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Black Women Employed in the Ivory Tower: Connecting for Success

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to continue the dialogue regarding the impact of lack of critical mass and systemic racism on the success of Black women employed in higher education. While the literature suggests that it is essential for Black women to connect with one another in order to overcome the obstacles they face within the academy, the effects of systemic racism and their underrepresentation in the profession makes this recommendation extremely difficult to implement in some settings, and nearly impossible in others. Black feminist thought and critical race theory provide a theoretical framework for discussing innovative connective opportunities that promote the success of Black women working in higher education. Individual as well as institutional strategies are presented as a means to address the obstacles encountered by Black female faculty and staff in predominantly White institutions (PWIs). Implications for practice are discussed and recommendations for research are offered.

Keywords: Women, racism, black women, Higher education

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Introduction

“It is evident that universities are still perceived by black women to be ivory towers as the structures and culture fail to acknowledge or value their contributions to society” (Henry, 1994, p. 54). Although Black women have been participating in American higher education for more than a century and have certainly made great strides towards occupying their rightful place within academia, they continue to face a myriad of personal and professional challenges (Gregory, 2001). Researchers continue to document a multitude of barriers encountered by Black female students, faculty, and staff (Bonner & Thomas, 2001; Gordon, 2004; Gregory, 2001; Henderson, 2005; Hughes & Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Nichols & Tanksley, 2004; Robinson, 1996; Simpson, 2001; Thomas & Hollenshead, 2001). Among the literature, studies reveal findings of co-occurring discrimination related to race and gender (Zamani, 2003), lack of support systems and networks (Patton & Harper, 2003), and unwelcoming, insensitive, and isolative environments (Watt, 2003). According to Gregory, Black women have demonstrated a great deal of resiliency despite being hidden behind the tripartite-layered veil of persecution that is the result of their race, gender, and class.

Underlying and perpetuating these oppressive conditions are the interrelated global obstacles of systemic racism and the lack of a critical mass, especially at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) (Bagilhole, 1994; Henry, Thompson, & Richards; 2006). For example, Howard-Hamilton (2003) notes that one of the issues that Black women face when participating in higher education, is that they are confronted with a multitude of “conscious, unconscious, verbal, nonverbal, and visual forms of insults [that] are directed toward people of color, [which] are called microaggressions” (p. 23). In addition, due to the lack of a critical mass at PWIs, many Black women in the academy are left to wade through the numerous barriers they face by themselves.

The significant challenges oftentimes inherent in small numbers coupled with institutional racial and gender inequality, have prompted Black women in academia to employ a variety of coping strategies that have been key to their academic and professional advancement (Bagilhole, 1994; Thomas & Hollenshead, 2001). Specifically, Black women connect with mentors within their academic discipline, establish supportive networks of colleagues in and outside of their departments and institutions, work to achieve high visibility in their communities, and rely on their personal contacts to create useful professional alliances (Gregory, 2001). Central among these major mediators of goal attainment are all forms of connecting, especially with other Black women, to bridge the physical gap on campuses caused by lack of a critical mass and to lessen the pain of racism.

While several success strategies have been proposed to help Black women navigate the treacherous conditions in which they commonly find themselves, the effects of systemic racism and lack of critical mass intertwine to make connecting with one another difficult in some cases, and virtually impossible in others. Unfortunately many Black women find themselves navigating the socio-political complexities of the ivory tower in isolation. The purpose of this article is to further the discussion surrounding the impact of systemic racism and the lack of critical mass on the success of Black women working in higher education settings, particularly in predominantly White institutions (PWIs). Black feminist thought and critical race theory

provide a theoretical framework for discussing opportunities that may assist Black women professionals in overcoming some of the continuing obstacles that plague them within higher educational institutions. The use of technology and creative programming in developing connective opportunities to address the obstacles that Black female faculty, staff, and administrators face in PWIs are presented in this article. Implications for practice are discussed and recommendations for research are offered.

