

# BSC \_ Season 1 \_ Dr Willie Blackmon \_ Final

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

students, uc riverside, imposter syndrome, academic, first generation students, willie, people, imposter, predominantly white institution, phenomenon, color, essence, peer, drexel university, fulfilling, institution, questions, struggling, survivor guilt, home

## SPEAKERS

Dr. Thomas, Dr. Willie Blackmon, Dr. Fowles

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- D** Dr. Fowles 00:16  
Today's guest is Dr. Willie Blackmon. He goes by Dr. Willie. He attended the University of California at Riverside for his bachelor's in sociology, University of San Diego for his master's in higher education, and Drexel University for his doctorate in higher education leadership and management. Throughout his career, he's worked in residential life and academic affairs. He is currently the Assistant Director of Academic Mentoring Programs at UC Riverside, where he works to build community among first generation, low socioeconomic students, and to help them mobilize their voice in pursuit of education. Welcome, Dr. Willie.
- D** Dr. Willie Blackmon 00:54  
Awesome. Thank you for having me.
- D** Dr. Thomas 00:56  
Yes. And I just want to chime in and say, I am super excited that you're here I met Dr. Willie, when we were working at UC Riverside a few years back. And when I met with Dr. Willie, there was a lot of change going on in the campus, he was just finishing up his

doctorate. And I just remember working with the staff that he supervises, and they were able to accommodate some really big asks that I made of his area. And I think that really speaks to how effective Dr. Willie is as a leader. And I am so excited today to hear all about your cutting edge research. So let's get today started with our Intellectual Capital segment. This is a discussion of a Black scholars' research, academic journey or current events in the professional world. So first question, what is the topic of your research and how did you become interested in it?

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Dr. Willie Blackmon 01:53

Right, great question. So the topic of my research, in essence, was looking at first generation students of color at a predominantly white institution that experienced the imposter phenomenon. So the title of my dissertation is "A Sequential Explanatory Mixed Method Study of the Imposter Phenomenon Experiences of First-Generation Students of Color at a Predominantly White Institution." And so, ultimately, the imposter phenomenon. Most people probably heard it call to imposter syndrome. I like to call it the imposter phenomenon. And so does the woman who created it, which is Pauline Clance. Because the syndrome really gets into the essence of you have a disease, you have something that you cannot get rid of. And so I don't like utilizing the term imposter syndrome, where the imposter phenomenon is something that you've experienced, and you go in and out of these experiences. And so the imposter phenomenon really looks at the experience of intellectual phoniness, which appears to be intense amongst high achieving individuals. And so I ultimately wanted to look into this because I had experienced it and I didn't have a name for it. I found myself receiving achievement after achievement and applying to the school and getting in and getting A's. But there was still this feeling of fraudulence, still this feeling of phoniness that, maybe I got it out of luck. Maybe they gave it to me for other reasons outside of pure merit. And so that is what really, I wanted to hone into it. And I wanted to look at first generation students, in particular, because when I would call home and I would explain what I was feeling to my parents, they didn't have an answer for it. And that- I then at that moment, knew that although I could go to them for other pieces in my life, they weren't going to be a resource for higher education.

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Dr. Fowles 04:06

Why do you think it is that the term imposter syndrome became more championed than the phenomenon itself?

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Dr. Willie Blackmon 04:15

Yeah, I ultimately feel that the imposter syndrome took over, because it's usually- we as people normally operate out of scare tactics. There's this, there's this sense of fear mongering that that you see happen, whether it's in social media, whether it happens in the media within itself. So when people say, Oh, my gosh, you have the imposter syndrome. People lose it, because it's like you have something. There's this urgency attached to the word syndrome, where it's like, oh, you're experiencing the imposter phenomenon, where it doesn't have the same urgency. And so I've seen and in my research, when I've talked to the CEO is around the imposter phenomenon. They were just like, okay, so but what is it, but when I would change it up and say imposter syndrome? They'd be like, Oh, my gosh, I got it, what do I need to do to get rid of it? There was an there was an, there was an urgency to the word syndrome because it attributes it to something that you may have, you may not be able to get rid of where the phenomenon is really this open ended kind of experience that people have to dig deeper to understand.

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Dr. Fowles 05:31

Got it? Got it. Got it. Can you talk a little bit more about your research process? I know you just mentioned talking to some students. So tell us a little bit more about the details and process of you doing your research?

