Written by **R. Cort Kirkwood** on March 22, 2024

UW Diversity Chief Hit With Second Academic Fraud Complaint — Plagiarized, Used Identical Material in Different Journal Articles

Yet another diversity, equity, and inclusion bureaucrat at a major university has perpetrated major academic fraud, a complaint has alleged.

An anonymous allegation and analysis by the Washington Free Beacon charges LaVar Charleston, head of diversity at the University of Wisconsin, with plagiarism and recycling previously published work.

The university is already investigating him in another recycling case involving his wife, Sherri Ann, Harvard University's diversity chief, who is also accused of plagiarism.

Phil Roeder/Flickr

The Fraud and Plagiarism

The award-winning Charleston "inflated" his credentials, the Free Beacon reported, by publishing the same work in different journals.

"In 2014, for example, he published a pair of papers in two separate journals — the *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education* and the *Journal of Progressive Policy & Practice* — that are near-verbatim copies of each other," the website reported:

> Both describe a 15-person focus group conducted by an African-American woman and feature identical quotes from participants, all of whom appear to have been recruited from the same academic conference.

> Neither paper indicates the other was published elsewhere — a troubling omission, scholars who reviewed both studies said.

> "It is academic misconduct to publish essentially the same paper twice with no acknowledgment of the duplication," Alexander Riley, a sociologist at Bucknell University, told the *Free Beacon*. "It seems fairly clear that Charleston is gaming the system in order to get more on his CV than is merited by the amount of research he has actually done." …

> "The two 2014 papers do indeed appear to be two versions of the same paper," Riley said. "I don't see the two as distinct from one another in any substantive way." …

> Both papers also share a prominent coauthor: Jerlando Jackson, now the dean of the Michigan State University College of Education, who advised Charleston's dissertation at UW-Madison and also coauthored one of the studies based on it. The overlap raises

additional questions about norms of academic integrity at education schools and within the field of DEI scholarship, which has come under intense scrutiny in recent months amid a drip-drip of plagiarism scandals.

"Either [Charleston and Jackson] are ignorant of this principle of research publication ethics," Riley said, referring to rules against duplicate publication, "or they were both aware of what they were doing."

Journal of Diversity in Higher Education

Characteristics of Focus Group Participants

Purposeful sampling techniques were employed to ensure that all participants met the following criteria (Lincoln & Guba, 1986): (a) identify as "African American" or "Black" women, (b) are enrolled full time or were recently (in the last 3 years), and (c) are between the ages of 18 and 35 years. All 15 of the focus group participants were African American females and were recruited from the 2007 African American Researchers in Computing Sciences (AARCS) Conference. All of the focus group participants had either majored or were majoring in an area within or related to computing as an undergraduate or graduate student. Moreover, at the time of the study, two participants had already obtained a PhD in com- puting sciences, 12 were current graduate students (PhD aspirants), and one participant was complet- ing her baccalaureate degree. All undergraduate student participants were attending a historically Black college and university, and all graduate students and current PhD-holder participants were receiving or had received their graduate degrees from a predominantly White institution (PWI).

Journal of Progressive Policy & Practice

Characteristics of Focus Group Participants

This study employed purposeful sampling techniques (Lincoln & Guba, 1986), wherein all participants identified as "African American" or "Black" women, were enrolled full-time or were recently (in the last three years) in an academic computing program, and were no younger than 18 years of age and no older than 35 years of age. Fifteen African American women participants from a 2007 conference dedicated to African Americans in STEM were recruited and took part in this study. Each participant either majored in or were majoring in a computing-science related area of study as an undergraduate or graduate student. While all participants attended colleges within the continental United States, their schools were geographically dispersed. Likewise, at the time of the study, two participants had already obtained a PhD in computing sciences, 12 were current graduate students (PhD aspirants), and one participant was completing her baccalaureate degree. The undergraduate student participant was attending an HBCU, and all graduate students and current PhD holder participants were receiving or had received their graduate degrees from a PWI.

Journal of Diversity in Higher Education

In accordance with the tenets of BFT and CRF, participants in this study grappled with their self-identity as women of color in racially and sexually exclusive academic spaces. Although participants described their experiences with regard to being a woman of color in the field of computing sciences in a variety of ways, the group's consensus can be summarized in the simple exclamation of one participant: "It's tough." Depending on the situational context, they noted that they identified as either "Black" or "a woman," or, in some cases, both. As one participant stated, "At different times, different identifications come to the fore-front."

Journal of Progressive Policy & Practice

Conflicts and integrations of racial, gender, and academic identities arose repeatedly as participants reported grappling with their self-identities as women of color in race- and gender-exclusive academic spaces. Although participants described their experiences as women of color in computing sciences in a variety of ways, the group's consensus was that it is exceptionally challenging and difficult. One participant simply and directly exclaimed, "It's tough." Participants' racial and gendered identities were proclaimed largely depending upon the situation context. In other words, their primary identities varied based upon the social space within a particular educational environment. One participant relays this sentiment like this: "At different times, different identifications come to the forefront," demonstrating a set of unique— although previously-documented— challenges facing Black women at the intersections of race, gender, and science identities.

Charleston also used material from his doctoral dissertation "in four subsequent papers: the 2012 and 2014 studies that were the subject of the previous complaint, as well as two additional studies published in 2016 and 2022."

Yet the studies are purported to be "novel" and don't cite his dissertation.

