

A dark teal rectangular box containing the text "ME AND EARL AND THE DYING GIRL" in white, uppercase, sans-serif font. The text is arranged in three lines: "ME AND EARL" on the top line, "AND THE DYING" on the middle line, and "GIRL" on the bottom line.

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SundayReview | OPINION

They Call Me Doctor Berry

By CARLOTTA A. BERRY NOV. 1, 2014

TERRE HAUTE, Ind. — I HAVE never been big on titles. Many people I interact with outside my job don't even know that I am a professor, or that I have a doctoral degree. When I introduce myself in public, I'm Carlotta Berry.

But when I introduce myself in the classroom, I'm Dr. Berry. And I insist on being Dr. Berry.

Titles in the academy are inconsistent at best. I have colleagues who would prefer to be called by their first name, or nicknames like "Bone Saw." But they are mostly men, and almost all white, and they have that luxury. As an African-American woman in a mostly Caucasian- and male-dominated field, I don't.

Some find my insistence on this formality a bit pretentious or arrogant. But they don't understand my story, and that of many other women and people of color in the academy.

Having worked with thousands of students, I know for a fact that for many — though by no means all, or even most — there is already a presumption that I, as a female and African-American, am less qualified than my white male colleagues, or at the very least that I was hired in order to meet a double minority quota. And I get it — anti-affirmative-action

ideologues have managed to not only demolish the legitimacy of that policy, but tar the reputation of anyone who might have benefited from it (even if, like me, they did not).

How do I know? Sometimes it's just a sense, a feeling I get from people's tone of voice. But some students will automatically call me Ms., while naturally referring to my male counterparts as Doctor or Professor. I'm not alone: When I meet fellow female engineering professors at conferences, this sort of treatment is always a topic of conversation.

In class, I have my derivations questioned, lectures critiqued, grading regarded as too harsh or unfair and my expectations dismissed as too high or difficult. I once had a student who would review notes with me that he had taken on my lecture, then offer tips on how I could improve. It seems he thought he was doing me a favor, despite the fact that I had been teaching for six years by then. I doubt that this is an experience that many of my male colleagues have ever had to endure.

On other occasions, I have had students state that it is difficult to follow my lectures because of my dialect or slang (neither of which I have, or use).

So what can I do? I already have to run faster and jump higher just to gain that minimal level of respect that my colleagues are graciously, automatically afforded. But I can also insist that my students interact with me in a professional manner, even if it's not something they're accustomed to in other classes.

When I tell friends outside the academy about these challenges, they're often surprised. It's 2014, and this is higher education, where enlightened worldviews are supposed to dominate. But consider that according to data from the American Society for Engineering Education, as of 2011 African-American women made up 4 percent of all women in the engineering professoriate. Between 2001 and 2012, the number of African-American engineering faculty members increased to 3 percent from 2 percent. In all, in



