



Advancing Women in Leadership

JOURNAL

VOLUME 43, 2024
ISSN 1093-7099

EDITORS: BEVERLY J. IRBY, NAHED ABDELRAHMAN, BRAD BIZZELL, AND JULIA BALLENGER
ASSISTANT EDITORS: JORDAN DONOP & KRISTINA HALL

Full Length Research Paper

Black Women College Administrators Perspectives on Informal Mentoring: A Phenomenological Case Study

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Accepted July 10, 2024

Within this qualitative phenomenological case study, I explored the perspectives of informal mentoring as a coping strategy to navigate workplace and career stagnation for Black women college administrators in the United States. Findings from their experiences indicate that while formal mentoring and sponsorship existed for their counterparts, it was not accessible for them. The participants described informal mentoring was needed and helpful for their workplace challenges and for the cultivation of their leadership growth strategies, particularly as employees at predominately white institutions. Seven themes emerged: (a) Defining Supportive Relationships; (b) Relevancy of Race and Gender in Mentoring; (c) Cultivating Kinships and Networks; (d) Identifying Salient Challenges; (e) Navigating Campus Culture; (f) Penetrating Boundaries to Leadership; and (7) Leveraging for Leadership.

Keywords: mentoring; Black women college administrators, counterspaces; Black feminist theory

Black¹ women's ascensions to senior-level leadership positions in U.S. higher education have been limited as they continue to struggle in attaining high ranking positions (Searby et al., 2015). While the advancement of Black women professionals in U.S. higher education has slightly progressed, senior leadership representation remains disproportionately low compared to White men who historically represent the majority of leadership posts (Chance, 2022). White men are historically at the top and white women hold more leadership roles compared to Black women (Chance, 2022; Jones, 2014). Noting college presidencies, 32.8% are held by women (American Council on Education, 2023). In 2022, 5.4% of college presidents were African American women (American Council on Education, 2022). More broadly, the U.S. Department of Education (2020) reported White males held 78% of leadership posts compared to 7% of Black women in leadership at higher education institutions. Given these trends, Black women administrators are not amply represented in higher education leadership within two- and four-year public and private institutions in the United States (Bartman, 2015; Paige, 2018; West 2018).

Researchers have illustrated that Black women have struggled to secure high ranking leadership positions (e.g., see Artay, 2018; Coker et al., 2018; Wilder et al., 2013). Black women college administrators experience challenges that represent barriers to their career advancement (Davis & Maldonado, 2015). For example, stigmas of gender inequality, isolation, lack of preparation, racial stereotypes, lack of opportunities

and underrepresentation all remain relevant as part of the problem (West, 2015). Underrepresentation is a main challenge that is best described as the disproportionate representation of a group of individuals when compared to another defined group (Zambrana et al., 2015). The slow moving and disconcerting leadership strides that Black women have been able to make in U.S. higher education impedes the positive expectations of these women in the field (Howard-Baptiste, 2014).

Mentoring can be employed by professionals on college campuses (Darwin & Palmer, 2009; Davis, 2009). A mentor signifies a role model with advanced experience and ability to guide and counsel (Kram, 1985). Mentoring has been explored as a support by Black women administrators to assist with aspirations of increased leadership and overcoming career barriers that impede their consideration for advancement (e.g., see Chang et al., 2014; Howard et al., 2016; West, 2018). It is suggested by Searby and colleagues (2015) that women not wait on mentor opportunities to appear, but to proactively seek them out. However, in many instances, mentors are not available and there is an absence of mentors, especially for women (e.g., see Ballenger, 2010; Chang et al., 2014; Horenstein et al., 2012). In particular, the lack of formalized mentoring and institutional support networks are an issue for Black women college administrators (Gardner et al., 2014). This is also a reality for other professionals of color in academia (Irby et al., 2016). Latina faculty face similar absences of formal mentoring that if available may improve

their workplace experiences (Irby et al., 2016). Few studies have elucidated formal mentoring specifically for Black

women college administrators, yet informal mentoring has often been employed by Black women to better understand their professional support and personal coping strategies (Irby, et al., 2016; Searby et al., 2015).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological case study, a form of research that focuses on the exploration of significant issues within a particular population or field, was to explore how Black women college administrators in the United States turned to informal mentoring to help their career paths and the influences of these informal relationships on their professional lives. Informal mentoring relationships are those typically established outside of the workplace that do not follow a set format and are synonymous with non-traditional mentoring in this study. I explored the challenges and experiences of Black women through illuminating their use of informal mentoring as a desired coping mechanism for dealing with perceived career, psychosocial, and psychological impacts. The following research questions guided the study:

1. What are the ways Black women college administrators experienced informal mentoring relationships?
2. In what ways does informal mentoring contribute to Black women college administrators' leadership growth in the workplace?