Literature Review

The issues and obstacles faced by Black women that impede their full participation in and contribution to higher education are not new (Elman, 1991). They are old issues that have not yet been fully acknowledged, discussed and resolved. For example, two decades ago, Noble (1988) provided a sweeping review of the motivations, challenges, and advancements of Black women pursuing postsecondary education in the United States during the 1900s. This historical work highlighted research findings that illuminated the Black woman's persistent struggle to discover and occupy her rightful place within the academy by exploring the chronic competing interests of race uplift, personal fulfillment, and social and economic mobility (Noble, 1988). In addition to the challenges encountered by Black female college students, Mosley (1980) spoke to the dearth of Black women employed in leadership positions within higher education. This author suggested that Black women were few in number; occupied positions that afforded them little, if any power; received little or no support from their peers and; were underpaid and overworked. The problems cited by Mosely in 1980 were among the same concerns that several researchers identified as barriers facing Black women in academia in the 1990s. For example, among these recurring issues were the chilly and unwelcoming campus climate (Henry & Nixon, 1994), feelings of isolation and salary inequities (Bagilhole, 1994), competing personal and professional obligations (Leonard and Malina, 1994), and the fact that Black women faculty at PWIs "give more, receive less and burn out sooner" (Mobley, 1992, p.). Unfortunately, the same types of concerns and issues identified in the 80s and 90s have persisted into the 21st Century (Gregory 2001; Hughes & Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Nichols & Tanksley, 2004; Patitu & Hinton, 2003; Rosales & Person, 2003).

The effects of systemic racism that Black women face in the academy can be directly observed in and attributed to the underrepresentation, or lack of critical mass of Black in higher education in general. Although Blacks have made significant strides in participating in and completing postsecondary education, there remain glaring disparities between the educational achievements of Black and White Americans. For example, 32.6% of all Black Americans ages 18-24 were enrolled in higher education in 2006, compared to 41.0% of all White Americans ages 18-24 (Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 2008). As a result of Blacks' lower participation rates, their completion rates also lag behind the completion rates of Whites. In 2007, only 19.5% of Black adults ages 25-29 held a bachelor's degree, compared to 35.5% of White adults in the same age range (Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 2008). The statistics for Blacks working in the academy paint an equally disparaging picture. In 2005, there were 145,936 White, full professors at colleges and universities in the United States; during this same year, there were 5,484 Black full professors (Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 2008). In 2003, Blacks in general working in executive, administrative, and managerial staff positions in institutions of higher education represented only 11% (Perna, Gerald, Baum, and Milem, 2006).

Systemic Racism & its Impact on the Success of Black Women Employed within the Academy

Current research continues to reveal that issues of racial and gender inequality remain extremely salient features within American Higher education, especially for Black women working in higher education (Hughes & Howard-Hamilton, 2003). The systemic racism that Black women face in the academy can be observed in a wide variety of professional experiences.

Recruitment and retention

Patitu and Hinton (2003) asserted that the recruitment activities of some institutions disadvantage Black women. For example, the existence of de facto segregation, in which many hiring decisions favor and reflect the race of the dominant group on campus, was noted by Hughes and Howard-Hamilton (2003) as common disadvantage Black women face. Furthermore, when Black women do obtain professional positions within higher education, they can expect, in general, to be paid less than White men and White women. Gregory (2001) contended that women and minorities consistently receive lower starting salaries than members of the dominant culture who are equally qualified and experienced. Guillory (2001) also observed that Black females were more likely to have lower average salaries than both black and white males (in absolute terms). Black women's membership in both a minority race and a minority gender, continues to place them in double jeopardy within the context of administrative and faculty salary negotiation processes. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) refers to this social phenomenon as the intersectionality of multiple marginalized identities. She defines intersectionality as systems of race, social class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality, and age forming features of social organization, which shape a population's experiences and in turn are shaped by the population.

