

LaNell Williams: *The Goals of the Women+ of Color Project*

The Equity and Inclusion Journal Club

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LaNell Williams is a PhD student at Harvard University, NSF Graduate Research Fellow, and member of the APS Council of Representatives. In addition to all that, she founded the Women+ of Color Project (WOCP) to support [womxn](#) of color in STEM. In October of 2019, she ran a workshop at Harvard to support under-represented racial minority (URRM) womxn in the process of applying to graduate school, through networking opportunities with their peers and STEM professionals, writing tips, and so much more. LaNell said that her mission was to give these womxn the resources and support to get into an excellent PhD program and to thrive.

The American Association for Women in Physics ([AAWIP.com](#)) notes that there are less than 100 PhDs in physics that have been awarded to African American or Black (AA/B) women (and only two have ever been awarded to AA/B womxn from the Harvard physics department). That figure is likely similar for non-White Hispanic, Native American, and other URRM womxn. Beyond that, the American Institute of Physics recently published a report saying that there has been no significant increase in the number of Black physics PhDs in the last 30 years. If you're curious about that report, you can find it here: [aip.org/diversity-initiatives/team-up-task-force](#)

So the question is: why? Why do AA/B womxn not pursue PhDs in STEM? LaNell said some of the most common answers she hears include:

- they don't have the academic pedigree, grades, or ability to thrive or survive in competitive programs (*they do*)
- they aren't interested (*they are*)
- they don't apply, so there's no way they could be present in that space.

It's this last point that piqued LaNell's interest the most. Are AA/B womxn applying to graduate schools to pursue a PhD in STEM? If they're not applying, why? There are a number of reasons this might be the case, including:

- the environment is unwelcoming, and in many cases, unsafe.
- with a dearth of peers and/or role models, so it's difficult — if not impossible — to see themselves in these spaces
- often students are actively discouraged from applying and achieving the goals that they have set for themselves

And so, the WOCP was founded because it believes there are qualified URRM women+ out there who are already ready for graduate school, but need the resources and encouragement to apply to the schools they want to go to. The conference actively recruited students to join the program. The organizers contacted heads of departments and chairs of HBCUs, advertised on Facebook and Twitter, and in doing so reached students across the entire country. After only two weeks of advertising, they got 150 applications. About 100 of those were womxn of an under-represented racial minority with an average GPA of about 3.6. In the end, 20 people were selected to participate in the workshop. Of those 20, 5 students sent in applications to graduate programs and 3 were accepted.

Anticipating some push-back to this kind of program, LaNell asked us (more or less rhetorically): Why is it so important to focus on the needs of these specific groups? How do we prevent those MOST marginalized from falling through the cracks? If we continue to create programs that only selectively focus on certain issues, then certain people, numbers, and ultimate representation will be washed into the background (for example, programs that are specific to *all* women are historically most beneficial to White women).

It is important to note that this was all put together by LaNell and one other graduate student, and it was *hugely* successful. How can institutions step up to the plate and make a bigger effort?

Due to current events, the organizers of WOCP have been thinking of bringing this to an online platform, with the potential to reach many more people than they could before. Their goals would be similar: a how-to for all the things you might do in academia (e.g., applying to grad school, getting through, applying for grants or fellowships or observing time, writing a paper, GRE prep, physics-GRE prep, conflict resolution, etc.). They want to spend more time addressing some of the social factors that block URRM womxn from applying to graduate school in the first place, including income, moving expenses, scholarships and fellowships.

The organizers of WOCP made this an external project from the beginning. This makes it much easier for the program to continue and be replicated at other institutions. Their hope was that this would encourage institutions to focus their attention on this particular demographic.

LaNell left us with a few questions to keep in mind and hopefully continue this conversation in other spaces.

1. Why is it so important to focus on the needs of these specific groups? How do we prevent those MOST marginalized from falling through the cracks?
2. What does this work look like on an individual level? An institutional level?
3. What has helped you to thrive?
4. What does mentorship mean?
5. How much onboarding is there for starting a research/graduate program?
6. How do we quantify success? How do we quantify thriving?
7. What kinds of jobs are students getting at the end of their programs?

For more information about LaNell and WOCP, check out this article:

<https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2019/10/conference-encourages-women-of-color-to-pursue-doctorates-in-physics/>