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# Factors Contributing to the Success Of African American Women In Higher Education

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## **ABSTRACT:**

*This work reviews the literature which details the history of African American women in colleges and universities to determine the factors which such faculty members believe contributed to their success in academia as well as obstacles the success the women encountered.*

## **Historical Context**

In 1862, Mary Jane Patterson made history by becoming the first African American woman to be awarded a Bachelor of Arts degree. Since that time, African American women have made tremendous accomplishments in higher education. African American women are CEOs and college presidents, lawyers and labor leaders, artists and activists, opera divas and doctors (Davis, 1997, 38).

A modern success story would be that of Dr. Ruth J. Simmons, chosen from a pool of 350 applicants to become the first African American president of the prestigious Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts. When she was growing up, Simmons' family did not have many material possessions, but they had a close-knit family that believed in education. The youngest of twelve children, Simmons was the first to attend college on a scholarship. This scholarship made it possible for her to go to college, because her family was too poor to pay for higher education for any of their children. Simmons stated that throughout her educational journey, she had teachers encouraging her, challenging her, and holding her hand (Phillip, 1994, 9).

Unfortunately, most African American women with family backgrounds similar to Simmons have not achieved such educational success.

## **Statistics**

Many African American teenagers are also mothers struggling to finish high school, and many African American women and their children live in communities that are economically blighted and overcome by drugs. Davis (1997) reports that almost half of all Black households are headed by women; nearly half of these households consist of single Black mothers and their children (46.1 percent), who struggle under the federal poverty line on less than \$16,000 a year for a family of four. Only one quarter of single white mothers (24.8 percent) are similarly impoverished (38).

According to the current census figures, African American women's median income is about \$14,000 less than White men's, \$4,400 less than Black men's, and \$1,500 less than White women's (Davis, 1997, 38). More African American women live in poverty than any other adults.

A college education is a very costly commodity. If nearly half of African American children live in poverty, going to college is impossible if families must provide the money. Other social problems, such as high teen pregnancy and high school drop out rates, must also be reversed if the status of African American women in America is ever to improve.

This study focuses on the factors that contribute to the educational success of African American women who had to overcome social and economic obstacles in order to succeed in higher education. By focusing on women who have already beat the odds, perhaps we can discover what interventions in the lives of African American females may be most effective in breaking cycles of poverty and educational failure. Some of the indicators of success reported in the literature are supportive families, conscious disregard of racism and sexism, aid from scholarship programs, and interpersonal relationships developed with classmates and college personnel.

## **Success Factors**

The role of interpersonal relationships in African American women's lives is a significant factor contributing to their success. Women who had support from family, friends, and mentors/role models were more likely to succeed in college. Support from family members can come from anyone in the family and can be seen in many different forms. For example, Hammons-Bryner (1995) found that older brothers played an instrumental role in their sisters' success in educational attainment. Some of the women in Hammons-Bryner's study did not have a father who lived in the same household;

therefore, their older brothers assumed a surrogate father role. Brothers encouraged their sisters by insisting on such things as the completion of assignments and attendance of classes. While their sisters were still in public school, the brothers began encouraging them to study. Mothers and other family members also provide encouragement for African American women.

Other types of familial support reported to aid in the educational achievement of African American women in higher education are verbal support, transportation provisions to and from school, and baby-sitting services (Hammons-Bryner, 1995, 15). Hammons-Bryner also found that some of the women studied purposefully avoided intimate relationships as an achievement strategy (12). This shows a difference between African American women in college and White women in college.

Hammons-Bryner (1995) further found that many white women were taught that one attends college not only for an education, but also in hopes of finding a marriage partner. On the other hand, African American women were taught that one's priority in college is to earn an education, and "education was the main avenue for escaping dependence on men" (14).

Another source of support upon which African American women rely was found to come from mentors and role models. A mentor can be a relative, a media personality, or an institutional role model. An institutional role model is simply an encouraging teacher/professor, counselor, advisor, or supervisor. Jackson(1996) reported that 76 percent of the 159 African Americans in her study indicated that they did have an achievement role model. The role model was a relative 56 percent of the time; 18 percent of the time the role model was a professor or teacher, and 15 percent of the time a person in the media.

Interpersonal relationships are very crucial to the academic success of African American women in higher education, but many would not have a opportunity to enter higher education in the first place without financial support. Many must hold jobs in order to pay for college and other expenses. Others receive financial support from family members, loans, grants, and scholarship programs.