Black Women, Mentoring, and Professional Counterspaces

Black women administrators through actualizing the oppressions they encounter alongside their feelings on the lack of general support, seek external outlets to deal with workplace experiences (e.g., see Davis, 2016; Hall, 2012; Jones, 2014; West, 2015). Research addressed that mentoring provides professional support advantages when such relationships are available (Ballenger, 2010; Kram, 1985). Henderson et al. (2010), through their exploration of Black women's experiences at predominately White institutions, recognized mentoring relationships as relationships where mentors "give advice and support in a warm and caring way to someone striving to become successful" (p. 35). Mentoring is a distinct relationship used to cultivate and motivate individuals (Arora & Rangnekar, 2015). Arora and Rangnekar (2015) postulated mentoring as "a vital tool to enhance career resilience" (p. 19). Mentoring has transformed and taken on different meanings and applications, and contextual applications as evidenced in the literature (e.g., see Agosto et al., 2016; Dunbar & Kinnersley, 2011; Henderson et al., 2010; Searby et al., 2015). Kram (1983) prognosticated a mentor-mentee relationship as having positive influences on one's professional and psychosocial development. Kram (1983) leaned toward a formal mentoring scenario where the relationship has set expectations, boundaries and accountability, where informal mentoring is less predefined.

In the absence of formalized mentoring structures, Black women college administrators embrace informal means of establishing mentoring relationships (see e.g. Searby et al., 2015; West, 2015). For example, Searby et al. (2015) sought mentoring perspectives of Black women administrators and found that participants were taking advantage of informal mentoring opportunities via informal structures. Non-traditional mentoring provides career and emotional benefits that are not tangible within the walls of academia (Carmel & Paul, 2015; Chang et al., 2014). Because opportunities for Black women to establish networks at work is difficult due to their lack of representation, informal methods are often implemented and beneficial. They may proactively seek out mentors on their own to align themselves with persons to whom they feel a connection and whom they can learn from (Agosto et al., 2016). Informal mentors provide certain psychosocial and emotional benefits that are not often tangible within the walls of academia (Carmel & Paul, 2015; Chang et al., 2014). Informal mentoring can include sister-circle meetups (Black women support groups), self-mentoring, religious counsel, friends, online professional or social groups that are multi-geographic, silent observed behaviors, occasional impromptu check-ins for advice or support, or positive interactions in professional campus settings (Agosto et al., 2016; Searby et al., 2015).

Informal mentoring experiences, also cultivated through professional organization memberships, provide additional benefits for Black women in higher education (Baltodano et al., 2012; West, 2017, 2018). The Association of Black Women in Higher Education and the American Association of Blacks in Higher Education are two organizations specifically created and operated for the purposes of providing professional and social networks for Black people and the former explicitly for Black women. The Association of Black Women in Higher Education (ABWHE) is a professional association that creates spaces for black women in higher academia to congregate and network on a regional and national level ("The Association of Black Women in Higher Education", (n.d.). The American Association of Blacks in Higher Education (n.d.) website provided the following vision statement:

The American Association of Blacks in Higher Education (AABHE) pursues the educational and professional needs of Blacks in higher education with a focus on leadership, access and vital issues impacting students, faculty, staff, and administrators (para. 2).

For Black women college administrators, membership in these types of organizations may have benefits that allow these women to engage, decompress, and have supportive discourse for handling the issues and challenges they may face on their campuses (West, 2015). The Women of Color Summit offered by the American Council of Education's Office of Women in Higher Education division provided platforms for women

leaders of color to form cross cultural networking groups and find mentoring (Baltodano et al., 2012).

In contrast to the research on mentoring strategies largely for Black faculty, West (2018) introduced the necessity for professionally homogenous counterspaces for administrators, which are more accessible through external organizational affiliations and conferences. A counterspace is a culturally homogenous site of resistance for marginalized groups of individuals, infused with responsive resources to promote professional success and personal wellbeing (West, 2018). Whereas the Women of Color Summit (Baltodano et al., 2012) was established for multi-ethnic Women of Color in higher education and Chang et al. (2014) introduced perspectives of both academic and administrative leaders of Color working in faith-based higher education, the African American Women's Summit in West's (2018) study was specifically for Black women professionals in higher education.

Black women often seek camaraderie and sisterhood with other Black women (e.g., see Arday, 2018; Henderson, et al., 2010; Johnson-Bailey, et al., 2015; Searby, et al., 2015). The African American Women's Summit (AAWS), according to West (2018), is "a culturally responsive professional development opportunity known as a professional counterspace" (p. 6). AAWS was a non-traditional form of mentoring that promoted culturally affirming positive interactions through affinity groups or sister circles (West, 2018). These safe spaces contribute to Black professional women's sense of belongingness and security to be who they are without fear or stigmatism of being Black women (Horenstein et al., 2012; Irby, 2014; West, 2018). Counterspaces, as newer interventions, support the standpoint of Patricia Hill Collins' (2000) Black Feminist Thought where models are created for Black women by Black women due to their shared understanding of oppressions, challenges, and coping.

