

# Flipping The Table: How Howard's Warner Music Center is Redefining the Music Business

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(Warner Music Cohort 4 with Alencia Johnson at the “Flip the Table“ Q&A Book signing event at Howard’s School of Business. Photo by Taylor Isaacs)

Ascending to the fourth floor of Howard University’s School of Business, one steps into more than just a classroom—you enter a hub where the next generation of Black music executives are being shaped.

At the Warner Music Blavatnik Center for Music Business, speakers can be heard pulsing with music from an NPR Tiny Desk performance streaming from a massive four-screen TV wall bringing life to the center. A mural of musical icons, platinum records from the likes of DMX and Jay-Z and awards glint under fluorescent lights.

A "Hall of Fame" spanning the two back walls, celebrates graduates who've landed internships and positions in the industry. This is not just a learning space; it's the epicenter of a quiet revolution challenging an industry paradox.

Sparked by the murder of George Floyd in 2020 and a desire to drive systemic change, Howard alum Julian Petty—executive vice president of Business and Legal Affairs at Warner Music Group—established the Center with a \$4.9 million commitment alongside Warner Music Group aimed at equipping students with a one-year fellowship program that includes coaching, mentorship, a specialized curriculum, and opportunities to work with influential industry partners to break through industry barriers.

At the helm is Professor Jasmine Young, an alumna with over three decades in entertainment, including a significant tenure at Def Jam Records. Young's leadership style is practical and forward-looking.

"We've been teaching data analytics, so every student that comes to the center is certified in digital analytics for the music business immediately upon graduation. Getting them the tools that they need in order to be successful," she said.

She said her commitment to the community is unwavering. That commitment earned her a Congressional Citation from Congresswoman Yvette Clarke

Despite the global influence and impact that Black artists have contributed to the music business, executive roles remain overwhelmingly White. A 2021 study by the USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative revealed that fewer than 5% of CEO, chair, or president roles in major music companies are held by Black executives. A follow up [report](#) published earlier this month revealed that "these numbers have not increased significantly — in fact, the percentage of underrepresented executives has actually decreased over time."

The reason being the systemic barrier that has persisted for decades — limited access to mentorship, funding and networking opportunities makes it difficult for Black professionals to climb the ladder. Even those who break through often face discrimination and microaggressions that chip away at their progress.

Music companies like [The Recording Academy](#) have launched several initiatives like the Black Music Collective, which is dedicated to the inclusion, recognition and advancement of Black music creators and professionals to combat this.

In 2020, both Sony Music Entertainment and Warner Music Group announced the establishment of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Institutions and initiatives in their companies. Yet still the progress has remained slow and with the political landscape shifting dramatically and DEI initiatives facing increased scrutiny across industries, some commitments feel more like PR stunts than genuine change.

The real danger is in complacency—the assumption that showcasing and awarding Black and Brown talent is enough to demonstrate diversity. If the industry fails to create meaningful pathways to leadership for Black professionals, any progress made will always be at risk. At the Center, the path forward is built on preparation and reliance. For recent graduate Angel Agyeman, the program delivered more than just theory.

"Not to say that education is not valuable—it's extremely valuable, but in this industry, experience is just as important", she said. She now works as an executive assistant at Compound Entertainment, a Black-owned label, -- completing her fellowship at the center.

During a recent Q&A with author and social impact leader Alencia Johnson—students explored how social justice and entertainment intersect. While discussing how to be resilient to DEI backlash and the pressures of representation Johnson emphasized the importance of mental health and collaboration to sustain change.

<https://youtube.com/shorts/sZsspOaQs44?feature=share>

For Angel, the experience has sharpened both her ambition and her awareness and gifted her a community that encourages and inspires each other.

“A lot of the things that [the executives] would have to teach someone else—comes second nature to me,” she said.

Graduates from the Center have gone on to work with major record labels, management firms, and streaming platforms like iHeart Radio, Atlantic Records and Rolling Loud. At Wasserman Music, 2024 graduate Troy White now coordinates schedules and talent negotiations with ease—but his discipline was forged long before his first day on the job. At the Center, showing up late meant being locked out of class.

“We were taught to overcome any type of adversity. It didn't matter what the situation was. Ms. Young used to lock us out of the room if we were late,” he said. “It's like we had to be like 15 minutes early or we were considered late, and I still do that today. That's now my internal clock; that's not my boss telling me that. That's something that the center just instills in you.”

White has watched others in the industry give up under pressure—but he sees things differently. “I could never do that cause I'd be not just quitting on myself. I had so much help to get here. The center prepares you for life though—not just the music industry,” he said.

As the industry continues to evolve, the Center stands as an example of what real investment in equity looks like: intentional, informed, and unrelenting. The future of music is being written here—beat by beat, name by name.