Promotion and Tenure

An example of the systemic racism that Black women faculty encounter within higher education is related to the promotion and tenure process. According to Gregory (2001), surviving promotion and tenure is usually directly correlated with professional success and retention in academia. She pointed out that Black women are still grossly underrepresented in tenure-earning faculty positions and that when they do achieve these positions, they are likely to suffer emotional and psychological abuse during the tenure review process. Patitu and Hinton's research (2003) support this assertion and indicated that Black women in their study reported more negative than positive tenure-related experiences. Patitu and Hinton cited the following as the most common barriers these women faced in the pursuing tenure and promotion: "conflicting information, unwritten rules, lack of direction and mentoring, and nitpicking or triviality" (p. 87). Additionally, these researchers noted that racism, as opposed to sexism, presented greater challenges for Black women seeking promotion and tenure. Along with the traditional demands that faculty encounter, Black women faculty must also find time to informally mentor and advise Black students who seek racially similar role models (Hughes and Howard-Hamilton, 2003). As a result, these women may be less productive in their research endeavors thus jeopardizing their opportunities for promotion and tenure (Gregory 2001).

Professional Interpersonal Interactions

Black women in academia must also grapple with an overwhelming lack of support and respect which results from the dominant culture's elitist attitudes and exclusionary practices (Bagilhole, 1994). Evidence of this devaluing can be observed in almost every type of interpersonal encounter in which the Black woman engages within the academy (with superiors, colleagues, and students). As Harris (2007) reported, she feels that she has been in the "precarious position of defining and defending [her] professional identity because of [her] race and gender" (pp. 57). Since the beginning of her career in academia, Harris has insisted on being addressed by her professional title, *Doctor Harris*, to deal with the lack of respect within and outside of the classroom—places where her "intellect, authority and credibility" (p. 59) as a professor are questioned. Hughes and Howard-Hamilton also (2003) reported that:

Evidence of systemic racism...can be found in the classroom when students question, query, challenge, and dismiss the intellectual ability of an African American faculty member. In all of these situations, no amount of experience is enough to prove that she is highly capable when the group comprises people who do not look like her. (p. 99)

Additionally, Crouther (2002) contended that when the grade point average of some White students is threatened by a grade lower than an "A," from a woman faculty of color, there can be problems to include unfavorable faculty evaluations.

Black women also continue to suffer ostracism from their colleagues and superiors. Research conducted by Patitu and Hinton (2003) revealed similar patterns of isolation among the Black women faculty and administrators in their study. The women in their study reported that they experienced marginalization and lack of support from both their peers and managers. For example, some of these women reported being sexually harassed by an immediate supervisor, being denied budgetary resources, and being ignored and/or alienated altogether. Furthermore, in some instances when Black women do form collegial relationships with peers, the results are just as devastating and demeaning. Being viewed as a "twofer," someone who counts as a female and minority race hire has been a salient attitude that Allen (1998) has encountered in academia. Allen recounts being blatantly told by a departmental colleague that she was "an affirmative action hire and not qualified" for the tenure-tracked professorship (p. 579). The picture is not much different for Black women campus administrators. As Hughes & Howard-Hamilton (2003) noted subtle expressions of incompetence and inexperience are made, often in cases where an African American woman oversees a unit on campus.

In Research Pursuits

Thomas and Hollenshead (2001) label the result of the widespread lack of support that Black women experience, "a feeling of invisibleness" (p. 166). These researchers suggest that even in one of the most highly regarded academic activities within the academy, scholarly research, Black women faculty oftentimes find little support for their research, especially if they are interested in studying issues that affect or are related to people of color. Furthermore, many Black women academicians believe that their research is not valued, their opinions regarding research ideas do not matter to colleagues (Thomas & Hollenshead, 2001) and that they are less

likely to be asked by a senior White faculty member to be a co-author on a publication (Patitu & Hinton, 2003).