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Dr. Willie Blackmon 05:44

Sure. So initially, in doing my research, I wanted to do a mixed methods approach. So I really wanted to look at quantitative data, and I want it to look at qualitative data. And with that being said, I reached out to Pauline Clance, who originally created the Clance Imposter Phenomenon Scale that looked at women, because the study- her initial study was done for women in grad school, and it was done for white women. And it was to look at the overall ability to address fear not being successful, not being successful, the ability to repeat certain achievements or perceived lack of ability. And so I wanted to take that scale. So I emailed her and asked her, "Hey, can I utilize this scale?" She gave me permission to utilize her scale. And it's 100 point scale on a Likert. With 20 Likert scale questions ranging from one to five, and 40 or less, that means they have few imposter characteristics. And then around 61 to 80. It was frequent imposter feelings.. And 80 to of course 100 were those intense imposter feelings. So what I did initially is I utilized a Qualtrics, which is like a surveying system that I send out to students at West Coast Catholic college. So students, in particular first generation students of color Black and African American and Mexican American. And I asked them to fill out this, the survey- the scale. So if they scored a 61 or higher, I wanted to meet with them. I met with them, I asked them a series of questions, no more than five questions, really, and my questions really focused on academic success and social success at a PWI a predominately white

institutions. And what I found was, is that these first generation students of color had an innate feeling of like, they didn't know how to navigate the campus climate. They wanted to rely on family, and they needed to control their internal dialogues of "I can't, or this is not for me." Their inability to ask for help, as well as addressing culture shock. And battling survivor guilt. And I say survivor guilt, and most people would think of, if you were in an accident, and someone were to pass away, you feel guilty that it wasn't you. Well, that is one form of survivor guilt, but survivor guilt in the academic sense, is I'm leaving behind what I know and the people that I love. And I'm going into a residence hall that has AC. And my family is cooking in a, you know, one bedroom, you know, apartment with no AC. I have a meal plan now, and my parents or family and my siblings are wondering when their next meal is going to be. So there's an element of survivor guilt that came from it. And lastly, the last thing I'll say is something else that emerged was parentification. And parentification, is basically when the child takes on the role of the parent. So getting that financial aid check, and then sending it home for Mom, Dad, you know, someone or a sibling to pay rent, to pay a bill, and really taking on the role of parents and not being able to focus on themselves in that space.

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Dr. Fowles 09:27

There's so many layers, right, to having the experience of school of higher education, um, you know, for both the student and the family, and I think that there's often some missing layers there that people just don't initially think about. And I think you brought up a lot of those, those concepts. You know, as scholars, we can tell that, you know, all of the inner workings and all the details right, and I always like to ask the question, Now that you have these findings, what do you want people to do? As a result of your findings? What, what, uh, how can we put this into practice?

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Dr. Willie Blackmon 10:09

Right? So a lot of problems that emerged in my research was that an inability to fully engulf first generation students of color, an inability to fully engulf themselves in the pre existing culture, right, and a lack of empathy from faculty and staff at this predominantly white institution, where these first generation students of color would show up and say, unfortunately, I wasn't able to do X because of this. And then they would say, but Bobby did it. So you should be able to do it, but they're not afforded the same resources that Bobby was right. And in comparing themselves to other students and relying on their overall fortitude. So some of the recommendations that I had, at the end of my study, for the institution that I looked at, and for predominantly white institutions, were to look at and implement training around empathy and diversity for senior level leadership, mandate that all first generation students of color attend summer transition programs--

So where they go through this transitional piece, where some people will call Summer Bridge, and get that early start into experiencing the world of academia before they're just thrown in in the fall, as well as creating a first generation living and learning community in the residence halls to promote a sense of community within itself, as opposed to having them show up the first day, and they don't have anything at all right. So that was for the institution, what I had recommended for first generation students of color is to lead with a positive train of thought. So go and saying that I can do this, and seek out mentorship early, right, find that mentor, find someone that you can relate to, and share positive and negative experiences with family, because a lot of the times for me, and for those in my study, they didn't want to call home and share the negative experiences with family because they didn't want them to worry about them. And so they were limiting bits and pieces of who they were because out of out of fear that, well, you know, they they put my family put all their eggs in one basket and and they bet on me, so I have to be successful, I can't call them and let them know that I'm struggling with my roommate who doesn't understand the food that I'm cooking in this moment. Right. So that's those were some of the recommendations. And I think a big one was that the transitional piece, I think getting that early start, I know for myself, what helped when I started at UC Riverside was going into Summer Bridge, starting to take those classes in the summer, realizing the rigor of higher academic academics in those classes, that pace, establishing friendships, understanding that I needed to go to financial aid, I needed to talk to my academic advisor, all of those things that were given to me upfront, as opposed to starting in the fall, and just being told to go.

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Dr. Thomas 13:14

So that's the end of the Intellectual Capital segment for today. We're going to go ahead and take a quick break. Hey, are you rolling your eyes right now because yet another talented student is questioning their abilities?

