



## Seminar

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Peabody College,  
Vanderbilt University

Tuesday, December 15  
ARMS 1109  
1:30-2:30 P.M.

### **It's Not Just in Your Head: Institutional Contexts That Position Black Doctoral Engineering Students as Impostors**

The experiences of Black engineering doctoral students are underexplored in higher education research. While scholars and policymakers have recognized the underrepresentation of women and Black students in STEM and strengthened their gaze on the STEM pipeline, most of the attention has been focused on early sections of the pipeline. In this study, we focus on its later sections by presenting the narratives of thirty-one high-achieving African-American doctoral students at various U.S. engineering institutions. To help frame this study we expand the theory of impostor syndrome by analyzing participant experiences through the lens of goal-striving stress. Study participants discussed persistent feelings of insecurity, unworthiness, and academic incompetence in their doctoral programs. In other words, they felt like impostors, a state known as impostor syndrome. Some participants described their feelings of impostorism as self-imposed or derived from their own psyches, but others attested that these emotions resulted from racialized and gendered stereotypes and biases that permeated their departments. The participants often contextualized their experiences by juxtaposing them with the experiences of students who they perceived as having more affirming experiences, typically White, Asian, and male students. Our analysis of participants' experiences demonstrates that students are placed in situations and presented with ideologies and behaviors that make them feel like impostors. Thus, we challenge interventions that propose that students are responsible for their own feelings of impostorism while ignoring deliberate institutional structures and practices that allow impostorism to thrive.



*Ebony McGee, Assistant Professor of Education, Diversity and Urban Schooling, studies the educational and career trajectories of STEM among historically marginalized students of color. Her research also focuses on the role of racialized experiences and biases in STEM educational and career attainment, problematizing traditional notions of academic achievement and what it means to be successful in STEM yet marginalized. Education is McGee's second career; she left a successful career in electrical engineering to earn PhD in mathematics education. Her current research, funded by the National Science Foundation, investigates the social, cultural, and structural barriers that have caused the number of African American and engineering faculty stagnate. A second study examines how female engineering faculty persist despite race, gender and class barriers. In addition, she has designed a holistic racial- and gender-specific online mentoring portal for PhD students and postdoctoral scholars with the goal of increasing the representation of engineering faculty of color. It can be found via this website- <http://BlackengineeringPhD.org>.*