In summary, Black women faculty and administrators who are fortunate enough to infiltrate the elitist ranks of higher education face an incredible amount of distress as a result of these racially motivated, pervasive psychological assaults.

Lack of Critical Mass & its Impact on the Success of Black Women in the Academy

Black women in higher education, whether employed as faculty or administrators, are also confronted with a myriad of issues related to their underrepresentation in the academy, which is also referred to in the literature as lack of critical mass. As defined by Miller (2003), critical mass:

exists whenever, within a given group [of individuals], there are enough members from a particular group such that they feel comfortable participating in the conversation and that [others] see them as individuals rather than as spokespersons for their race. (¶ 18)

In examining the current status of Black women faculty, researchers contend that although gains have been made in the numbers of Black women working in higher education, they remain severely underrepresented and have not yet obtained the same participation levels as their White male and female counterparts (Gregory, 2001). As of 2005, Black female faculty represented 6.7% of the 274, 117 female faculty and 2.7% of the 675, 624 total faculty employed at degree-granting institutions (US Department of Education, 2006). At the Assistant Professor level, Black female faculty numbered 5,438 with only 1,986 employed as Full Professors. Conversely, White female Assistant Professors numbered 54,226 with 36,808 employed as Full Professors (US Department of Education, 2006). As several researchers have indicated, Black women are not faring much better in administrative position within higher education either (Moses, 1997; Belk, 2006). For instance, in the 2006-07 Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac, it was reported that in the Fall of 2003, Black women were employed in approximately 5.6% of all college and university executive, administrative and management positions. Although it is difficult to ascertain the exact number of Black women who are employed in university administrative positions, according to Belk, "data from 2005 indicated that fewer than 3% of [ACPA] members were classified as midlevel Black administrators at four-year institutions" (p. 18). The preceding data suggests that Black women continue to be severely underrepresented in both faculty and administrative positions within the academy and their ability to overcome the obstacles that result from systemic racism is severely hampered by this underrepresentation.

One primary issue that emerges when analyzing the impact of the lack of critical mass Black women face in higher education is the scarcity of other Black women to serve as role models, mentors, peer advisors, and confidants. This unavailability is the result of not only the low concentration of Black women at PWIs overall, but also their dearth in specific administrative roles and academic disciplines. Hughes and Howard-Hamilton (2003) provided evidence that supports this assertion and contend that many Black women faculty are forced to look outside of their academic discipline for support. As these researchers concluded, the

physical isolation that is the result of the low numbers and dispersion of Black women in academia, causes them to connect sporadically and haphazardly.

Another factor that is attributed to the lack of critical mass is the manner in which Black women are disproportionately overloaded with professional obligations that completely absorb the time they have to engage in formal and informal supportive relationships. Gregory (2001) noted the lack of opportunity that Black women have to reap the benefits of professional support networks while Phelps (1995) reported that Black faculty women considered it essential to “have access to others who could validate their experiences, welcome their input, and critique their work” (Gregory, 2001, p. 130). Black women, because of their low numbers, are also called upon to work with Black students more than their White colleagues, because these students naturally seek advisors who look like them (i.e. race and gender) (Hughes and Howard-Hamilton, 2003). In addition, they are sought out to represent the minority opinion in institutional service activities, such as committee meetings, leadership groups and training programs, far more frequently than their White peers (Gregory, 2001). All of these demands diminish the time that Black women have to identify, establish, cultivate, and maintain relationships that will empower them for success in the academy.

Theoretical Framework

Black feminist and critical race perspectives suggest that creating and sustaining strong connective relationships with other Black women are essential to their social and psychological wellbeing (Hughes and Howard-Hamilton, 2003). Majority monocultural human development theories are harmful when they are used as the primary lens to understand the developmental needs and experiences of Black women because these theories are validated on non-Black persons. According to Howard-Hamilton (2003) Black feminist thought and critical race theory provide an appropriate framework which adds an important element of depth to our understandings about the struggles and needs of Black women in academia.