Dr. Ruth J. Simmons, the first African American president of Smith College, would not have been able to attend college without the scholarship she earned. A high school teacher persuaded historically Black Dillard University to grant Simmons a scholarship. She graduated summa cum laude. Simmons says, "Had I not received that scholarship, I would not have been allowed to go to college. We were too poor to afford it" (Phillip, 1995, 9). Simmons continued her education, receiving a Ph.D. in Romance Languages from Harvard University.

Another major battle that African American women on college campuses must fight is the battle to gain respect. As Cole wrote:

And so, if I know my name, I know that in the academy, like in America, the sister is caught between the rock of racism and the hard place of sexism. There are a multitude of ways of saying that things are not well by the sisters, that we Black women have a hard row to hoe (14).

The classroom climate is still chilly not only for African American women, but for all women. Sandler et al. (in Morgan, 1996) found that professors interrupted women's comments more than men's, and responded to women with patronizing brush-offs ( 21). Professors also have been reported to use women as examples in hypothetical situations with sexual or inappropriate overtones. Sandler also found that there was a tendency for faculty members to frown more at women (21).

Although African American women have various sources of support to aid them in their pursuit of education, they still must face and manage the problems of racism. For example, African American women are asked the least number of questions and receive the least amount of concern in the classroom (Morgan, 1996, 21).

African American women were also found to be treated superficially and viewed in terms of their sexuality; they were perceived as lacking the ability to attain status or power (Rusher, 1995 30). Furthermore, the perception that African American women are not scholars has been documented (Morgan, 1996, 22).

In 1991, women with a college education earned 31 percent less than their male counterparts, and Black women earned even less than white women and were at the lowest rung of the economic scale (Morgan, 1996, 22). The women Ehrhart-Morrison interviewed in *No Mountain High Enough: Secrets of Successful African American Women* reported that they accomplished success by consciously disregarding racism and sexism. They aware of the existence of these two evils, but they chose to ignore and disregard them. These women attended college when schools were segregated or recently integrated, so they were constantly faced with the stress of racism.

Even today, racism is a problem that African American women face on college campuses and in the workplace. Racist treatment by professors can undermine the confidence and motivation of African American students. The report of the National Association for Women in Education indicated that many faculty members attributed women's achievement to luck or affirmative action (Morgan, 1996, 21).

Many women give credit to spirituality for their success. The women featured in Ehrhart-Morrison's study came from families in which religion played a very important role. For example, Antoinette

Handy attributed her solid moral foundation to her parents: "She believes that their spiritual grounding—which included love, morality, ethics, and education—was the basis for her future success and achievement" (Ehrhart, 191).

### **Implications and Recommendations**

In light of the obstacles blocking African American women's paths to educational success, several recommendations can be offered to institutions of higher education, in order to increase African American women's achievement. African American women face massive obstacles in their pursuit of higher education. The persistence of these social problems will continue to limit African American women's access to educational opportunities.

Higher education institutions must create opportunities for African American women that counteract the effects of racism and sexism. The definition of achievement should be examined more closely. To achieve may require different levels of effort for different groups of women. White women face considerable difficulties completing college due to sexism. However, Black women confront twin challenges of sexism and racism. To survive their college experience, African American students must learn to cope with an unfriendly social climate and an ethnocentric curriculum. These social adjustment factors appear to be more important to college persistence for African Americans than for Whites, according to Jaynes and Williams (1989).

Secondly, the general population's decreased commitment to Affirmative Action is expected to have adverse effects. If affirmative action programs are dismantled, it will result in setbacks for African American women, as well as for other minorities. Affirmative Action is necessary, but one must have what it takes intellectually and psychologically, because Affirmative Action does not secure success (Ehrhart, 110)

Iris Rideau says, "Affirmative Action was the grease that turned the wheel. It helped me and made it a lot easier for me to succeed—but I had the will to succeed..." (Ehrhart, 110)

Colleges can also do more to increase success of African American women. Higher education institutions can increase the number of African American women as role models on college campuses. Institutions should ensure that all programs and initiatives are empathetic to the concerns of women of color. Institutions should form committees to deal with diversity issues, and, to ensure the success of these committees, university leaders should be proactive in bringing about change to increase the educational achievement status of African American women. Another important recommendation is that classroom and campus climates be more conducive to the needs of African American women (Morgan, 1996, 21).

Sandler (in Morgan, 1996) observed, "Women of color have different experiences than white and other women. It's not a double whammy, it's a different entity" (21).

### **Summary**

The purpose of this study is to make others aware of the situation that African American women face. The problem has been stated and recommendations have been contrived. The number of African American women who pursue degrees in higher education may decrease, which may lead to an increase in the number of African American women who live under the poverty line. The outlook for African American women remains bleak if changes are not made.

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