Charleston 2010

Actually I became really good friends, well it was like five of us (all African Americans), and we actually started finding more things to do like different um, there used to be like different tweaks that you could put or even like in operating systems like 95 and 98, like there's a lot of different tweaks that you could, probably do like our own extra stuff. . . I actually have one of my friends who um I met freshman year as well. . .We always had this like competition about our computers like. . .What new specs are we gonna buy so its kina like a competitive and feeding type thing at the same time.

Charleston 2012

Actually, I became really good friends, well it was like five of us, and we actually started finding more things to do, like, different, um, there used to be, like, different tweaks that you could put or even, like, in operating systems like [Windows '95 and '98], like there's a lot of different tweaks that you could probably do, like, our own extra stuff. . . . I actually have one of my friends who, um, I met freshman year as well. . . . We always had this, like, competition about our computers like. . . . What new specs are we gonna buy, so it's kinda like a competitive and feeding-type thing at the same time.

Charleston, Charleston, and Jackson 2014

Actually I became really good friends, well it was like five of us (all African Americans), and we actually started finding more things to do like, there used to be like different tweaks that you could put or even like in operating systems like 95 and 98, there's a lot of different tweaks that you could do, like our own extra stuff... I actually have one of my friends who I met freshman year as well . . . We always had this competition about our computers like . . . What new specs are we gonna buy?! So it's kind of like a competitive and feeding type thing at the same time.

Charleston 2022

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THE WASHINGTON FREE BEACON

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Charleston 2012

The participants cited a number of incidents when some aspect of positive social interaction was instrumental in their decisions to pursue the computing sciences. Although other research regarding persistence in STEM has illuminated negative social influences that deter underrepresented populations from persisting (e.g., ACT, 2006; Charleston, 2012; Moore, 2006), the participants within this study relayed mostly positive social interactions that aided them throughout their studies. The participants under study were those who had gained measurable success in computing, which may be reflective of the positive iterations regarding their social experiences and scientific identity formation related to computing. This is not to say that there were not barriers related to their academic socialization experiences; however, these iterations generally came in the form of retrospective considerations about computing, as well aspects about computing they least liked. Though some participants cited their own intrigue and curiosity as large contributors to their increased search for knowledge surrounding the area of computing, most of the participants credited their parents, professors, advisors, teachers, and friends who either majored in computing sciences, or encouraged, supported, and in some cases, sponsored them to do so for their increased intrigue, introduction to the field, as well as sustained involvement in and related to computing. The thematic representations of these sentiments emerged in the form of social interactions that promoted socialization, STEM identity, confidence or self-efficacy, and success in computing sciences through STEM-related influences (STEMfluences) which formed three major sub-themes: (1) positive peer interactions and modeling, (2) parental and familial nurturing, and (3) multifaceted mentorship.

Charleston 2010

The participants cited a number of incidents when some aspect of positive social interaction was instrumental in their decisions to pursue the computing sciences. While other research regarding persistence in STEM has illuminated negative social influences that deter underrepresented populations from persisting (e.g., Moore, 2000; ACT, 2006; Gilbert et al., 2007), the participants within this study relayed mostly positive social interactions that aided them throughout their trajectories. The participants under study were those who had gained measurable success in computing, which may be reflective of the positive iterations regarding their social experiences relating to computing. This is not to say that there were not barriers related to social aspects of their experiences; however, these iterations generally came in the form of retrospective considerations about computing, as well aspects about computing they least liked.

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Plagiarism, Criminal Charge

But Charleston also stands accused of plagiarizing material for his dissertation and academic papers, the Free Beacon reported. Indeed, Charleston's work is a virtual farrago of academic fraud.

He stole material from two previously published dissertations and, amusingly enough, "by recycling a plagiarism-laden thesis, Charleston ensured his subsequent work would contain plagiarism," the website observed:

> "Much of LaVar's scholarly work since the dissertation lifts language from the dissertation verbatim," the complaint reads. "But the dissertation is full of plagiarism. So LaVar's peer-reviewed work has plagiarism throughout."

Nor is Charleston a stranger to the cops.

In 2011, he was charged with attempting to strangle a police officer, the website reported, citing the conservative MacIver Institute. Charleston skated free without a conviction because he did community service.

"Even with a PhD, I'm looked at as a criminal," he lamented in 2020. "[I]t has to be because of my color."

However people look at him, "the arrest didn't stop Charleston from climbing the ranks of the school's diversity bureaucracy," the website reported:

> Between 2010 and 2017, he helped to build Wisconsin's Equity and Inclusion Laboratory, which conducts research on "inclusive learning." He became assistant vice chancellor of student diversity at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater in 2017, then served as the inaugural dean of diversity, equity and inclusion at UW-Madison's School of Education — the third-ranked education school in the country, according to *US News and World Report*. He became the chief diversity officer of the entire university in 2021.

Charleston earns $280,000 annually.

Another Case Involves Wife

Charleston's other trouble, again, involves wife Sherri Ann.

In February, the Free Beacon reported about a complaint to her employer, Harvard, that alleged 40 plagiarized passages in her doctoral dissertation.

And she and LaVar also pulled a fast one on a peer-reviewed journal in 2014. Along with his dissertation adviser Jackson, they published a paper in *The Journal of Negro Education* that lifted passages verbatim from an article that LaVar Charleston published in the *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education* in 2012.

Just this week, the *City Journal's* Christopher Rufo unmasked a fourth plagiarizer at Harvard.