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African American Women in Higher Education: Issues and Support Strategies

Cover Page Footnote

The terms African American and Black are used interchangeably throughout the article.

African American Women in Higher Education: Issues and Support Strategies

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In recent years, the college graduation rates of African American women, a historically marginalized group, have increased. However, their graduation rates continue to lag behind those of White women, among other racial/ethnic groups. This paper reviews the related literature and identifies four major issues impacting the college graduation rates of African American women. Additionally, intervention strategies are suggested.

Keywords: African American women, Black sororities, Black women, higher education, mentoring

African American women appear to be making notable progress in higher education based on participation and degree attainment rates. By 2010, Black American women held 66% of all bachelor degrees attained by Black Americans (Jones-DeWeever, 2014). Black women continue to make up an increasing percentage of all students entering higher educational institutions (Jones-DeWeever, 2014). Women exceed their men counterparts in participation and degree completion rates across all demographics but none to the degree of African American women (Garibaldi, 2014). However, statistics do not tell the whole story. While African American women are increasing their graduation rates they are not keeping pace with White, Latina, or Asian American women (Guerra, 2013). Specific, targeted interventions are needed to support the continued success of this marginalized demographic of women college students.

This review of the literature was conducted to examine the current status of African American women students in higher education and recommendations to support their continued success. The Education Research Complete and Educational Resources Information Center databases were utilized in conducting this review. Search terms included African American women, Black women, higher education, mentoring, and Black sororities. Only articles published after 2002 were considered for inclusion. Based on the literature review, four significant issues impacting African American women in college were selected for this discussion. Additionally, three targeted strategies with the potential to impact these issues are recommended to support the retention, persistence and degree attainment of this often overlooked student group.

Discussion of Issues

Multiple Marginalized Identities

An understanding of the unique needs of African American women college students is essential to implementing meaningful strategies to support their continued success in higher education. Effectively addressing those needs requires recognition of the issues of dual oppression faced by students who self-identify as both Black and women. Greyerbiehl and Mitchell (2014) noted that participants in their study identified themselves with the dual identity of Black women as opposed to a singular identity of either Black or women. Zamani (2003) noted that “being female and African American places African American women at the confluence of two forms of oppression” (p. 7). The college experience is a stressful time for many students. All students face struggles with academic pressure, time management challenges, relationship issues and independence to name a few (Kreig, 2013). Howard-Hamilton (2003) noted that Black women college students face the additional stressors of racism and sexism to a degree unmatched by any other student group as, “double oppression-racism and sexism- was born for African American women when their subordinate status was assumed and enforced by white and black men as well as white women” (p. 19). The ongoing clash between Black culture and White educational systems has been the focus of pedagogical research for the last century (Tuitt, 2010). Zamani summarized that “given the complex intersection of race and gender, more attention should be paid to the educational, social, and political positions of African American women in post-secondary education” (p. 6). Howard-Hamilton explained the concept of the *outsider within*, whereby African American women have been, in ever increasing numbers, invited into the higher education setting yet are still considered and often treated as outsiders with little voice within these walls. This pervasive outsider self-perception further predisposes this subgroup of students to feelings of isolation and invisibility. A sense of community and acceptance, so essential to the continued success of Black women in higher education, has not been achieved because there is little recognized shared cultural experiences with the dominant group.

Lack of Critical Mass

In 2012, African American women made up 12.7 % of the female population of the United States but held only 8.5% of the bachelor degrees earned by women (Guerra, 2013). This data supports the fact that while African American women’s participation in higher education is improving, it is not yet representative of the overall population. This translates into fewer Black female students on college campuses than is optimal to provide community, support, and a sense of belonging for these students. Miller (as cited in Hughes & Howard-Hamilton, 2003) noted that “a critical mass exists whenever there are enough individuals from a particular group that they feel comfortable participating in conversations and enough that other students see them as individuals rather than as spokespersons for their race” (p. 96). Rosales and Person (2003) noted that there are some institutions where enrollment of Black women is so low that there is no sense of

community for these students on campus and therefore their identity development lacks appropriate cultural references. The most damaging result of this level of isolation is burnout, which negatively impacts retention and attainment rates and adds to the lack of critical mass of this particular student group (Hughes & Howard-Hamilton, 2003). It is essential that academic institutions adopt strategies that promote the enrollment and persistence of Black women in higher education to address the issue of critical mass.

Impact of Gender Gap

According to Garibaldi (2014), there were over 800,000 more Black women in 2012 studying on American college campuses than Black men. Garibaldi further noted the “disproportions in male-female enrollments in college negatively impact student interactions and social life on campus” (p. 375). Furstenberg (as cited in Henry, 2008) explains that in light of these statistics it is increasingly unlikely these college educated women will date and marry men with educational backgrounds similar to their own. Henry (2008) suggested that many Black women feel obligated to date only within their race or remain single in order to protect and promote their culture. This responsibility for upholding the race is a theme that runs throughout the history of African American women and is now influencing African American women college students to remain single rather than date or marry outside of their race. In addition, some Black women choose not to date inter-rationally because they fear they will not only be rejected by the White community but also ostracized by the Black community (Henry, 2008). Attempting to navigate the personal and cultural issues of dating may place this particular subset of students “...at risk for depression, anxiety, anger, guilt, shame and despair” (Henry, 2008, p. 20). It is essential, according to Henry for higher education professionals to recognize the critical issues faced by these students who attempt dating in such a disproportionate environment.