Black Feminist Thought

Black feminist thought is a theory that centralizes and validates the intersecting dimensions of race and gender that are uniquely experienced in the lives of African American women. It is grounded on the premise that the majority of Black women share certain commonalities, perceptions, and experiences. The distinctness of their worldview is due in large part to the larger sociopolitical development of American culture (Collins, 2004; Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Smedley, 2007; Waters & Conaway, 2007; White, 2001). This sociopolitical context represents a common experience among African American women and is one feature of their collective identity (Howard-Hamilton, 2003).

According to Collins (2002), at the core of Black feminist thought is the concept of standpoint, which suggests that the inherited struggle against racism and sexism is a common bond among African American women. Collins contends that while all African Americans experience racism, they do not experience and/or respond to racism in the same way due to the diversity (i.e., class, age, religion, sexual orientation, etc.) that exist among these women. Additionally, race and gender are often internalized in ways that contribute to a significant

portion of one's worldview (Smedley, 2007; Zamani, 2003). As members of two groups-- African Americans and women-- who have been historically oppressed and marginalized, their unique voice offers important insight into the needs and aspirations of this group (Collins, 2004; Simien, 2006).

Collins (2000) also suggests that there are four themes inherent within Black feminist thought. The first theme, "the lived experience as a criterion of meaning," refers to the knowledge Black women gain as a result of their life experiences. The next theme, "the use of dialogue," suggests the importance of establishing bonds and relationships since oppressive and contentious events are seldom solved in isolation. The "ethic of caring" theme incorporates the use of expressiveness, emotion and empathy as a means for greater understanding of the Black woman's unique experiences. Recognizing that personal values influence knowledge, the fourth theme, the "ethic of personal accountability" refers to knowledge claims which lack objectivity. The expression of these themes by Black women may vary given differences in class, region, age, ethnicity and sexual orientation, which impact the lives of these women individualistically (Collins).

Despite the significance of Black women's distinct perspectives, there is a paucity of research that accurately expresses the unique, yet common experiences of Black women—and even less research originates from the perspective of the Black woman herself. Central to Collins' paradigm is the role of Black female intellectuals "... to produce facts and theories about the Black female experience that will clarify a Black woman's standpoint for Black women" (2002, p. 469). Applied to higher education, Black feminist thought is important in assisting Black college women to effectively deal with the wide array of "microaggressive" indignities (i.e., racist attitudes and behaviors) encountered in their daily campus experiences (Howard-Hamilton, 2003). Black feminist thought (Collins, 1990, 1998, 2002) recognizes the marginalization felt by many Black women in academia, which is sometimes described as the "outsider within status" (Howard-Hamilton, 2003, p. 21).

Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory (Delgado and Stefanic, 2001; Villalpando and Bernal, 2002; Smith, Altbach, and Lomotey, 2002) was developed in response to racial oppression in society and seeks to "deconstruct [the] racialized content" (Howard-Hamilton, 2003, p. 22) of institutional practices, curriculum, and research. It takes a stand against avoiding issues of race and history through colorblindness and a historicism. In particular, critical race theory deeply values the knowledge of people of color that is grounded in their daily life experiences. This theory is centered on the transforming empowerment experienced by people of color that is the result of examining the various contexts that construct their identities. Within this theoretical framework, Black women share their experiences, also referred to as "counterstories" with one another in welcoming and hospitable counterspaces (Hughes and Howard-Hamilton, 2003, p. 101). Conversations may include recounting of the many racial vituperations that these women face on a daily basis (Howard-Hamilton, 2003). Critical race theory recognizes that in order for Black women to survive in a racially hostile society, they must identify environments in which it is safe to discuss their plight among those with similar experiences. Hughes and Howard-Hamilton (2003) describe the theory in practice:

