
# Press Clippings
# March 2016
# Print

newsworks

MARCH 1, 2016 | HUMAN AT WORK

# Untangling what black women's 'rebellious' hair says about identity at work


In February, Uva Coles, center, helped assemble a Peirce College panel discussion called "Your Hair, Your Image & Your Career Climb." (Peirce College)



# Black hair and the career climb

Work-life balance is usually about parsing out workplace and personal time. But for many African-American women, it also includes something that is often overlooked by managers, but which goes to the core of identity: their hair.

Uva Coles, vice president of institutional advancement and strategic partnership at Peirce College in Philadelphia, has spent a lot of time preparing students for career moves, from resumes and cover letters, to which jobs to apply for and how to dress for interviews. She has also observed the need among many students for more nuanced conversations around the deeper issue of identity.

"Professionalism is professionalism," she says. "But when you really listen, we recognize in some cases, hair style is less about image, more about identity."

For Black History Month, Coles helped assemble a February panel discussion called "Your Hair, Your Image & Your Career Climb" to create the safe space she thinks Peirce students need. Seventy percent of Peirce students are African-American, the average age is 36, and many are first-generation college students.

Blend in or stand out?

"For African-American traditional hairstyles, there's a history of your hair telling you something about you," Coles says. "You decide for yourself what you're willing to adjust for that first job. ... For some students, if you have natural hair, and you're not used to seeing it in the workplace, it becomes a conflict. Am I able to bring my full self to the work environment? And if not, how do I adjust? And what does that say about me? In an environment that I may not be used to, I want to hold on to who I am. I want to navigate in a way that doesn't ask me to compromise who I am."

The topic had been part of her conversations with students, but she was surprised by the degree to which the forum showed how much people need to talk about it in community. "We knew the conversation really wasn't about hair, though we presented it that way," she says. "A person of color going into an environment that may not be very normalized or diverse may think, 'I'm already worried about standing out. Do I blend in, or do I use my image as a way to stand out?'"

It might seem that, even if the workplace presents a challenge for women and their hair, the home space would always be embracing, but depending on the family background, she says, some women have to negotiate there as well. "We have to pivot and think about what our hair says in our own families and communities. One woman kept it natural in the workplace, but when she went home, the acceptance wasn't there. How do I embrace it in the workplace but then go home where my family doesn't experience this as I do?"

And the conversation is happening across the diaspora, Coles says. She recalls ones woman from the Republic of Panama whose family was uncomfortable with her choice to wear her hair naturally. "In so many places, you sit at the kitchen table and your mother or grandmother tells you what you need to do. You just learn it's what you need to do."

Breaking barriers internally and externally

Coles' own hair story has given her the insights she shares with the students. "For many years, I put chemicals in my hair to relax it," she says. "For many of us, it becomes a rite of passage, that when you get to a certain age, to be more presentable, you have to adjust your hair to fit what is mainstream. For me, it was age 13, though I realize now parents are doing this with kids from about age 8 or 9. Our hair is coiled and rebellious."

It wasn't until she was in her 30s that Coles realized she was making adjustments that were counter to how she identified instinctively. "I wanted to be true to who I am," she says, "so I made a decision to cut my hair and allow it to be natural, to embrace who I am and be comfortable in my skin. It came with a cost. I was told in other [work] environments that my hairstyle was not ideal."

Coles learned to weigh experience and risk. "Early in my career, ... I made adjustments," she says. "But the older I've gotten, the more I've built my resume, and the more my work speaks for itself, the more comfortable I am presenting myself as I am. So wearing my hair locked is comfortable for me. I've been in spaces that welcome all of me. Peirce is one of those places that lets me walk in with locked hair. So when I come to work I don't have to worry about what my hair looks like or if it can present barriers. I can suspend the conversation of identity on a daily basis and focus on the work. People tend to engage the inner conversation about my hair, and I welcome that. It's been an opportunity to teach what I've learned over time."

How identity on the job affects performance on the job is a compelling connection.

"Organizations think about diversity," Coles says. "But there's a difference between diversity and inclusion. Having people who think differently is the easy piece .... Diversity introduces conflict because of differences."

But Coles takes it a step further. "To create an environment of inclusion — that's the hard work. Not just tolerance, but better understanding your colleagues. That's inclusion at work. If you as an organization put resources forth to create that space for learning, your work becomes richer, fully productive.

"Some companies don't realize the full breadth of what inclusion means and why it matters. Individuals need to feel they are valued, that who they are matters to the organization. Instead of worrying about whether I can show up as I am, I can focus on the work of the day."

The core question, she says, is how we optimize diversity in our various work environments so we can become more productive. "When you have more voices at the table, your company becomes stronger, your workforce feels more valued."

Laboratory EQUIPMENT.

# Ranking STEM Hubs Across the Country: What's the Best, Worst?

Science, technology, engineering and mathematics-related jobs are in demand in the changing Information Age economy. But there are subtle shifts geographically within the U.S. employment landscape, according to a new survey by WalletHub.

The normal hubs are still thriving. Silicon Valley, in California, is still number one on the ranking as the best metro area for STEM jobs. The Austin-Round Rock metro area in Texas is second, with its prominent employers including Dell, 3M, Hewlett-Packard, IBM, Cisco and Intel—all bolstering the area's unofficial nickname: the "Silicon Hills." Third is the Seattle-Tacoma-Bellevue triangle in Washington state, which boasts major tech anchors Microsoft, Boeing and Amazon, among others.