Lack of Black Faculty

There exists a serious lack of African American women faculty and staff members working in institutions of higher education, and this also impacts the experiences of Black female college students. *The Digest of Education Statistics* report that African Americans make up seven percent of American college and university faculty (National Council of Education Statistics, 2012). African American women represent only four percent of this total. As African American women seek role models and mentors in the college setting they must often look outside of their cultural group due to the minute number of Black female faculty and staff. In a qualitative study conducted by Louis, Russell, Jackson, Blanchard and Louis (2014), the participants noted that self confidence in their success as students was directly related to their relationship with their African American mentors. However, the statistics support there are not enough African American women faculty members to mentor these students. This situation adds to the isolation, lack of belonging, and stress so prevalent with this subset of students. Targeted interventions are required to help these students successfully manage these challenges and in this article three specific strategies will be introduced.

Strategic Recommendations

Black Sororities

Greyerbielh and Mitchell (2014) summarize the response of a participant speaking to the issue of being multiple marginalized, “The participant understood her identity has multiple layers, and that those layers position her and other Black women toward the bottom of the social hierarchies” (p. 287). Greyerbielh and Mitchell make a strong case for the value of Black sororities in generating social capital for their members, serving as intersectional support system, and providing students with a sense of community and belonging. The authors go as far as to note, “using an intersectional social capital lens, the findings suggest that historically Black sororities provided the participants a level of support not found in other cultural or African American organizations” (Greyerbielh & Mitchell, 2014, p. 290). Additionally, in a 2007 study conducted by Harper, participants noted that membership in a sorority or fraternity positively influenced academic participation. Institutions of higher education should take particular interest in supporting Black sororities because of the overwhelming positives they generate for Black women students.

Mentoring

Hughes and Howard-Hamilton (2003) emphasize the “responsibility for providing supportive environments for African American women should not be left to women of color only” (p. 102). Louis et al. (2014) acknowledged that because there are so few African American women faculty members, non-African Americans must assist the academic and personal development of African American students. This strategy requires faculty members make the commitment to develop cross-cultural competence and be willing to connect with African American women students and form significant relationships of depth and impact. Louis et al. pointed out that “the process begins with mentors taking the time to understand the voice; disaggregate the experiences; and comprehend social imbalances exerted upon this sub-population” (p. 244). Dahlvig (2010) studied cross cultural mentoring at a Christian, predominately White institution (PWI) in the Midwest United States and noted that cross-cultural mentors were encouraged to be sponsored by a person from the African American student body to facilitate acceptance of the mentor. This concept of cross-cultural mentoring is a strategy deserving consideration as a tool to help meet the needs of these students for engagement and support while institutions actively work toward increasing the number of African American female faculty members and students. Dahlvig pointed out that at PWIs students may not be able to engage with a mentor who is of color. Until academic institutions achieve diversity among faculty and staff it is essential that culturally competent mentors be trained to meet the needs of students. Conversely, Louis et al. found while African American students did develop trusting, respectful, relationships with their cross cultural mentors these bonds were not as deep or meaningful as those formed with their African American mentors. Louis et al. provided this summary: “Universities and their faculty members must become, more rapidly and readily, cross-

culturally competent. This urgency is to create an environment where African American women students will have the necessary support from their faculty for the academic journey” (p. 243). Strong, positive relationships with faculty can result in greater student success and well-being (Louis et al., 2014). Ultimately these relationships may improve persistence and attainment rates and therefore, increase the number of African American women faculty members.

Contextual Counseling

The increasing enrollment and participation numbers for African American women indicate institutions of higher education must adopt strategies to support the continued success of this group of students. When addressed, many of these issues will be positively impacted by supporting improved retention rates and increased graduate degree attainment rates by this student population. Until parity of numbers is achieved on college campuses these students will continue to need specifically designed support strategies to assist them in overcoming the feelings of isolation, invisibility, and separateness experienced by these multiple marginalized students. Bradley and Sanders (2003) detailed an innovative and customized counseling strategy developed to recognize the powerful bonds of sisterhood between African American women and use that to provide mental health services built on the critical social networks these students establish. The authors noted “the special strengths and resilient behaviors that result when African American women participate in such groups” (p. 188) describing a “sista” intervention in which a student’s friends are asked to participate in a counseling session. Including friends in the sessions provides assistance and relevant insight to a therapist who is of a different cultural background than the client (Bradley & Sanders, 2003). This intentional collaboration is an advantage of this type of support strategy. It is essential for higher education professionals to remain open to strategies which may not be familiar to them as they try to reach across cultural divides to meet students’ immediate needs for relevant support and intervention. It is also important that the dialogue required to evaluate and select strategies to assist and support these students takes place with the involvement and inclusion of representatives of this population. In this way, strategies are being evaluated and adopted with, as well as, for the students they will serve.

Conclusion

The author of this paper does not intend to portray a bleak and discouraging outlook for Black women in higher education. Many of the issues Black women currently face in higher education are related to the significant strides made thus far in outpacing all other marginalized groups in enrollment and degree attainment statistics. However, the success this group of students has achieved overshadow their continued need for effective, evidenced-based strategies designed to promote their continued growth and success in all aspects of higher education. Rosales and Person (2003) addressed this concern: “We must offer more support for these achievers, create stronger support networks, and establish new programs of service to meet the diverse needs of African American women. No one service, one approach, or one program can meet all

their needs” (p. 63). To this end, three specific and innovative strategies—Black sorority engagement, cross-cultural mentoring, and population specific counseling techniques—are presented and described in this article with literature based evidence provided for each recommendation. Higher education professionals must give voice to the need for continued and focused intervention strategies in order to build further success on the achievements that these students have already realized.

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