Support systems include opportunities for African American women to form sister circles and share counterstories that refute some of the negative information they may have received during their daily campus routines. Such support systems are not intended to portray or reinforce a debilitating sense of self and hopelessness but, instead, to provide settings in which to create an identity not based on gender roles or racial stereotyping. The role models and facilitators of these support groups should be African American women. (p. 101)

Discussion

Although the literature suggests that it is essential for Black women to connect with one another (Hughes and Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Collins, 2000), their underrepresentation in the field makes this recommendation difficult to achieve, especially in face-to-face interactions, in some cases. In other cases, it is virtually impossible to find another African-American female and/or male to interact with in the same unit, department and/or division on some college campuses (Brightharp, Henry, Hinton, et al., 2005). Both Black feminist thought and critical race theory provide useful cues for redressing the disenfranchisement that Black women continue to experience in institutions of higher education. The concept of standpoint, which describes the bonding that occurs among Black women as a result of their common struggle against racism and sexism, suggests that connective strategies may work to strengthen and empower these women. Furthermore, critical race theory relies heavily on the sharing of personal experiences (known as “counterstories”) and the creation of supportive and welcoming environments (“counterspaces”) in helping Black women overcome the challenges related to systemic racism that are compounded by the lack of critical mass. It is within this context that the following individual and institutional strategies are offered to counter some of the difficulties that Black women working in higher education face when attempting to establish and sustain relationships with one another.

Individual Strategies

Connecting Through Mentoring

There are several connective strategies that Black women in the academy may employ to counter the isolation, lack of support and marginalization they face. According to Gregory (2001), one of the most detrimental obstacles to the academic success of Black women is the absence of mentoring relationships. Moreover, a study conducted by Noble (1988) revealed that having a mentor was reported to enhance Black faculty women's opportunities for promotion and tenure as well as provide important information needed for professional mobility. Patton and Harper (2003) asserted that Black women would be served best by same-race female mentors because they would “understand the complex intersection of race and gender in the academy and society” more than mentors from other racial backgrounds (p. 71). The pressing need for Black women in higher education to engage in healthy mentoring relationships is in direct conflict with their underrepresentation in general and within specific academic disciplines. Even when they are present in adequate numbers, they are unavailable to fulfill the mentoring role due to the overwhelming professional demands they face.

In attempting to identify same-race mentors, Black women in the academy may have to explore building cross-functional and/or cross-disciplinary connective relationships. For instance, Black women faculty may have to venture beyond the confines of their department or academic college to find same-race mentors. Similarly, Black female student affairs professionals may have to seek the support of Black women faculty or other Black women employed in seemingly unconnected functional areas within student affairs (i.e. a Director of Student Health Services connecting with the Director of Career Services). Additionally, Black women working in higher education are encouraged to identify the external sources from which they can develop mentoring relationships (i.e. church, social organizations, family, friends, etc). Furthermore, Black women may also benefit from forming mentoring relationships with individuals outside of their race. However, Hughes and Howard-Hamilton (2003) warned that some Black women have reported that in attempting “to make a connection with their White advisers or faculty members [they] were rebuffed” (p. 101). Similarly, Patton and Harper (2003) noted that mentoring relationships with individuals from other racial or ethnic backgrounds resulted in less favorable outcomes. Black women must take initiative and continue to proactively forge meaningful formal and informal mentoring relationships with one another if they are to survive and thrive in professional settings where they are significantly underrepresented.

