

MINORITY SERVING INSTITUTIONS ORAL HISTORIES PROJECT

FELECIA COMMODORE

By Brittany Robertson



Felecia Commodore is Assistant Professor of Educational Foundations and Leadership at Old Dominion University. Commodore earned her Ph.D. in Higher Education from the University of Pennsylvania in 2015, an M.A. in Higher Education Administration from the University of Maryland, College Park as well as a B.A. in Sociology from Drexel University. She has published many articles and publications related to Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and issues concerning organizational leadership, education, race, and gender. Recently, Felecia released her latest book *Black Women College Students: A Guide to Student Success in Higher Education* (2018). In her career, Commodore has served in several administrative roles in advising and admissions at Trinity University and the University of Maryland College Park.

In my interview with Felecia, I had the opportunity to learn more about what lies beyond the accomplishments listed on her resume. Her perspectives and research interests are shaped by her identity: her upbringing in rural Maryland, her family, her faith, and most importantly, her identity as a Black woman. Felecia's scholarly work is tied to a larger purpose that guides her work. Her familial ties, including a long lineage of HBCU graduates, have contributed to her passion for supporting HBCUs. As I learned, one of her most fulfilling roles is as a supporter and advocate of Black women. She noted the need for representation in faculty positions at universities and the impact of the visibility of Black women faculty on the educational outcomes of Black women students.

Commodore recognized three parts of her identity that have had the most impact on her research interests: her race and gender, her faith, and her upbringing. She strongly identifies with her Black woman identity, so much so that when she noticed that there were few Black women faculty in her Ph.D. program, it only affirmed her decision to become a professor. In her own words:

I think particularly in my Ph.D. program, it became more of my consciousness because of not only what I was studying but the space I was in. Just thinking and looking around and seeing that there weren't many Black women faculty, at least tenure track. And so, as I was coming into my academic identity, looking for those roles models and listening to their stories, and what they had experienced, I think it really did have an impact on me. And, even now, as a Black woman faculty, I am the only Black faculty in my department, and even the impact that my presence has is important.

An additional layer of her identity that contributes to her work is that she is also a woman of faith. She is a Christian and is a leader and parishioner of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church. This aspect of her identity not only supported her need to find purpose in her work, but contributed to her interest in studying AME-sponsored HBCUs.

Finally, an important aspect of her identity was her rural upbringing. Interestingly, Commodore pointed out that the experiences of rural Black people are often "forgotten" in research, due to the focus on the urban/suburban dichotomy of the Black experience. She described herself as a "...country Black girl, who you know, listens to country music and has cowboy boots." Though she admits she no longer wears the boots, she carried this identity with her throughout her educational journey. She supports her students, particularly those that share a similar Black rural experience because she understands how important that is.

Though Felecia attended Drexel University, a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) for her undergraduate studies, her exposure to

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higher education from an early age was at HBCUs. As mentioned previously, she had several family members that attended or were associated with HBCUs. She mentioned that she even learned how to swim on an HBCU campus. When her sisters who attended HBCUs were reading books that tackled subjects related to racism and Black consciousness, this encouraged her to read those same books. Seeing educated Black people encouraged her to pursue her own educational goals.

She also mentioned that one of the reasons she wanted to study HBCUs was because of the negative perceptions of HBCUs her fellow Black PWI peers internalized. Because HBCUs were so instrumental in her upbringing despite attending a PWI, she wanted to support these institutions any way she could. In her doctoral studies, Felecia worked at the Center for Minority Serving Institutions at the University of Pennsylvania and published works related to these institutions. She mentioned that one of her greatest accomplishments was publishing a piece on HBCU boards, which had not been focused on in that way before. Doing research on HBCUs and supporting their initiatives is more than a research agenda in her view, it is her passion and her purpose. She views her work as a way to give back.

For Felecia, the path to the professoriate was not a clear one. Initially, she wanted to work in the music industry as an A&R executive. After taking advantage of the co-op experience embedded within Drexel's curriculum, she decided to switch gears and focus on higher education. Ultimately it was the support and guidance of faculty, like Noah Drezner, Marybeth Gasman, and Sharon Fries-Britt in graduate school, that showed her that she could receive a Ph.D.

Now in her role as Assistant Professor at Old Dominion University, she does the same for her students. In the interview, Felecia recalled a time where a student had difficulties adjusting, and how important it was for her to recognize that she was in distress, and support her in any way she could. She took a more hands-on approach in this situation and became not only an example of educational success for this student, but a supportive accountability partner. In the end, the student persisted and is now interested in graduate work.

Finally, Felecia shared several best practices for students and researchers interested in studying HBCUs. The first piece of advice she shared is that you should work with other scholars in the field. She stated, "There are only a handful, in my opinion, of HBCU researchers, and we all need each other." The second piece of advice she shared was related to the importance of being ethical in your work. Researchers should treat HBCUs as communities that should be respected. The third piece of advice is to be passionate about your work. Another essential piece of advice pertains to researchers in general, and it is to be persistent. More specifically, gaining access to sites may be difficult at times. She also encourages researchers to look for new questions to explore, because of the saturation of researchers focusing on the same questions. Additionally, she advises researchers to reflect, and to always check their motivations throughout the process. Finally, for students considering doctoral programs, she believes that you should consider the source of your training (advisors/professors), as it will impact your level or preparedness for faculty roles.

Minority Serving Institutions Oral History Project

The MSI Oral History Project shares a glimpse into the lives of prominent scholars and leaders across the MSI landscape. This initiative was born out of a class titled "Understanding Minority Serving Institutions," in which students interviewed key figures in higher education who have led Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs), work to advocate for MSI inclusion in larger discussion within higher education, or conduct MSI-related research. These important individuals range from faculty in higher education to MSI presidents to those working within nonprofit organizations that support MSIs.