work was established in 1969 as the Undergraduate Social Welfare Program in the Department of Sociology, College of Liberal Arts. It was not until 1975 that the program received departmental status and the name was changed to Department of Social Work. Following the addition of a Masters and Doctoral program in 2006, the social work department was formally recognized as a School of Social Work in 2009. Since the start of the social work program at Morgan State University, faculty and students have engaged in social justice and community work in Baltimore city and surrounding areas.

Within the School of Social Work at Morgan State University, there is a large focus on doing community work and pushing the motto of “#URBANSTRONG.” For me, the #urbanstrong motto means to work hard and uplift the community in all the work that we do. Being a faculty member at an HBCU is rewarding and in many cases very protective from the experience of African American faculty members at a predominately white institute (PWI) (Zambrana, 2015). However, during the campaigning and subsequent election of Donald Trump, the effects of his campaign, which included racism, sexism, classism, xenophobia, and other discriminatory practices, began showing up in the classroom. I remember vividly the morning after the election results; it was such a disappointment to realize that America had voted for a person that said so many distasteful things that were offensive to many minority groups. All I could think of at the time was “What does this all mean?”

While this was a larger question in general, it resonated with me throughout the day, constantly wondering what effect this election would have on students, clients, families, communities, and as a society. I had a genuine concern and fear for my community and the people that I worked with in the community. These thoughts were distracting for many days following the election. One day I walked into the classroom and was met with a variety of stares from students. Some of the students looked stressed while others did not have any reaction, just the look of being numb. Immediately, I tried to figure out how I was going to address all these different emotions and cover the material for the session. As I began class, I simply started with a question, “How are you doing”? This led to a variety of responses and emotions. When it was all said and done, it was time for the class to end. We did not even get started on the planned material for the session.

As the class ended, I realized that this level of emotion and concern would be prevalent until people figured out what this election meant overall. As such, I had to think of a way to engage the students in political discourse while also covering the require information for the class. As I was driving home from the university after the class, I called my colleagues and asked if their students had a similar reaction to the election as mine did. Both stated that their students could not stop talking about it. As we progressed in our conversation, the question of how to incorporate these ongoing and much needed discussions into class came up. As we talked about

various possibilities, I suggested, “Why not let the students come up with how to integrate the discussions?” This question led to further discussion about transformational learning that put the power of the learning in the students’ hands. Additionally, this approach allowed for students to have creativity with how they integrated the information (Witkin, 2014).

Using this transformational learning approach provided students with a way to discuss the current political climate while also discussing it from a perspective or social issue that they were passionate about. However, the students were not the only ones who benefitted from this approach. I was also able to engage in the discussion with the students and discuss my thoughts and concerns around the information and intersections of the many topics presented. In a sense, this transformational learning approach created a safe space for expression of feelings and to voice concerns and fears related to the election. Additionally, this was also a space where students would discuss their increased involvement in social justice activities such as protests, as well as things that were going on in the social media environment which were as relevant to the class. As a faculty member in the School of Social Work, I was pleased that my students were able to utilize and adapt to this approach as a means to understand politics, social work and social justice.

### **Reflections from Clark Atlanta University Social Work Faculty**

Clark Atlanta University is a historically black college/university uniquely situated in the Atlanta University Center (AUC) within the metropolitan community. The location offers students both southern and urban aspects to learn, utilize and apply hands-on applications within their internships. The School of Social Work has the distinction of being the oldest historically black accredited school of social work in the world. The program seeks to prepare social work practitioners and leaders with knowledge, skills, and abilities to address social problems locally, nationally, and globally. The Whitney M. Young Jr. School of Social Work (WMYJSSW) prepares social work students with an emphasis on the Afrocentric perspective as a lens to screen for culturally and linguistically sensitive interventions with at-risk populations.

As a faculty member who teaches within the practice and research foci, it has always been my aim to thread the knowledge from each of these core classes into conversations, discussions and coursework, to offer students an opportunity to implement the core values of social work. This past year has been extremely interesting as the discussions around the presidential debates and changes from the President’s first hundred days have affected the social work profession and society.

During the presidential election, classroom discourse centered on how each of the candidates’ proposed policies would impact the practice of social work and ultimately their client base. Students shared how important it is to distinguish between their professional and personal values. Several discussions and class activities centered on females in leadership and the role of service. Students researched and discussed female leadership globally as well as directly, and the differences that they felt about leadership and gender equality. A large majority of the current student body within the School of Social Work are women of color, and several expressed that within their internships they have women supervisors who guide their practicum. Given the

negative tone and demeaning messaging towards women from Donald Trump, I augmented our coursework to include information around the gender pay gap and how it impacts our profession as well as our clientele. Rather than focus on the issue individually, I encouraged my students to focus on solutions and how they could become more involved in policy to create change.

