

## 2 Howard Women's Unconventional Journey Toward Attaining Doctorate Degrees

**Tamanika Ferguson's** desire to attain a Ph.D. started when she came to Washington, D.C., to attend Barack Obama's first presidential inauguration in 2009. She saw Howard University and said it was the place she wanted to pursue her doctorate studies. From age 14 to 22, Ferguson referred to herself as a street hustler, a teenage mother and a high-school dropout without a GED. But now, she is Dr. Ferguson.

"I learned never to give up and to listen to my own voice and take unconventional paths to achieving my goals in education as a black woman," said Ferguson, who earned a doctorate in Communication, Culture and Media Studies. "Never let anyone tell you are not smart enough, and you don't have what it takes. Don't let the haters stop you from pursuing your Ph.D. Everyone has a different path in life, and you can create your own path that can be a light to other people."

Before earning her Ph.D., Ferguson started her academic career at Long Beach City College in California. In 2000, she did not need a GED or a high school diploma to get an associate degree. In 2006, she transferred to California State University Dominguez Hills, where she earned a bachelor's degree and a master's degree in Africana studies. Ferguson's dissertation titled, "Women in Prison Speak: A Case Study of Writings by Incarcerated Women and their Advocates," is timely and compelling, especially at a time in U.S. history when the female prison population is growing and women's rights are generally being eroded on every front.

Ferguson's research puts imprisoned women on the communication research agenda. Few studies have been done



on this population, and none of those studies consider the women's ability to act and speak for themselves. Her focus on agency (through media activism) and voice are original and important because these factors move beyond the view of women in prison as helpless or as victims of the system.

"Ferguson's findings are useful," said Carolyn Byerly, Ph.D., Ferguson's adviser and chair of Howard University's Department of Communication, Culture and Media Studies. "Her analysis of newsletters and published essays in books brought to light the concerns of several dozen women's 'media activism'

for over a 20-year period, and allowed her to tease out their personal, political and social views as expressed in their writings. The study is theorized; using a feminist theoretical framework of analysis, she

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was able to show how these writings gave incarcerated women a voice, and over time, their collective voices formed an incarcerated women's public sphere. Ferguson's instrumental case study is interdisciplinary and contributes to the fields of communications, sociology, political science, criminal justice and women's studies."

During Ferguson's second year of study, she took Byerly's class on gender, culture and communication. Thus, Byerly was involved with Ferguson's research for several years.

"It is gratifying to see students like Tamanika confront the deeper issues in society as well as to have watched her development as a scholar with self-discipline and commitment to accuracy in her work," Byerly

said. "While it was difficult to determine the role of race in this study, since most authors did not identify their heritage, and they rarely spoke specifically to racial concerns in their writings, Tamanika determined that her sample of authors were likely to be mainly women of color, since they account statistically for the majority of women in prison in California and the rest of the nation. The study thus responds closely to the [Communication, Culture and Media Studies] program's goals of advancing scholarship in the interest of social justice, especially with

respect to African Americans and other marginalized communities."

Upon graduating in May 2017, Ferguson attributed part of her success to her mentors in the program, including

Carolyn Byerly; Velma LaPoint, Ph.D.; Erica Southerland, Ph.D.; Barbara Hines, Ph.D.; and Elsa Barkley Brown.

Ferguson is from Harbor City, California—south of Los Angeles—and she aspires to teach and research at the university level in California. Her instrumental case study is interdisciplinary and contributes to the fields of communications, sociology, political science, criminal justice and women's studies.

For **Radscheda Nobles, Ph.D.**, graduation signifies the completion of an uphill battle—a health disability combined with numerous financial constraints. Her completion of Howard's four-year Ph.D. program in May 2017 reveals a journey characterized by tribulation and dedication.

Nobles, who has a learning disability and neurofibromatosis, a genetic disorder that causes tumors to form on nerve tissue, has grown academically and emotionally, said Gina F. Marr, Howard University's disability/technology coordinator.



**“Black Girl Magic is a rallying call of recognition. Embedded in the everyday is a magnificence that is so easy to miss because we're so mired in the struggle and what society says we are.”**

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