

SPEAKING AGAINST INSTITUTIONAL VIOLENCE

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Acknowledgement

I owe a world of gratitude to my friends and family for helping me get through this. You know who you are.

Speaking against Institutional Violence

Seven years ago, a colleague directly attacked my scholarly integrity—setting in motion an almost two-year battle with my university. I had no choice. I had to fight back. I won the case, but I also lost. I lost years of my professional life, faith in the institution, and my original desire for being a faculty member.

Power functions in brutal particulars. It stretches time. I was forced to re-turn, re-hash, and re-live the past in slow motion and from multiple angles. My senses were overwhelmed. My body ached. I was angry, disappointed, and righteously indignant all at once. Battling a powerful institution cracked me open. It broke parts of me and changed me.

The case that cracked me open was initiated by an older white man who blamed me—a younger but more senior Indian-American woman professor—for his professional failures.

During those years, I was completely disoriented—by design or inefficiency, I'm not sure. I wasn't told, for example, what the case was about for two months. I repeatedly requested information and got *no* response. Throughout the case, I was advised by well-meaning veteran colleagues that if I just shared the facts then everything would work out. As a woman of color, I had my doubts about this strategy; but as a social scientist, I too wanted to believe that facts would carry the day.

My opponent made his specious case to the office of research integrity, which then initiated an investigation of research misconduct. This committee would report their recommendation to the provost. According to the system rules, the provost would make the final decision on the case.

While in the hands of the investigation committee, which received limited oversight from external administration, I was presumed guilty. I found that the university committees took up

my former colleague's complaints about me, repeating his harmful mischaracterizations in their comments and raising doubts about my integrity and expertise:

Was I telling the truth?

Did I really know enough about what I was doing?

They also reinforced retrograde patriarchal beliefs when they questioned my role as a woman working with a man. . . .

Had I been kind enough to the complainant?

Did I make sure my male colleague knew how to complete basic academic tasks?

They seemed untroubled that these questions positioned me as a subservient caretaker and the complainant as a person who was not capable of doing the work of a scholar. When I named these patterns of questioning as potentially racist and sexist, I got *no* response. I hired an attorney.

For every day of my two-year battle, I was made to feel enraged, frustrated, and tired.

I was always screaming on the phone as my daughter witnessed me trying to get the university to do something about my case.

I obsessively replayed my arguments with my husband who worried with me about how this would affect my livelihood and our lives.

I couldn't sleep and when I did, I would often jump out of the bed to run from phantoms.

I was exhausted, but I refused to be beaten, and positioned as an uncaring, unethical, and incompetent scholar.

On the advice from my dean, I reached out to multiple campus offices to explain the situation and get appropriate support. I communicated with multiple administrators in the office of faculty affairs, staff in the offices of institutional ethics and compliance and victims

assistance. With varying degrees of compassion and concern, I received advice to document everything I was experiencing and to have patience with the process, in which no one thought they could intervene. A couple of kind administrators reached out multiple times during this time to check in with me and to express their disappointment in how the case was being handled.

While I was seeking formal support from the institution, teaching courses, serving on committees, and running research projects, I also had to address the committee's constant onslaught of questions. I flooded the committee with evidence responding to each and every feeble allegation set before me by the complainant. I responded quickly and thoroughly with carefully worded arguments backed by email records, Google documents with time-stamped entries, data visualizations, and letters from eyewitnesses to back every one of my claims. I produced hundreds of pages to defend myself.

I was effective in forcing the committees to give up on particular lines of questioning, but they would come up with new and almost laughable angles to pursue. They kept shifting the ground. They would throw something at me and I would quickly respond using all the skills of research that ironically, I was being accused of not having. They tried to find the smallest of mistakes in my responses, as if to suggest that if I were capable of making a tiny error I was also guilty of destroying a man's entire career.

My unwillingness to be cowed seemed to have made the committee more determined to win. When they threatened to level stronger accusations against me, which would have significant consequences on my career, I realized that what had sprung from one man's bruised ego had turned into a battle between me and the university committees who seemed determined to take up his cause. The case's increasing absurdity clarified that this was not about any

supposed misconduct in which I was purported to have engaged. It was about me, a woman and a person of color, challenging institutional power and those who hold it.

When the case finally emerged from the bowels of the university and reached the provost who would determine the final decision on the case, it was fully dismissed. The nearly two-year battle was an enormous waste of my time. It was a distraction that kept me from giving my full attention to my students, my scholarship, my friends, and my family.

One of the especially damaging outcomes of institutional violence is that we are made to feel afraid to talk about how we were abused. We fear retaliation. We are ashamed that we let this happen to us. We worry about our careers. For many women of color, these fears are just another layer added to persistent feelings of not belonging in higher education. Our fears do not, however, silence us. Word gets out about who has been harmed, who has done the harm, and its consequences.

I am often contacted by women at conferences and via social media who need a witness to their story, who want advice, or who are at the end of their rope. I am happy to talk with these people. But, we should not have to rely on a *whisper* network to protect ourselves.

I share my story because I want other women and people of color to know that they are not alone. What happened to me should not be understood as a one-off experience, a terrible thing that happened to an unfortunate person. During my fight with the university, I knew of two other women who were also in the midst of their battles. Comparing my situation to theirs underscored that not everyone can hire an attorney, draw on the strengths of their community, or continue fighting while maintaining their job.

I have the gift of education, if not hyper-education, from a PhD to a post-doc to the privilege of a tenure-track position. I have the luxury of speaking the language of the academy

and have access to a robust social network and economic resources. We should not be required to have all of these resources to stand up for our dignity. The institutions where we earn our paychecks were not created for people from non-dominant backgrounds to thrive. The procedures that enliven many institutions of higher education have not historically served us well and there are people in our institutions who are threatened that we are here.

I share my story with the hope that it moves those of us in positions of power—and all of us have some—to speak up, to intervene, and to challenge institutional abuse that often cloaks itself as legitimate policy. It is on us to recognize and embody our ethical responsibilities to each other. We do not need individual actors to save the day; we don't need saviors. What we need is *collective* responsibility and *institutional* accountability to ensure that abusive processes do not undermine the true and radical possibilities of higher education.

In that spirit, I conclude with a set of recommendations for institutional leaders to consider as they organize investigations into research misconduct:

- Campus policy should state that judgments on research misconduct and/or authorship must align with the agreed-upon publication standards and ethical standards of the relevant fields.
- An unbiased administrator should provide oversight of research misconduct investigations to ensure that people are being treated fairly and in an efficient manner.
- Research misconduct offices should provide training
 - on what counts as “evidence” to all committee members
 - on how to write reports so that everything that is written is grounded in evidence and written in a way that does not position participants negatively (e.g., as liars)

- on understanding the research base that demonstrates how racism and sexism play out in investigations both in the academy and more broadly in courts
- Overall, the process should be highly transparent—for example, respondents should have access to the allegations as soon as possible so that they can respond fully; participants should know how the case is being presented to committees; and I strongly recommend that there should be transcripts of the committee conversations available to all involved if we are truly committed to being fair in these processes.

Dr. A. Susan Jurow is Professor of Learning Sciences & Human Development at the University of Colorado, Boulder. Dr. Jurow's scholarship and professional practice center on ameliorating systems that marginalize people and communities. Her work involves research and design efforts with historically non-dominant youth in school and community settings, progressive social activists, technology designers, and faculty and students in the context of higher education. Across these contexts, Dr. Jurow and her collaborators have foregrounded people's capacity to organize new futures while simultaneously struggling against entrenched systems of oppression.