

Erin

WR 13300

Prof. Clauss

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Note: I have changed this essay's margins and line spacing to save paper. I also numbered the paragraphs to facilitate discussion. --PClauss

You Gotta Keep Your Head Up

Situation: I am an alumnae of Shaw High School in Columbus, GA and a freshman at the University of Notre Dame. I am writing to my friend Josh, who is a senior at Shaw and is considering attending several historically black colleges and universities. He is not sure how rewarding attending a predominantly white institution would be. Josh is worried that his teachers and peers will not be able to relate to him and that he may feel isolated and out of place. These are the same concerns that I had when deciding to attend Notre Dame. I intend to encourage him to make an informed decision about attending Notre Dame, a university wherein he'll become a catalyst for improvements, all the while developing his own personal skills.

Josh,

(1) Hey, my boy! I would be polite and ask how you're doing, but considering the Facebook posts I've seen and the scattered conversations we've had recently, I can come to that conclusion on my own. You're prospering! The last time I spoke with your mom she did nothing but brag about you. Like her, I'm proud that you're so involved in clubs, activities, and organizations at school and in the community. I always see pictures of you at events and with leaders and other black activists. Speaking of pictures, your mom posted a load of pictures from last weekend. It's odd that Shaw [the high school that we both attended] had their prom so early, but you and your date looked fire! Right after that, I read that you got the news about your acceptance at Notre Dame! Following in your girl's footsteps, I see? I know that you really like the idea of becoming a student here, but I also know that you're a smart kid and have plenty of different options for higher education. Perhaps you're apprehensive about confirming your attendance as a freshman this fall because you find some aspects of this university's culture off-putting. Being that I've been here for about a year now, I think that you can trust my opinions about the university and, by taking into account my views of this institution, make an informed decision about what to do.

(2) Although I'm sure that you have predicted this anyway, I take some responsibility in your view that predominantly white institutions make minorities, especially black people, feel out of place. I remember talking to you during the first couple of weeks of school and telling you how uncomfortable I felt living on a campus full of such a homogenous population of people. Have you heard that Notre Dame is full of rich, white people? Well, it's true. Considering where we come from, that is a huge culture shock. Shaw was what, about 50% black and almost 70% minority

students (“Shaw”)? And, I’m not sure about you, but I don’t remember sharing classes with a bunch of rich people at Shaw. It’s definitely different here. The differences between this place and our home were first emphasized during the incoming freshman’s welcome weekend. It made me feel so uncomfortable. Throughout the weekend every speaker talked about the “community” we’d be a part of as Notre Dame students. Then, a few hours later when I was thrust into dorm activities, I would see everybody who didn’t look like me cling to each other. I tried to ignore my feelings of isolation and insert myself into groups, but I didn’t get an accepting vibe from the others. The following days weren’t much better. Because of the lack of diversity, I felt so out of place the first day of classes, like an outsider looking in. I would walk into my classes hoping to find at least one black person so that I could feel some ounce of comfort. I rarely found any. There was one seminar where there were black football players, but that was my only class like that. I took another class that is known to be a “football player class” and I was the only black person. That class had at least 200 students and I was the only black person. Imagine that. Still, I didn’t purposely exclude myself from my fellow students. I tried to connect with others on a genuine and personal level, and then settled to solely searching for people to talk with about classwork. Unfortunately, trying to find a study partner was impossible. I would ask to be included in study groups but never contacted, or I would be told that they weren’t doing well enough in the class to be a good study partner, despite their A average (students at Notre Dame love to brag about As). I would trek back to Howard Hall after class feeling discouraged. Back in the dorms, there were polite hall mates. I got smiles and hellos, but I didn’t feel quite “right.” So, for the next several days I navigated the campus alone and wondered how, or if, I would try to make it through four years of this.

(3) Then, as I sat alone in my dorm room one day in September, I got a knock at the door. Waiting in the hall was a black girl with a goody bag in her hands. She introduced herself as Geralyn, and then invited me to attend a retreat called The Plunge, a retreat for black freshman that is counseled by older black students. A few days later I was running with a book bag towards the buses to the campsite (I was a little late, but you know how we do). We did an icebreaker on the way to the camp that allowed us to speak to everyone at least once. I met Karla Giles, my roommate for next year, during that short bus ride. She’s someone I spent time with during the retreat, but I also met others that have made living at Notre Dame so much easier. At the campsite, the first thing we did was get separated into families of about seven. There was a mom and dad who were counselors, and the freshmen who were the kids. The counselors encouraged us to ask them questions or voice any concerns that we had so far about being students at Notre Dame. I was

thankful that these conversations were not surface deep like the ones that I had been having since welcome weekend. In our families and in other group discussions, we spoke about the lack of black father figures, how to deal with micro-aggressions, and hair. These discussions got deep very quickly, and everyone began to form bonds as a result of them. Because of the people I've formed relationships with throughout the talks, games, and activities at the retreat, I've never had to study alone, go to the dining hall alone, or miss out on any fun activity. The older black students have been so accepting and helpful with anything from picking professors to taking me to Wal-Mart. Notre Dame boasts about the community feel, but apart from my scholarship program mates and the black community, I don't feel bonded to anyone. The black community is more closely bonded because we understand each other on a different level. We all understand how difficult it is to be the only black person in the class or go an entire year without having a black professor. So, I know that you'll feel out of place sometimes, but at least you'll have some students to relate to.