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Dr. Fowles 13:30

We'll turn a negative into a positive with the No Deficit Model or No Imposter Syndrome Tee. Check out all of our Black Social Capital swag and stay motivated by going to [staymotivatedandrisetogether.com/shop](http://staymotivatedandrisetogether.com/shop).

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Dr. Thomas 13:45

All right, we're back.

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Dr. Fowles 13:47

You know, you weren't always Dr. Willie. So if you could just describe your educational path, how you chose your institutions. How many times did you switch your major? Tell us all the tea. Right. In terms of how you got to where where you see yourself right now.

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Dr. Willie Blackmon 14:06

Gotcha. Well, let me tell you, I came in pre med. So it was I was a bio major, I was ready to be a doctor MD. And my first quarter I had a 1.9. And I had never seen an F before in my life. So I thought to myself, when I got to UC Riverside, and I applied to UC Riverside, because again, I was a first generation student, I have four sisters. And I found that I needed to be close to home in order to- and so for me, UC Riverside was 30 minutes away. I had worked with their early Academic Outreach Program, which afforded me the opportunity of guaranteed admission to UC Riverside. And so I said, I'm going to go there. And so after my first quarter after struggling in one of those bio classes, I got an F. I had a 1.9 and I thought to myself, "I- this can't happen. I don't know why I'm struggling here. But I wasn't struggling in high school," because I graduated high school with a 4.0. And so, it really started. That's when a lot of the self doubt kicked in. That's when "I can't do this. Maybe UC Riverside made a mistake. Maybe this wasn't meant for me." So my second quarter, I took that bio class over again. And I improved, I went from an F to a D, but I still had a 1.9. And they mandated that I actually go through an academic intervention program in the Learning Center, which is now called the Academic Resource Center. And they said, you have to go through this program. I remember walking into the Learning Center and saying, I have to meet with somebody to get off of academic probation. And they said, Do you have an appointment? I said, "Oh, no, I don't need an appointment. Because I need to meet with somebody today. I was in tears. I was like, I'm not leaving, until I meet with someone." And I remember Gabe Mendoza came out. And he said, Let me help. And he said, you realize that there's something called a retro drop, I said, a retro drop. He said, Yes, we take that F and turn it into a W, because you've had extenuating circumstances. You know, my dad, you know, had had had had several medical issues, I was traveling back and forth from home. And once I- that 1.9, went to a 2.8. Overnight, when that retro drop got approved. And I changed my major from bio to Sociology. And I didn't stop, right. It was like, it was just my GPA kept climbing, and happy to say that I graduated UC Riverside with a three, four, right 3.4. And so I attribute my academic voice to the Learning Center. And then from that point on, I really was like, I want to be someone's Gabe. I want to be that person. And so I started academic advising at the University of California, San Diego. And I was doing that for grad and doc students. And-

D Dr. Thomas 17:12  
Wow

D Dr. Willie Blackmon 17:13  
Right. And in electrical computer engineering that I knew nothing about. But I could tell you what courses to pass in order to- and what courses you needed to take. But I was there. And I found myself being challenged by faculty, being challenged by staff, being challenged by the students, because they would come in and I was 21. And they would say How old are you? And I would say old enough to be here. Right? Old enough to help you

D Dr. Fowles 17:37  
Well! (Laughter)

D Dr. Willie Blackmon 17:39  
Old enough to be here old enough to help you. And so my mentor, Diane LeGree. I love her. Yeah, she shared with me that maybe you get your master's. So then you know what theories that you can apply to working with these students in this population. So I ultimately ended up at the University of San Diego, I moved into the residence halls, my first year took a grad assistantship in the Center for Student Involvement, and started my master's program. And then ultimately ended up at Drexel, because I knew that I wanted to go back and get my doctorate. And I looked them up, I saw that they had a program, I applied to the Drexel University program in Sacramento. And it was a hybrid, so half online, and then half in on campus. And then I got an email saying, Congratulations, you've been admitted to Drexel University in Philadelphia, we have closed down the campus in Sacramento. As I said, I don't want to do this. I don't want to do an online program. But it was the best thing that happened for me, because that allowed me to make career moves with doing an online program because I wasn't attached to a physical location.

D Dr. Thomas 18:56  
Yep.

D Dr. Fowles 18:58  
And that is key. And that is key, right?

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Dr. Thomas 19:02

Let's talk about your current job and responsibilities. Tell us tell us about it. What do you do? Who are you helping? And how is it fulfilling?

