

**Critical Book Review**

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My objective for this essay is to provide a critical review of “To Live More Abundantly: Black Collegiate Women, Howard University and the Audacity of Dean Lucy Diggs Slowe” by Dr. Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2022). As I write this paper, I coincidentally celebrate my 32<sup>nd</sup> anniversary as a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated® (AKA), the first Greek-letter organization founded by Black women in 1908, a group consisting of 16 undergraduate students, one of whom was the illustrious Lucy Diggs Slowe. So, even though I have a deeply personal connection to her legacy, I am grateful for the author’s in-depth research and for this course’s broadened access and for introducing me to Dean Slowe’s many other “educational innovations” and societal activism. It is not lost on me that the chock-full of lies within the anti-DEI Executive Orders (Executive Office of the President, 2025) aim to limit the accessibility of legal, scholarly, and culturally rich literature at colleges and universities.

Distinguishable from our primary textbooks (Thelin, 2019 and Wilder, 2013), this supplementary reading unwraps the social dynamics of interpersonal relationships within the context of self-determination and during seminal moments in the history of higher education concerning the evolution of college deans. By reading this book through the critical lens of Black Feminist Theory (Collins, 2022) I’ve developed self-reflexivity and can better understand, articulate, and make meaning of my own intersectional experiences as a higher education administrator.

## **History, Logic, and Organization**

This book chronicles the lifetime achievements of the first African-American woman to become a college dean, Lucy Diggs Slowe (1883 – 1937), which span across a backdrop series of historical significance, encompassing the Post-Reconstruction Period, the Segregation Era, The Great Migration, World War I, The Harlem Renaissance Era, and The Great Depression. Within the overarching context of higher education administration, the organization of the meta-narrative covered in this book is masterfully constructed and made me think of the type of structural sequences typical in motion pictures. The sequences within this book entail miniature stories that interestingly assemble a much bigger picture. For example, the opening scene (p.1), using Dean Slowe’s wit and charisma to invite readers to Howard University’s Inaugural Women’s Dinner in 1922, is a story about Black womanhood, self-definition, and the “great law of self-development” (Cooper, 1892). A different sequence about Dean Slowe’s career ascension, demotion, and self-determination details the outrageous dimensions of sexism in higher education. The author also uses storytelling for the sequence about the racially segregated National Association of Deans of Women (NADW) Conference in New Orleans to narrate our protagonist’s activism and resistance to racism in 1937 (p. 73-77). Additionally, a key story concerns the dreadful “Mills Case”, (where a fellow professor publicizes Dean Slowe’s sexuality in attempt to humiliate her), bringing centerstage the impact of heteronormativity to educate readers about the effects of marginalization from an LGBTQ perspective (p. 90).

Having been informed by course materials, such as the aforementioned textbooks, primary source documents and additional assigned readings from Dr. Blockett’s syllabus that provide me with points of reference, this essay synthesizes the topics discussed in

Beauboeuf-Lafontant's book with two major themes, (1) the evolution of student affairs leadership and, (2) allyship and activism which, as a sidebar, also envelop the "respectability" values of the "New Negro Woman" akin to the "Female Talented Tenth" (DuBois, 1903 and Higginbotham, 1994). It is important to note that respectability as a strategy to combat the "controlling symbols, negative stereotypes, and false images of Black women" (Collins, 2022) is arguably not in the same context as it has become referenced post-civil rights era; but, the breadth and depth of the respectability concept is beyond the scope of this essay's focus on the ways Dean Slowe uniquely institutionalized resistance to marginalization.

### **Evolution of Student Affairs**

Lucy Diggs Slowe was an extraordinary pioneer who influenced the professionalization of the job title, Dean of Women Students. Yet, our primary textbooks mention her name once and only in general reference to being among a handful list of the "galley of lone voyagers" (Thelin, 2019) regarding the emerging occupations available for academic women with advanced degrees. In contrast, Beauboeuf-Lafontant's research reveals a broader scope of the contentious issues at colleges during the early 1900s by using a gendered lens to examine the history of student development philosophies and courses of study for higher learning. Not only were academic leaders grappling with whether or not curriculum should focus on liberal arts content or vocational training (Washington, 1895), but the deans of collegiate women in the United States were fighting against the devaluation of course requirements for women students being relegated to domestic, household work.