Another topic that seemed to permeate our classroom discussions was that of service and experience. During the election campaign process, it was apparent and regularly reported that one of the candidates, Donald J. Trump, had not previously held a position within politics or the area of public service. As a way to address this glaring issue within the context of social work practice and education, I had the students share their conflicted views on how years of service were a hindrance for one candidate and a possible strength for another. As part of this transformative learning process, students had to make a case for themselves to take over a large human service agency using their current level of experience. Given the mixed demographics of the student body with regards to age, this provided for a wide variety of responses from the students. During this process, students made great cases for why they should be offered the position of administrator even when they may have had limited experience. This process allowed for an open discussion regarding the various candidates and what they may or may not bring to the position. Students were able to research and learn that Hillary Clinton's years of service were often seen as a strength and a weakness. We discussed her public service and work with children and families for over twenty-five years as a strength and also a weakness as she was often referred to as a "career politician." If society and the profession sought major change how would that be possible with someone that had been involved in public service for so long? Students were also able to research her work and discuss the pros and cons of the platform she was running on. They were also able to do this with Donald Trump despite his negative rhetoric. In looking at Trump, although he did not have years of service, he shared his expertise within the business world and offered a business model as a strategy to change several major entities. The purpose of the transformative learning was to allow students to express their feelings in a way that was also constructive for classroom time and was solution oriented. I wanted the students to understand their power in advocacy, but also their responsibility to be able to make informed political arguments based on facts. As a major component of social justice and advocacy, I also encouraged and engaged in dialogue around the importance of voting. Many of our students within the class were local; however, several were from other areas and saw the importance of mailing in their votes and voter registration.

After Donald Trump's victory was announced the discussions in my classroom then shifted to how the change in government could affect their internship agencies and clients. Within the first hundred days, Donald Trump rendered several changes that impacted students directly and indirectly. The most concerning to students were the travel ban and the cutting of school lunches. Being that many of the students utilized the holistic Afrocentric lens, when the travel ban was first passed, it impacted a few of our international students, and one was held in another country as she was traveling when it was enacted. As frustrating as this was for me, it also provided students with a clear example of the direct impact of political action. Students were able to see beyond their own world view and personal feelings to discovering a more global view which impacted their colleague. The transformational learning approach offered international students opportunities to share their thoughts and feelings regarding the travel ban and the recent

election. Other students were deeply engaged and interested in hearing and learning more about international student experiences to have a deeper understanding of cultural sensitivity within themselves and their clients. Many of the class projects submitted by students centered on enhancing cultural sensitivity and the impact of the current administration. Students focused on learning about oppressed populations and understanding the recent changes from their view with the goal of developing solutions and continuing to be change agents.

Another topic that emerged as a result of the election of Donald Trump was the proposed cutting of school lunches for children. This was a hot topic for students in my class as they debated the rationale as well as the impact of such a political decision. When looking directly at the cutting of school lunches, students were appalled at President Trump's communication director's statement "that there is no evidence to prove that free lunches help the students receiving them reach higher educational standards." From those statements, students understood the importance of moving beyond "doing the work" while also incorporating program evaluation and dissemination of true findings. I encouraged my students to further discuss the impact of other proposed cuts which could affect agencies where students were placed for their internship. I assigned coursework which consisted of research on local and state representatives and their voting patterns. I wanted students to be heavily involved in the political process and to learn more about their elected officials' backgrounds. Additionally, I wanted students to identify those social workers who were engaged in activism and politics to see the importance of social work integration in policy. As we continued to discuss the impact of Trump on minority communities and clients, we discussed the Affordable Care Act and the proposal to replace healthcare with another model. I expressed to students the importance of understanding these changes and how some of the government cuts could potentially impact agencies to the point of needing to close, thus causing some students to lose their internship placements. As these discussions occurred in my class, each of them presented students with a chance to learn and gain a better understanding of the importance of connections within each of their classes as well as the impact of having social workers at the table. Through the transformative learning approach, students were able to understand that research offers the opportunity to see issues from multiple perspectives and develop solution-oriented approaches to social justice and advocacy.

It is my continued goal as a social work educator to bring real life issues to the classroom and incorporate them into both practice and research. Furthermore, the mission of the program is to prepare advanced social work practitioners as leaders who pursue social justice with a commitment to service with diverse populations, address disparity issues that prevail globally and engage in competent practice.

### **Reflections from Johnson C. Smith University Social Work Faculty**

Johnson C. Smith University (JCSU) is a 150-year-old HBCU with a rich history of making a contribution to the development of a socially just society. The history of the university demonstrates an institution committed to create change agents for building a better society. The institution creates a safe environment to nurture and protect student development socially and academically. The process of obtaining higher education has historically been a mechanism many members of marginalized societal groups have employed to create social opportunities for

societal change and to ensure both individual and group upward mobility. In August 2014, JCSU launched the first graduate program in the university's history. The university's selection of social work education to be the inaugural graduate degree demonstrates the institutional commitment to social justice.

My personal reflection of the election of Donald Trump is in the capacity of a father of two children, one twelve and one fifteen. My daughter, who is the youngest and is in the 7th grade, presented the greatest challenge for me. This election had successfully divided citizens along party lines, ideological values and beliefs, and even among some of our youngest and most vulnerable members, such as middle school youth. My son who is 15 was much more distant from the drama of the election, but he closely examined the rhetoric and was verbal about how candidate Trump's derogatory use of language and apathetic attitude prevented him from connecting with Trump. He was clear that, based on his observations as an African American male, he did not believe that candidate Trump would fairly represent the issues of all members of society fairly nor equitably. The morning after a full night of anticipation, the results were in and shock and trauma held a tight grip as the nation reacted to the news.