Connecting Through Spirituality

Spirituality has also been documented as useful in helping Black women combat “the everyday struggles that come with living in a socially and politically oppressive system,” (Watt, 2003, p. 29). Researchers have defined the role of faith and spirituality as a coping mechanism (Constantine, Wilton, Gainor, and Lewis, 2002; Thomas, 2001), a point of psychological resistance (Robinson and Ward, 1991; Robinson and Howard-Hamilton, 1994, Brookins and Robinson, 1995) and an identity construct that is emphasized in the Black woman’s plight to develop a positive identity (Stewart, 2002; Watt, 1997). According to Watt (2003), “the search for an integrated identity is intense for African American women who exist in a culture where being female and being Black are devalued” (p. 32). In essence, the unique intersectionality of the constructs of race and gender contributes to the formation of Black women’s developmental and social identities (Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Stephens & Phillips, 2005). From this perspective and within the common context of their underrepresentation, spirituality may be employed as a connective strategy to assist Black women in overcoming the issues of isolation and marginalization they experience in higher education. Constantine, Miville, Warren, Gainor, and Lewis-Coles (2006) noted that several connective spiritual activities such as attending church and participating in group bible study were used by participants in their study as a means to deal with career-related challenges. Furthermore, Williams, Frame, and Green (1999) asserted that “because spirituality is interwoven with African American identity, it becomes a powerful resource for personal growth with African American women in groups” (p. 262). Black women in the academy who are over burdened with a plethora of competing personal and professional demands may be more likely to pursue supportive relationships with other Black women that are based upon their spiritual connectedness and common struggle.

Connecting Through Involvement in Professional Organizations

Another strategy that Black women faculty and staff may find useful in connecting with other Black women in the academy is participation in local, regional, and national professional organizations. Twale and Shannon (1996) have noted the findings of several researchers who contend that “association involvement has often offered a more hospitable environment than the academic workplace” for women in higher education (p. 117). Additionally, the following benefits that positively impact career success and satisfaction have been noted from participating in professional associations: “camaraderie and networking among colleagues to fulfill social and psychological needs not met on campus; influencing one's field and advancing and disseminating scholarship; professional development; and career stature. Historically, professional conferences and workshops have provided a forum for Blacks in general, and Black women in particular, to share and exchange ideas related to their personal and professional development. For example, the African American Women's Summit has been offered as a pre-conference workshop at the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) and the American College Personnel Association's (ACPA) annual conventions for a number of years (Henry, Brightharp, Powell, et al., 2008; Henry, Brightharp, Howard-Hamilton, et al., 2007; Henry, Brightharp, Brazzel, et al., 2006; Brightharp, Henry, Hinton, et al., 2005; Howard-Hamilton, Henry, Hinton, et al., 2004). This gathering has provided a venue in which Black women in the academy can connect with one another and share their personal and professional struggles and success strategies (W. J. Henry, personal communication, June 10, 2008). As facilitators and participants engage one another in interest sessions geared toward the issues and concerns of Black women, as suggested in black feminist thought and critical race theory, inevitably the sharing of “counterstories” occurs. These types of opportunities have become especially important for a number of Blacks in higher education who find themselves in positions at institutions where there is a lack of a critical mass of Black peers and few role models who “look like them” with whom they can connect.

Institutional Strategies

Connecting through Programming

It is imperative that colleges and universities take an active role in establishing connective programming that decreases the obstacles that Black women contend with on a daily basis when attempting to connect with one another (Hughes and Howard-Hamilton, 2003). Patton and Harper (2003) asserted that “the most important step for institutions that wish to prove that they are sincere about wanting to retain African American women, be they faculty, administrators, or students, is to provide support systems” (Hughes & Howard-Hamilton, 2003, p. 101). It is essential that Black women be provided the space and time to engage in meaningful and safe interpersonal exchanges with one another. Watt (2003) recommends holistic programming that “create[s] an environment in which women can discuss what it means to experience life being both female and black” (Watt, 2003, p. 38). To assist Black women to “operate from a position of strength” (Tatum, 1999), the university would institute well advertised and integrated programming to provide ongoing connective services to Black female students, faculty and staff. For example, among these services, the university may provide space and promotional assistance for sister circles and ‘Waiting to Exhale’ Indiana University style

retreats for Black and White women to foster positive understandings through sharing personal life stories (Howard-Hamilton, 2003).

