

‘I Was Fed Up’: How #BlackInTheIvory Got Started, and What Its Founders Want to See Next

By *Francie Diep* JUNE 09, 2020



Courtesy of Shardé M. Davis

Shardé M. Davis and Joy Melody Woods at the National Communication Association’s African American Communication and Culture Division/Black Caucus

Joy Melody Woods first typed out the #BlackInTheIvory hashtag sometime late Saturday night. She and Shardé M. Davis, her friend and colleague, were spending the evening on Twitter and texting each other. Both are Black women in communications research — Woods a doctoral student at the University of Texas at Austin, and Davis an assistant professor at the University of Connecticut.

Prompted by nationwide attention to deadly policing against black Americans, the two friends had been talking about racist encounters they had had during their academic careers, like the time a senior white male colleague [told Davis](#) that she would have no problem getting a job because she is a black woman — “as though I couldn’t get a job otherwise, based upon my merit and record.”

“I texted her: I have this hashtag idea, #BlackInTheIvory,” Davis said. “What do you think about that? I think I’m going to use it to share some of my experiences. She responds, saying, ‘Girl, I’ve already used it. I just tweeted it out.’ I was like, wait, I just wanted some feedback!”

Davis and Woods’s hashtag unleashed a tidal wave. As of Tuesday morning, nearly 9,000 people have tweeted #BlackInTheIvory, a testament to how prevalent experiences of discrimination and alienation are for black scholars. The tweets are part of a [call for higher education to confront systemic racism](#) within the institution.

The Chronicle spoke with Woods and Davis about the hashtag and what changes they want to see in academe. The discussion has been edited for length and clarity.

Tell me about what was going on in your minds as you were first tweeting #BlackInTheIvory.

Woods: What is going on in the country right now is that everywhere, from every corner, people are calling for change around the police and policies that are inherently racist toward black people. Meanwhile, these universities are sending out these statements about, "We stand with you" and "Black Lives Matter," and they were putting out these little black squares that were going around that day on social media. As a black person within that system, I call that into question. OK, you’re saying this, but how are you going to do it?



Blake Warner

Joy Melody Woods

I was fed up. I was like, I might as well talk about these experiences because if we're going to call for change in systems, why not academic systems?

Davis: We see that this police brutality is happening against black bodies, but we also know this is in our own personal lives, within the institution of academia.

The conversation we're having now about black scholars' experiences in academe, where does it fit in, in the longer history of black and other scholars of color trying to bring attention to bias in higher education?

Davis: Systemic racism has been with us, but unfortunately, white academics have not given it the weight and attention that it deserves. Because in order for them to recognize systemic racism, they also have to recognize their white privilege, which has propelled their careers in ways that are not based upon merit. That's uncomfortable, but the beautiful thing about this moment is that white folks are being forced to face it. They cannot turn their heads away.

What we're seeing now, which I think is a bit different than what we've seen before, is we are no longer interested in having dialogue about reform. We're seeing this in

the news, where people are no longer interested in talking about police reform. Oh, no. We are talking about completely uprooting the entire idea of police and law enforcement, period. Thinking about how that is one branch from systemic racism, we then can look at this other branch, academia, and say, 'We're no longer talking about reforming academia.'

Woods: We want radical, structural change.

What's the difference between reform and structural change in academia?

Woods: Reform is like: Let's do a workshop. Let's bring in one extra hire. But if you're bringing a black scholar in to be a new hire and the system that's in place is terrible, then they're not going to succeed.

Davis: Some concrete structural changes that could be made include: Having an [antiracist reporting system](#) where all students can anonymously report racist acts happening on campus. Dedicating dollars for fellowships, postdocs, and scholarships for black students. Changing promotion-and-tenure policies to acknowledge the work that many faculty of color do, that goes unnoticed and unpaid, including mentorships, service, and nonacademic publications. Having or hiring more folks of color in upper administrative positions, including presidents, provosts, and deans.

These are just a few examples, but let me tell you that I am certain that every university has had some entity on that campus that has drafted a document of what structural change would look like, but those ideas go unnoticed. I know that personally because I have been part of a group where that has happened.



Courtesy of Shardé M. Davis

Shardé M. Davis

It's honestly now the university's job to figure out what structural change looks like, for their specific community. And henceforth, they need to compensate us accordingly for the work that they're likely going to call us to do, to enact structural change. I want my back pay, and I want pay moving forward.

Do you have any next plans for the #BlackInTheIvory hashtag?

Davis: We don't want to plan too far ahead because we want whatever this is going to be to be genuine and organic. But so many folks have reached out about the possibility of how we can leverage this hashtag into other endeavors.

Woods: With the tweets from the hashtag, we now have this evidence that this is happening. So when we go to these institutions and say, 'We want this structural change,' we have this proof.

There's an open call for people who want more anonymous ways to talk about their experience. They can fill it out in a Google Form. We will be working on a document for black students who are trying to pick programs, whether it's undergraduate,

graduate, postdoc, or residency for medical schools, where they can make better-informed decisions.

That idea reminds me of what #MeToo activists would call “the whisper network,” but in written form.

Woods: Every time we mention #MeToo, we always have to shout out our black sisters. That hashtag was started by a black woman, Tarana Burke.

Davis: The #MeToo movement is interesting because it started from a hashtag and really exploded with a great amount of power. That points to the possibility of us being able to do that for our specific experiences, related to our racial identity and how it intersects with gender and other identities as well.