(4) Sadly, another aspect of Notre Dame that you're put off by is accurate; since there are so little minority professors or ones that come from a socioeconomically challenged background, it is true that other black students might be the only ones who can truly relate to you. I've only had one professor that is black, Professor Jennifer Jones. Other than her in the Sociology department and some in the Africana Studies department, I don't personally know of any black professors. That is unfortunate because having people teach us that look like us is so important. Sometimes I look around in class and feel discouraged because I don't see anyone who looks remotely like me. Although I know that this isn't true, it makes me think that only those types of people will ever elevate to a prestigious position. If Notre Dame had role models, or professors, that looked like us, I would feel encouraged and understood. I wouldn't feel so much pressure every time I walked into a class void of my people. The pressure comes from knowing that, to at least some of those people, I represent all black people. I have to be the most behaved and most intelligent version of myself so that I won't further ruin or perpetuate the inaccurate depiction of the stereotypical black woman in today's society and at Notre Dame in particular. Of course there's nothing wrong with being an athlete, but being a tall black woman somehow implies that I, and others like me, all play basketball because black people couldn't possibly get here without an athletic scholarship. For example, last semester my non-athlete friend and future roommate, Karla, told me that her class had a question about the women's basketball team. In front of the entire class, the professor turned and said, "Karla, you're on the basketball team, what's the answer?" I couldn't imagine the comments that you might receive. In theory, having a teacher who understands that I am not all black people will

relieve that pressure, but for now I'm stuck with having majority white professors.

(5) In addition to being of different races, you and I grew up in different socioeconomic statuses than the majority of the professors that teach here. There is an entirely different set of challenges for students like us. Contrary to some people's beliefs, money doesn't magically appear. It is a necessity that isn't easy to come by for some of us, and our lack thereof negatively affects our college experience. Sure, we have a meal plan, but there are so many other items we need that aren't often taken into account. Being from the south, we don't have any Indiana winter clothes. Jackets and snow boots and gloves and hats are expensive; and, without the financial support of family, these pressures added to a heavy workload at school can get overwhelming. Most professors at Notre Dame are accustomed to interacting with students who can focus completely on school. Those students and professors don't have to forego homework to sort out family issues or determine how they'll get home when the dorms close for breaks; we do.

(6) Although Notre Dame needs more professors who understand those issues that we face, there are some. There are professors who have gone through the very same experiences that you will throughout your college career. You probably won't find them right away. Thankfully, the scholarship program that I'm in held a panel for some of these professors to tell the audience their stories. From that panel of professors, I met an awesome one named Professor Thomas Tweed who has become a great mentor and resource for me. He's my portal to the world of college that I don't quite understand yet. He is not black, but he has gone through many of the things we have, and he is willing to my mentor. Finding him was a blessing and I haven't found many more like him, but even one person is better than no one. So, when you're a student here I suggest that you try to get to know your professors. Ask older kids that you'll meet on The Plunge about great black or ally professors. Although it may be difficult, it could really make a positive impact on your college career to seek out some professors that understand you and what you've been through.

(7) Despite all that I've written to you about the failures about Notre Dame, I still hold this view: we need you. You are a strong-willed, outspoken, educated black male. Who else would be better to initiate change than someone like you? The more people like you that flock to this university, the less of these problems we'll have. We need more people to change the minds of our peers and professors and encourage them to be more proactive and educate themselves about the issues that affect their students and classmates. We need more people to meet with administration to talk about hiring faculty that better reflect the population of the students. We need more people to be positive role models to kids at home and we'll need people to lead activities like The Plunge that

support black excellence. We need you, Josh.

(8) While it is good to know the difference you'll make at the university, I know that you won't make your decision strictly based on that; you also need to know the benefits that you'll receive from attending this university. Here, you'll learn from very intelligent individuals. The professors that will lecture you are renowned in their selective fields. I've had well-respected professors that have written widely cited works and professors who attend World Health Organization meetings overseas. Your future peers have some of the best brains in the country. They are the future successful entrepreneurs, political leaders, and activists. These professors and students are different than you in many ways, but you deserve to be here, too. You're not used to this difference. Honestly, I don't think that I am yet either. Still, I know that being around people of different races, religions, socioeconomic statuses, classes etc. is beneficial to me in the long run. You intend on going into corporate America, right? While it is becoming more diverse, corporate America is still composed mostly of white men. Racial/ethnic minorities are still underrepresented, just as they are at this university. The other universities that you're looking at are great. HBCUs were made for people like us to be able to get an education. However, that demographic is not at all representative of the country that we live in. Being here will allow you to gain the skills to learn from, and share ideas with, people that aren't like you. Those skills of communicating and interacting with different perspectives will be helpful to you in your career after college. This college may have its downfalls, but you will personally benefit from them.

(9) The last thing that I'd do is misguide you about the University of Notre Dame. You've already figured out that going to a predominantly socioeconomically privileged white institution brings about some issues for socioeconomically challenged black students like us. All of the concerns that you've previously raised have been valid and turn out to be continuing issues here, issues that you could help to fix. There have never been changes to schools, organizations, or this country without the mobilization and sacrifice of intelligent men and women who care about pertinent problems in our community. You have the opportunity to become apart of the real community of Notre Dame and promote real change. And, although I would highly respect and applaud your decision if you chose another great university, I think that you'll develop and thrive here. Good luck on your decision, kid. Call me anytime.

Keep your head up,

Erin

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