But other areas across the nation are up-and-coming—while the traditional Northeast enclaves seem to be losing some of their competitive advantage, according to the survey.

For instance, the McAllen-Edinburg-Mission market in Texas, along the Rio Grande, is growing the fastest, based on its lucrative access to the Mexican maquiladoras (tax-free manufacturing facilities), and its Free-Trade Zone, which has lured employers to the area—despite relatively high poverty rates.

The Detroit-Warren-Dearborn area is growing the second-fastest, with the previously depressed areas looking to pump public dollars into colleges and other educational agencies to foster the labor force there—and with a renewed commitment to the automobile industry since the bailout of Ford and General Motors.

The Cape Coral-Fort Myers metro area in Florida includes many health care providers and is considered the third-fastest growing STEM economy. It's a major turnaround from last year, when the WalletHub roundup listed it in the bottom 10 overall—partly due to a lack of research universities and big employers in the area.

The Silicon Valley region itself is listed fourth, due to growing and thriving major players like Apple and a long list of others headquartered there.

Fifth is the Charlotte, N.C. metropolitan area, which is experiencing a population boom based partly on the location of employers such as Lowe's hardware headquarters, Daimler trucks and the University of North Carolina's Charlotte campus.

But not everyone is growing. And the slowest growth, or outright loss, is being experienced by places in the Northeast, according to the analysis.

The Allentown-Bethlehem-Easton metro area in Pennsylvania along the New Jersey border was ranked lowest, despite tens of thousands employed by local hospital networks.

Also in the mid-Atlantic is the New York-Newark-Jersey City region, whose economy has remained relatively stagnant despite a bounce back from the Great Recession in neighboring regions.

Also in the Northeast: Worcester, Massachusetts was ranked as the fifth-lowest growth, despite a wide variety of major employers, including hospitals and some institutions of higher learning.

Other places outside the Northeast are also experiencing setbacks in growth, according to the survey.

The Grand Rapids metro area in Michigan, unlike Detroit's fast-growing ranking, has the second-lowest growth in STEM jobs.

And unlike the fast-growing Cape Coral area across the Florida peninsula, the triangle of Palm Bay-Melbourne-Titusville is among the slowest-growing.

**Location, location, location**

The majority of STEM jobs remain in the eastern half of the country, and the biggest concentrations remain in clusters: the Northeast extending from Virginia up to New England, the Midwest, the Carolinas, and another hub in Florida.

Keeping STEM jobs in particular regions is a matter of better working relationships between institutions of higher learning and the business community, said Sharon Locke, director of the STEM Center at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

"Programs that encourage partnerships between higher education and local businesses to offer internships for students while they are finishing their education are important," said Locke. "Internships open doors for STEM graduates and increase their professional network in a region. This also helps companies because they are then better connected to job candidates."

Local and even federal government can help foster this collaboration, according to Uva Coles, the vice president of Institute Advance and Strategic Partnership at Peirce College in Philadelphia.

"Incentivizing or rewarding full partnerships through the development of grants and/or tax credits that support joint innovation, collaboration and strategic experiential opportunities align with local and/or regional workforce needs," said Coles.

The WalletHub survey is given annually. This year it was based on a series of 16 weighted metrics, from job openings in related fields, percentage of the local workforce in STEM jobs, employment rate for those with a bachelor's degree or better, R&D spending, the location of research universities, and other factors. It also included quality of life measurements, including recreation, family and housing affordability, among other non-science categories.

The top 10 overall metropolitan areas were: San Jose, Austin, Seattle, Denver, Minneapolis, Boston, Madison (Wis.), Houston, Pittsburgh and Columbus (Ohio).

The bottom 10 of the 100 ranked by WalletHub were disproportionate to the South: North Port-Sarasota; Deltona-Daytona Beach; Miami-Fort Lauderdale; Jackson (Miss).; Oxnard-Thousand Oaks-Ventura (Calif.); Honolulu; Cape Coral-Fort Myers; Lakeland-Winter Haven (Fla.), Bridgeport-Stamford-Norwalk (Conn.); and Las Vegas-Henderson-Paradise.

**Little startup on the prairie**

While not mentioned specifically in the WalletHub report, there may be a new competitor to Texas' Silicon Hills.

For the past few years, tech startups have been flocking to Lincoln, Nebraska, forming what has come to be known as "Silicon Prairie."

Compared to Palo Alto or New York City, Lincoln enjoys—and uses—a low cost of living and high quality of life to attract companies and employees to the formerly sleepy town. Startups from the town also have the advantage of being the big fish in a small pond, rather than the reverse that is typical in the Northeast and California.

For example, the median home in San Francisco sells for $1.1 million, while in Lincoln it's about $158,000. Therefore, startups need a lot less capital—something that is vitally important to these up-and-coming companies, especially in the early years.

Less than 10 years ago, Lincoln's downtown was mostly neglected warehouses and the city's old rail depot. Now, the once-abandoned buildings house the brightly covered walls of tech startups.

A main element that affords Lincoln so much success is enhanced access to the University of Nebraska. Startup owners in the city have applauded the university system, calling it a supportive community for entrepreneurs. In fact, the city and university have agreed to turn the old state fairgrounds into an innovation campus for high tech firms.

If that's the case, why would a startup ever leave Lincoln, Nebraska?