This connective programming approach, while driven and embraced by the institution itself, would be supported collectively by all university stakeholders. African American faculty would contribute to its success by supporting outreach and encouraging women to create peer mentoring circles/sister circles. Students would establish and grow cross-disciplinary connections, join student and professional organizations, and when desired or necessary, engage with other-race or male mentors (Patton & Harper, 2003). Non-African American faculty would “be aware of the politics of difference” (Patton & Harper, 2003, p. 76) and would reach out to Black students in true caring and mentoring capacities in addition to working to become aware of and eliminate “personal biases and stereotypes” (p. 76).

Connecting through Technology

The utilization of technology is an important means by which Black women may overcome challenges related to their lack of critical mass within the academy. Thus, it is recommended that they explore and take advantage of the benefits that can be derived from accessing virtual support systems available through computer-mediated communication mediums (i.e. chat rooms, online social network sites, discussion boards, etc). Miller (2007) asserted that the use of internet-based communication mechanisms is supplemental form of communication that does not rely on traditional geographic proximity. This suggests that Black women who are physically isolated can overcome the lack of opportunity to engage in face to face interpersonal interactions with one another. Furthermore, Lampe, Ellison, and Steinfield (2006) found that the participants in their study who used the online social network, Facebook, more intensely reported being more engaged in the university community and having more social connections at their institution.

Connective strategies such as mentoring, support groups and sister circles can be enhanced by utilization of technology. For example, universities could implement networking databases, such as through a university run Facebook© type program, manned video/audio chat Q&A lines, and listservs via the university website. These software programs would be geared toward providing academic, professional, and social networking opportunities for Black female peers, colleagues, mentors/protégées to connect across the campus or the world for much needed on-the-spot advice, information, or to simply to afford access to a much needed friendly face or voice.

Conclusion

Black women have been extremely resourceful in using their position of marginalization to resist the oppression they have encountered within the academy and society at large despite the enduring history of disenfranchisement they have faced (Thomas and Hollenshead, 2001). In order to maintain this position of resistance, Black women in the academy must pool their collective energy and continue to proactively identify and participate in formal and informal mentoring relationships; they must pursue both conventional and unconventional connective opportunities. Additionally, Black women interested in spirituality should be encouraged to

continue to rely upon their individual and/or collective conviction as a coping mechanism, point of psychological resistance, and an integrated identity conception in order to create a barrier against the isolationism they face.

Furthermore, Black women must recognize the value of professional development opportunities that allow them to connect with one another and must negotiate with their employers for those opportunities. Black women should be given the necessary support to pursue professional development opportunities through participation in national, regional, and state professional organizations. They should be encouraged (and empowered) to facilitate conference presentation, but their willingness and/or ability to do so, should not determine if they are permitted to attend. The disproportionate workload that Black women in the academy are challenged to manage, may discourage them from taking advantage of these highly productive and personally fulfilling activities.

Institutions committed to promoting and facilitating the success of their Black women faculty and staff might be wise to consider initiating university-wide connective programming since Black women's needs are generally not met by majority programming. Black feminist thought may serve as a useful and appropriate framework in developing activities that give voice, self-definition, and belonging to Black women (Collins, 2004) working in higher education. Additionally, the use of technology (specifically computer-mediated communication mechanisms) is an innovative approach that institutions may employ in helping Black women manage the challenges they face due to the lack of critical mass and systemic racism they face within the ivory tower.

Although researches have focused some attention toward the success and challenges of Black women in the academy, a great deal more qualitative and quantitative research is needed to determine effective ways to assist them in overcoming some of their obstacles. Thus, research exploring the use and effectiveness of mentoring, spirituality, and involvement in professional organizations as well as creating and maintaining connective opportunities for Black women professionals in higher education should be conducted. Research regarding the use of computer-mediated communication technologies to facilitate connective opportunities for Black women in the academy is nonexistent and should also be examined. Moreover assessments of current effective institution-wide initiatives and strategies to include connective programming for Black women are warranted.

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