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Women of Color Face Added Challenges in Workplace

Tina Tchen and Adrienne Lawrence talk to RWU students about extra “homework” required to overcome big assumptions, small margin for error



Adrienne Lawrence (left) and Tina Tchen (center) discuss the “micro-aggressions” and false assumptions they’ve encountered being women of color in the workplace. RWU Professor Kamille Gentles-Peart (right) moderated the conversation and shared her own perspective. Image Credit: Oggi Photo

April 4, 2018 | Edward Fitzpatrick

BRISTOL, R.I. – As a trial lawyer, Tina Tchen would talk to jurors after the verdict was in. And on more than one occasion, jurors told her: “We were so impressed with how well you spoke English.”

Tchen – a Chinese-American who grew up in a Cleveland suburb and who went on to become chief of staff to former First Lady Michelle Obama – laughed when recalling those uncomfortable moments, saying, “OK, that is the only language I speak.”

Adrienne Lawrence, an African-American legal analyst and former ESPN anchor who grew up in California, can relate. She said she has often had people tell her: “You are so articulate.”

Tchen and Lawrence came to Roger Williams University on March 28 for a panel discussion titled “Not Just Race, Not Just Gender: Women of Color in the Workplace.” Inspired by the Time’s Up and #MeToo movements, the event was sponsored by the RWU Donor Fund to Increase Sexual Assault Awareness on College Campuses. It is part of RWU’s year-long series, “[Talking About Race, Gender and Power](#)” and the [President’s Distinguished Speaker Series](#).

Tchen and Lawrence spoke to RWU students, faculty and staff about the false assumptions, “micro-aggressions” and other challenges that women of color face on the job.



Tina Tchen (left) laughs when recalling her response to uncomfortable moments of people making assumptions based on her race.

“People of color have to do way more homework,” Tchen said. “It doesn’t go away after you graduate from school. In the workplace, you have to do way more homework so that you are always prepared to push back against those [false assumptions].”

Women of color are not given as many chances to fail, she said. “You don’t get multiple strikes. You get fewer strikes than white men.”

Rather than let that drive her “crazy,” Tchen took it as a challenge. “I am going to show you: I don’t need any strikes; we are going to do this right the first time,” she said. “Which is why I think I have had the success that I’ve had – that understanding that I had to do more homework stayed with me.”

While that’s not fair, Tchen said, “It’s there, and that’s, unfortunately, still the case.”

Lawrence said, “I found that at law firms there was always that question of: Do you want me as a token to have me in a photo or are you going to give me substantive work?”

She said she had to work hard to build trust and to ensure she had enough cases to keep her busy.

“As Tina mentioned, you work a lot harder than a lot of people,” Lawrence said. “Studies show that people tend to relate to or give work to people who look like them, and there were very few people who I happened to look like at my law firm.”



Adrienne Lawrence talks about the challenges of being treated as equal in the workplace.

Looking ahead, she said, “Hopefully, as places become more diverse, individuals won’t be seen as tokens or meeting some kind of quota – that it will be for the wealth of knowledge and human capital that they bring to the table.”

RWU Associate Professor of Communications Kamille Gentles-Peart said women of color may take a job knowing their strengths but end up suppressing some of their identity to make themselves more “palatable” in the workplace. “How do you hold on to your authentic self in the context of the workplace that is very much based on ideologies that may not allow you to be fully expressive of that?” she asked.

Tchen said women of color face “a constant calibration” of the moment, deciding whether to stay true to who they are or make choices about the battles they pick. She said one compromise she made was clothing because it wasn’t all that important to her what she wore. She decided she would always wear business clothes, even when law firms began having dress-down days.

“I knew the external view was kind of important,” she said. “When I’m walking into a room with all-male lawyers, I have a hard enough time getting taken seriously without walking in there in jeans.”

But Tchen said she would never compromise about her basic demeanor. “I am not demure. I am not the quiet person. I am not the shy person. I am not that image of an Asian woman,” she said. “That was the piece I didn’t give up.”

Lawrence said she, too, made sure to dress professionally at law firms. “I was always in pearls,” she said. “I was polished.” She said her mother always told her: “Everywhere you go, you are representing the black community.”

When she was younger, Lawrence said she sometimes concealed part of what she was really like. “As I got older, I started giving people the chance to meet the 100 percent authentic, genuine me,” she said.

Both Tchen and Lawrence praised RWU for its “Talking About Race, Gender and Power” series. “I’m enormously impressed that you are having these conversations,” Tchen said. “And you are having them in a thoughtful and engaging way.”

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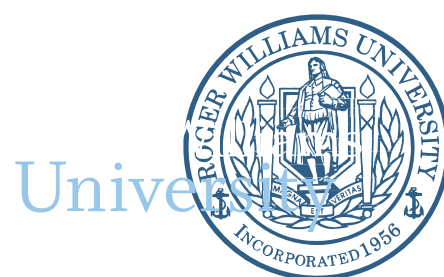
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