

DIARY OF A 21 YEAR OLD NIGERIAN PHYSICS GRADUATE IN CANADA'S SMALLEST PROVINCE

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January 5th, 2015. I arrived at Charlottetown, PEI at the age of 16 to pursue my career goal of becoming a computer scientist. This was after I had been told in high school to pursue something a bit more “realistic” than Astronomy. Job security had always been a top concern for African parents, not “passion”. The only options parents loved hearing were doctor, lawyer, engineer.

December 15th 2019. I graduate with a degree in Physics and minor in Math. These pure science careers that would make any African parent cringe. I do not blame them.

STRUGGLES AS A PHYSICS MAJOR MINORITY

I am not only not a white male, I am female and to take it a step further in the underrepresented chain, a black female.

Representation matters more than you think. Being able to see someone who looks just like you, doing something that you would love to do, makes all the difference in the world.

I had only encountered one other black person, in all of my time in Canada and actually all twenty one years of my life, pursuing a physics degree. This was during year four of my undergraduate degree when I attended my second AUPAC (Atlantic Undergraduate Physics And Astronomy Conference). The first time I had attended that conference was the year before. I was the only black attendee. I was excited but also uncomfortable, felt out of place and simply did my best to get through the weekend. Imagine my excitement, when I finally saw someone that looked like me, and most importantly: it was a woman! It felt less lonely.

I recall when I landed my first physics job as a research assistant. It was a dream come true. I had been asked by three individuals what I was doing for the summer; my response was met with a lack of excitement, which was further met with confusion. “What is that?”, “Is that your real job?”, “I mean, what is your actual job?”.

“Oh wow, good luck with that” is the most common response I received disclosing my major. I think “alien studies” would get better responses.

I had a lot more struggles that if I were to share, this would end up being a book.

HOW TO ACHIEVE A MORE RACIALLY AND GENDER DIVERSE ENVIRONMENT

As you read these, I ask that you do so with a very open mind. My main goal is not to criticize but simply to highlight blind spots and genuinely inspire change.

- Stop being so cliquy. If the world were a high school and subjects were people, Physics would be the mean girls that are hard to be friends with. One would have to look a certain way (white) and have a certain status (male) to be included.
- Financial Aid — it’s quite straightforward, if you want more diverse students and professionals, create financial help
- Hire professors that are not just white males. Have diverse board members. Difference in opinions and backgrounds lead to breakthroughs, not conflicts.
- A society of black physicists in Canada would not hurt.
- Do not forsake the years of your youth. People I have conversed with pursued a physics degree because we had a really good physics teacher who was passionate about the subject. If you want more people in the field, show them why you are in it.
- Don’t argue, Listen! Don’t be defensive, be empathetic. It is out of love that change occurs.
- Promote and value careers and physics opportunities besides research. If one does not want to be a researcher or a teacher, they should still be able to pursue a Physics degree because it presents lots of career paths. If these options are highlighted, it will attract people with different backgrounds.

A lot of support towards underrepresented minorities (race, gender, etc.) has always been word of mouth: platforms to speak up, diversity events, the list goes on. Creating diversity, equity and inclusion is not doing someone a favour, it’s giving someone what is rightly theirs. It is not something to pat yourself on the back for. Changes start small, and drops of water make an ocean, but consistency is key.

Physicists are some of the most patient, competitive, stubborn, persistent people that I know. Those skills have led to amazing breakthroughs in the world of science. If only we applied a little of that tenacity towards improving equity, diversity and inclusion in the Physics community, we could change our community as well.

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