

THE SOLE BLACK STUDENT

By Robert W. Lay II '10 (800)

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Ever since I was in high school, I considered myself to be a lifetime learner. When I enrolled in college and realized that I could get paid to go to school, I decided right there that I would do it for the rest of my life. I will admit, even though school was difficult at times, I enjoyed the challenge. I loved taking on new knowledge every day and furthering my education, so it was natural that after I received my bachelor's degree, I would go on to obtain my master's degree and eventually, my doctorate. However, when I entered my doctoral program, that's when things got tough. The classes went from hard to intense, but it was equally as hard being the only person in my classes that looked like me. Though there were other Black students in my program, we were all at different stages of our journey, so we barely took classes together, making me the only Black student in my courses the majority of the time.

To make matters worse, it was evident that many of my classmates and professors did not interact with Black people often, as there were many micro aggressions directed towards me. They would frequently single me out to compliment me on how articulate I spoke, how intelligent I sounded, or how my locs looked so "cool" and "fun." As a result, on top of having to worry about being prepared enough for my classes, on a daily basis I felt an increasing amount of pressure to represent and speak for a whole race of people. When Alton Sterling, an unarmed Black man in Baton Rouge, LA, was murdered by a police officer on camera and the country shifted to discuss how police viewed Black men, I was asked to speak out in class about my point of view. When we discussed educational issues that plagued Black students, it was all eyes on me to add something valuable to the conversation. After the 2016 election of Donald Trump, many people, including myself, were not particularly happy with the outcome. My white classmates looked to me as they were curious to know how I felt about it. The pressure never stopped. However, a part of me felt that if I represented my Blackness well enough that it would make it easier for the next Black person they interacted with, or that it would prompt my white counterparts to give a Black student an opportunity that they normally would not have given to a student who preceded me.

Knowing positive change in my counterparts was potentially on the line made my doctorate program much more difficult than it should have been and led me to focus my efforts on always trying to stand out in my classes through the quality of my work and class participation. A white classmate once even jokingly stated that I was a teacher's pet because in our ethnographic class I would always ask a lot of questions and share my opinions. Though I laughed it off with the rest of my classmates, it was clear my white counterparts did not understand my plight, but also could not ignore my effort. A week later, that same white student even asked me to my face what motivates me to be so interactive in class. So, I explained to him,

"When the professor does attendance tonight and determines who participated in class, she may not remember if a portion of the white students in class spoke, but will be more likely to believe they did anyway. However, when she looks at my name, the name of the only Black student in her class, she will remember how intelligently I spoke or did not speak. She will remember if I had something to contribute to the conversation or not, because I am the only Black student taking her course. And in the future when you interact with a new Black person with fun and interesting hair tomorrow, or the day after, you will think of me and you will think that student may speak as "intelligent" like you say I do. And hopefully because of that you will give them the same opportunity this institution has given me."

Though I feel the message got through, it did not relieve any of the pressure that I felt every day. However, there was reprieve in those few classes that I was accompanied by another Black student. During those classes it felt as though a weight was lifted for that two-hour class period. Unfortunately, these classes came few and far in between, but the real motivation to continue to face this challenge day after day, came not from being in class with other Black students, it came from the relationships that we created outside of class. We shared advice with one another on how to navigate the academy, we shared strategies for tackling big research papers, the frequent, "how

are you doing?” texts we shared in our GroupMe,” and the overall comradery we built while fighting what felt like the same battle. It came from the support from my friends, family and mentors, that always provided me with words of wisdom, and always rooted for my success. Those are the things that made being the sole Black student in my doctoral classes just a little easier, while reminding me that though the journey was difficult because I was by myself, I was never truly alone.

So, if you’re reading this right now, and maybe you are in the same position I was, I want you to know that there is light at the end of the tunnel. Find or build yourself a support group, colleagues in different programs, mentors, faculty members, or family members that understand the obstacles you face and can support you in your mission. Do not be afraid to shine in the spotlight that you are in, speak up and speak out in your classes. When you hit the wall and that Imposter Syndrome begins to creep in, and it will creep in, remember all that you have accomplished to get to where you currently are and where you are going. Lastly, never forget that you can do it, and I know you can because on May 10, 2019, I did it. I walked across the stage and received my degree, and where I was once was Robert Lay, the sole Black student in his doctorate classes, I am now Dr. Robert Lay, so please, “put some respect,” on my name.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Robert W. Lay II, Ed.D., defended his dissertation in the Spring of 2020 and graduated from Temple University School of Education program. His research area was hazing in Black Greek Letter Organizations. Robert Lay, who goes by Rob Lay, is a motivational speaker, a personal trainer, a published author of the fiction book entitled “The Mydas Touch,” a poet, a photographer, a brother of Omega Psi Phi Fraternity Incorporated, and most importantly is a man of God. Rob Lay was born and raised in Pittsburgh, but now lives in Philadelphia where he works for Master Charter Schools. He received a bachelor’s degree in Accounting from Cheyney University, the first HBCU. He worked as an Internal Auditor for one of the largest mutual funds companies for 4 years before switching his career path to education. After making this big decision, Rob Lay obtained his master’s degree in Educational Leadership from Temple University while also working at the institution during that time. During Rob Lay’s time in education, he has fallen in love with assisting students through their college careers through mentoring as many students as he can, working as an academic success coach and even starting his own minority need-based scholarship entitled the #loveliftlifescholarship where he raises and gives out \$500 a year. Going forward Rob Lay would like to invest more time into obtaining motivational speaking engagements, opening a photography studio, and obtaining a professor position at an institution of higher education.

Are you interested in submitting an essay or op-ed for the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Institute for Leadership, Equity, and Justice? [Read the submission guidelines here](#) and reach out to Director for Programs and Communications, Brandy Jones at brandy.jones@gse.rutgers.edu.