Regarding the role that college faculty served in the administration of student affairs, this book also informed me on the progression of what was considered a “matron” to dean of women students, to a gender-neutral dean, and now in many instances a position leading to an executive career path such as vice president of student affairs, provost and president. Career counseling as embodied by career service centers at colleges is a byproduct of what Dean Slowe was trying to establish as an advocate for exposing Black women to a variety of professions to offset pigeonholing within “feminized roles” such as secondary teachers. Dean Slowe’s foresight is incredibly relevant to my scholarship, which aims to interrogate the power and responsibility that colleges have in delivering on the promise to all graduates securing aspirational occupations and equal pay.

### **Allyship and Activism**

Although the author, Beauboeuf-Lafontant, does not use an intersectional framework (Crenshaw, 1989) to address the compounds of racism and sexism that Dean Slowe encountered within her affiliated higher education institutions and associations, this book does establish a blueprint for activism that ranges from engaging in personal protests or individual forms of resistance to leveraging allies and forming new organizations altogether. An example of Dean Slowe’s strategy to secure a male advocate, George Crawford, to help her with confronting the sexist treatment she was experiencing by her supervisor, a Black man, Mordecai Johnson, the President of Howard University, is as follows:

In an attempt to protect her name and work, Slowe reached out to the vice president of the interracial board of trustees, George Williamson Crawford [a

protégé of W.E.B. Dubois], a lawyer from New Haven, Connecticut. He was not a member of the executive committee that had decided to move her to campus, and Slowe hoped he would be sympathetic to her situation (p. 98, para. 2).

The origin of organic but deliberate allyships formed with organizations whose members were predominately White women is also highlighted:

At the start of her tenure at Howard, Slowe served on the board of the NSC [National Student Council] as well as on the YWCA's [Young Women's Christian Association] National Council on Colored Work... fostered interracial education and linked chapters across the color line. For twelve years... Slowe represented the NSC at the annual national conventions of the Committee on the Cause and Cure of War, a coalition of nine Progressive Era women's organizations. The regularity of her attendance reflected the specific and atypical belonging she experienced within the YWCA.

I suspect that the reason the author did not reference intersectionality is that the discriminatory experiences mostly documented were compounded but arguably not necessarily interlocking forces of oppression. However, I would be remiss if I did not call to attention that the formation of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated® (AKA) was an act of self-determination in defiance of intersectionality. Knowing that Greek-letter organizations at colleges are generally considered positive vessels for fostering student development, the founders of AKA, including Lucy Diggs Slowe, engaged in self-led activism by seizing the opportunity to form this new sorority. Therefore, Beauboeuf-Lafontant could have used Crenshaw's framework to inform how marginalization is

manifested and dismantled. In this case, students who were Black women were denied full participation in the college life experience because of the interlocking structures of existing fraternities, which were exclusive for men, and the existing sororities, which were exclusively established for Whites.

### **Conclusion**

The strengths of the book, “To Live More Abundantly,” are marked by worthiness and credibility, two of the highly revered components of the eight “Big Tent” criteria model for qualitative research quality (Tracy, 2019). The topics covered in-depth are worthy because the research is relevant to studies within a PhD in Higher Education Administration Program, and, ironically, timely due to the 2025 political discourse centered on diversity, sense of belonging, and education policy. Furthermore, the volume of artifacts and documents analyzed is significant and culturally interesting. Concerning credibility, Beauboeuf-Lafontant’s research contains “thick description, concrete detail, explication of tacit knowledge, and showing rather than telling using multivocality for crystallization” (Tracy, 2019). In other words, her research is sufficiently backed by evidence from her extensive literature review.

A potential limitation of this book is the oversight of not explicitly attributing Dean Slowe’s 1920s college student development philosophy as precursory to the cognitive development and self-authorship theories of Piaget, Petty, Kegan, and Baxter-Magolda (Patton, Renn, Guido, Quayle, & Evans, 2016). However, it is a limitation that can be viewed as an opportunity, whereas I intend to augment from the point of connection that involves career education at colleges. I believe that a research agenda aimed at advancing the

vertical, socio-economic mobility of marginalized groups is warranted to further address intersectionality in occupations, hiring, compensation, and promotions.

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