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Dr. Willie Blackmon 19:10

Right, so currently, I work in the Academic Resource Center at UC Riverside. And I am the Assistant Director of Academic Mentoring Programs that oversees supplemental instruction, tutoring, writing support programs, and academic intervention. And as I had mentioned earlier, this is the same office that helped me find my academic voice. And I'm running the program that helped me and got me off of academic probation and working with a peer mentor. And so I am fulfilled every time a student successfully goes through or non successfully. Let me be clear, as long as the student signs up for our peer mentoring program, that, to me is step one, whether they are successful, or whether they aren't successful. Now I want them to be successful. But whether they are not successful initially does not mean that our time was wasted, because they're going to think back later on some of the little nuggets that we've, you know, instilled along the way. So it's fulfilling because it's almost, it's this full circle element for me where I got to hashtag return to sender, I got to go back to the place that in essence, built me. And now I can build up other students. So my role there is to help students developmentally when it comes to academics, so overlooking tutoring, our tutoring is four to one. So one tutor and four tutees. Supplemental instruction, really working hand in hand with faculty members, and having peer led discussions, where they then review what took place in the lecture. Our writing Support Program, as well as our peer mentor program, which is our Academic Coaching Excellence Program. And that's really creating this contract between two students, one being a peer mentor, and the other being a student, potentially either of need or a student who wants to continue to excel. And they show up once a week, for 30 minutes to an hour to set a plan for success. And it's that accountability sometimes is all we need. Right? And that has in essence, for in essence, that's what I do. And that is why it is beneficial to me is the ability to advocate for these students who maybe haven't found their academic voice, and my ability to challenge faculty and staff around Well, they just don't get it. No, it's not about these students that just don't get it. It's about maybe they're learning in a different way if we need to switch it up. And so what does that look like? Right, because our research in the Academic Resource Center, it shows that students are more likely to talk to their peers than they are to go to faculty, or staff, or a teaching assistant. And so all of our programs are peer led. And we have seen the numbers drastically improved from students who come in, I'm struggling in developmental writing and math. And so that has, in essence, you know, kind of been one of my proudest things happening in the ARC.



- D** Dr. Fowles 22:36  
But let me let me ask you this really quickly, actually, um, in terms of the students that are peer to peer leaders, how many of them also, were initially, you know, they came to the to the to get support themselves, and are contributing back in this way? Would you say? Would you say that that's a common story?
- D** Dr. Willie Blackmon 22:58  
Common! And we- it's about 60%, actually. And I Yes, and I love it, because not only are they walking the walk, but they are literally saying, look, I was you I am you I'm still struggling, but let me help you. Because I found my my zone, I found my niche. And so it's nice, the ability to be able to see that and the ability to see that these students go on to serving professions, whether they are working in education, in the health field, etc. But they go on to continue to want to assist others in that way of being like, this is what I've obtained, and I want to share my knowledge with you. So you can be equally successful.
- D** Dr. Thomas 23:47  
Dr. Willie, when you think about your professional progression, I'm wondering if there is a story that you can tell our listeners we like to, again, you know, you weren't always Dr. Willie. So we do like to try to help our listeners imagine us, as you know, not the people who are presented here today, but people who, you know, took a journey to get where we are. And I'm wondering if you can share something about your journey
- D** Dr. Willie Blackmon 24:15  
Something that I did to step outside of the box. And my mentor, again, Dr. Diane LeGree who is a dean of Sixth College at the University of California, San Diego. She always told me, Willie, when you're looking to make professional moves, she says, I want you to be cognizant that you're not doing it for money. And I want you to look at how you can affect change in that position and at the institution, right, challenge yourself step outside of your comfort zone. But when you feel that something isn't right, and when you stop doing things, for the initial reason that you started, you may want to return to sender. Return back to that that space of Why this job is fulfilling why I do what I do is fulfilling, as opposed to having to be very transactional, as opposed to transformative.
- D** Dr. Thomas 25:12  
I'm super excited to hear about your next steps. So you have to keep us have to keep us

informed.



Dr. Willie Blackmon 25:18

This has been great, thank you both for having me. And I'm happy that you all are doing this work, and really highlighting, you know, folks of color to come together and really talk about our trajectories and our experiences, and hopes that others take bits and pieces from it. And so the work that you both are doing Dr. Jaqui and Dr. Theo, I commend you both and thank you



Dr. Fowles 25:41

Of course, of course, you know, we wouldn't have it any other way. You know, we didn't get to where we are by ourselves and we know that our stories now mirror a lot of our peers and and, and colleagues and, and I think it's important that our stories are told right so



Dr. Willie Blackmon 25:57

For sure.



Dr. Fowles 25:59

We hope you enjoyed today's show. Remember, the way we build social capital is to build self and build others. We're sure you got some notes on your tablet, computer or even using a pen and paper. Write us a review, continue the conversation on social media @blacksocialcap , and share the show with someone you know. Until the next episode, stay motivated and rise together.



Dr. Thomas 26:23

This is Black Social Capital.