I remember vividly the election of Donald Trump, which was a shock that was felt by many who feared the damage and social upheaval that could quickly become a reality under the leadership of someone whose rhetoric was so bigoted and filled with hatred of others. This billionaire who ran on the promise to "make America great again" was never quiet about his intention to return America to its former greatness, nor did he ever directly define the causes for which America had strayed from greatness. The best the American people had in the interpretation of his rhetoric was his campaign platform to build a wall and keep out illegal Mexican immigrants, create a ban barring Muslims from entering the U.S., tax goods coming from China and Mexico, repeal and replace the Affordable Health Care Act, increase and expand military capacity for war, and ensure aggressive reaction to terror against American enemies (Johnson, 2016). As a member of a marginalized community, I connected with how the language of Trump's campaign created fear and terror in the heart of citizens who are aware of their marginalized position in America. The arrogance and attitude of superiority displayed throughout his run for the presidency was frightening to me and my community. The definition of white privilege, a term used to describe societal privileges not accessible to non-whites, is the invisible package of unearned assets, both recognized and unrecognized advantages accessed by those who identify as white (McIntosh, 1990).

One of my many roles as a social work educator is to engage students in critical thought. The graduate students at JCSU take my social problems and policy course as a part of the final year curriculum. As the campaigning and subsequent election of Trump was happening, it was my goal to ensure that students learned and discussed the history of the social welfare institutions, the qualitative differences between ideologies, values and political party affiliation, in addition to building on the knowledge, skills and beliefs of the profession in an effort to identify social problems. I engaged students in this process through the transformational learning approach. This process of helping students shift through the many voices they have developed over a lifetime is a highly reactive professional activity for graduate social work students. I felt it was necessary to shift the way I taught and engage students in the content, given the real-time

examples of shifting politics.

As my students were developing their professional identity and utilizing professional competencies in their field placements, I felt the need to ensure that students had an appropriated outlet as a means to gain clarity regarding their personal and professional development. The election of Trump brought out many emotions and thoughts, especially in North Carolina where we were already engaged in the controversial HB2 legislation which restricted the facilities of individuals within the LGBTQ community. The rhetoric of Trump was increased and many of the students were conflicted, given their personal religious or cultural beliefs. One of the more difficult tasks that I had to undertake was to ensure that students understood how social norms, societal values and beliefs, family values and training, religious or church experiences, educational training and personal dreams and aspirations influenced decision-making and behaviors. Two of my goals in using the transformational learning approach was to provide my students with a place for creative critical thought and to create an environment that supports the development of social consciousness that impacts and connects the student to the professional values, skills and competencies. The use of critical thinking pushed students to uncover and individually investigate their core personal beliefs, values, and behaviors evaluating each against the profession's expectation and code of conduct. This process was necessary for my students in understanding the importance of being able to meet others where they are without judgment or value in order to provide appropriate social work services.

As an important note, during the campaign and election period, students were exhibiting confusion, fear and apprehensive hope. There were several other social issues that were impacting student response: locally and nationally the issue of police brutality was escalating; racial tensions were high as a result of the South Carolina church shooting killing nine church members; and citizens were rioting in the Charlotte area in response to yet another police shooting killing a husband and father who suffered traumatic brain injury. JCSU held several events on campus to help students navigate their political and social response to a marked number of social unjust events as well as the election of President Trump. There was a partnership created between JCSU, University of North Carolina Charlotte (UNCC), and the National Association of Social Work Charlotte Chapter where several panels were provided to address the issue of race, social justice and political action. These events were held in three locations, one on the JCSU campus, the second on the UNCC campus, and the third at the NASWNC conference in Asheville, NC. Several students participated in all three events; many students noted their participation and having a role in the peaceful protest occurring in the Charlotte area; students also committed to increasing their civic engagement activities and being more politically involved.

### **Conclusion**

From our perspective, the election of Trump created a variety of responses from students, faculty, and the larger community surrounding HBCUs. While there was initial shock at how America could vote for a person who engaged in the use of xenophobic, racist, sexist, and homophobic remarks to represent the country, there was also a sense of togetherness which occurred as a need to rally against the type of society that promotes such behaviors. Moreover,

there was a sense of necessity to look for groups that were specifically target by Trump and his campaign. As demonstrated in this reflection, the rise of Trump to power led to more political discussions and the incorporation of transformational learning into social work courses at three HBCUs as a means to embrace student learning and engagement. While there is still much work to be done, we wanted to ensure that future social workers felt empowered and were able to engage in social justice, advocacy, and creative critical thinking. Despite the negative rhetoric that has plagued the White House, we have all pledged to do what we can when we can to stand up against racism, oppression, discrimination, and sexism within our roles as social work professionals.

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