Extensive data does not exist that introduces prominence of Black women holding leadership roles in higher education administration (Davis, 2016; Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Hague & Okpala, 2010; Searby et al. 2015). Although, according to Ballenger (2010), women leaders in higher education that engaged in mentorship found the relationships integral to their career advancement; it is also regarded as a popular mechanism for career support and rapport building (Chang et al., 2014). Additional research on the mentoring relationships of Black women college administrators would prove beneficial to include the informal methods they use for their own professional successes, career ladders and well-being, and the present study contributes to this exploration.

Theoretical Framework

Black feminist thought (BFT; Collins, 1986, 1990, 2000, 2002), penned by Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins, is a formative theory that introduces a conceptual frame rooted in sisterhood for Black women to cultivate a better

understanding of their oppressions and relationships with one another (Collins, 1986). According to Collins (2000), Black feminist theory encompasses a place of marginalization in which Black women are different from White and other minority women. Black Feminist Thought (BFT) is a framework that allows for further exploration of the experiences Black women face in academic workplaces - racism, sexism, and underrepresentation. These types of oppressions add to the dearth of mentoring opportunities for Black women higher education professionals.

Collins (2000) asserted BFT consists of the following tenets: (a) Black women's group location in intersecting oppressions produces commonalities among individual Black women, (b) BFT emerges from a tension linking experiences and ideas, (c) BFT is concerned with the connections between Black women's experiences and sharing of knowledge or standpoint, (d) BFT is concerned with the essential contributions of Black women intellectuals, (e) BFT is concerned with the significance of change, (f) BFT is concerned with its relationship to social justice, and (g) BFT decrees that Black women have specialized knowledge of their own realities that includes the intersection of race and gender.

BFT provided a deeper foundation for conceptualizing the underrepresentation, isolation, negative cultural stereotyping, and marginalization that Black women administrators experience as employees at institutions of higher learning (Henry & Glenn, 2009). The focus is on Black women's experiences and "consists of ideas produced by Black women that clarify a stand-point of and for Black women" (Collins, 1986, p. 16). Black Feminist Thought postures the catalyst for Black women to challenge the ill-norms by seeking relationships with other professionals and asserting their desire for mentoring.

Methods

I employed a qualitative phenomenological case study research design. A phenomenological case study is a research method that is focused on the participants' experiences with a phenomenon and understanding them through analyzing participants' perceptions and descriptions of their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Further, it is a research design that focuses on a bounded case rather than a population sample. It "enthalls us with insights into the enigma of life as we experience it" (Manen, 2017, p. 779). A phenomenological case study takes what is experienced in the real world and elucidates it through simulation in research studies. Moustakas (1994) proffered that phenomenological inquiry may be applied to a chosen topic or population. Interpretively, phenomenology is used to unearth concerns and create opportunities for voices with shared experiences (Moustakas, 1994). My rationale for electing to employ this type of design was to use phenomenology as a method of inquiry to illuminate awareness of the mentoring challenges of Black women.

The phenomenological case study design is useful to unearth and interpret how the specific phenomenon of informal mentoring impacted Black women in higher education administration as a case, and if it contributed to their personal well-being, leadership growth, and career success. I explored what is experienced in context, such as how Black women feel when they are not supported in the workplace (West, 2015), or how the absence of formal mentoring exacted using alternative measures for support are embraced by Women of Color (Agosto et al., 2016). The intent was to fully engage and find meanings from an individual's respective experiences and for greater understanding of those personal experiences (Lune and Berg, 2017).

Participant Criteria and Recruitment

I recruited study participants based on the following criteria: (a) Full-time Black woman college administrators representing a variety of administrative areas and years in the field; (b) full-time professionals at a two or four-year public and private higher education institutions in New York State; and (c) Black women that identified as having experiences with mentoring.

I contacted prospective participants via email, using lists from two Black-women-centered higher education organizations and one national leadership organization for Black college professionals. I parsed out the lists to further identify possible participants in the northeast, primarily New York State. I formally introduced myself via an invitation email that included an overview of the study in efforts to solicit Black women professionals to participate. Their responses to the written correspondence confirmed their willingness to participate in the interviews, focus groups or both, understanding the time commitments. Responses from eleven Black women college administrators, representing nine institutions, were received. I sent follow-ups to the respondents along with the interview protocol. Two withdrew prior to the beginning of the process; there remained nine study participants from eight schools.

Sample

The sample for this study included nine participants ranging in administrative level from counselor to assistant vice president representing student affairs, academic affairs, and admissions areas, aligning with Creswell's (2009) recommendation of including 5-25 participants in phenomenological studies. The participants were selected due to the similarities of being Black women administrators in the field of U.S. higher education. Black women in U.S. higher education have been viewed as a marginalized group, and the participants captured the complexities of their experiences providing various points of view (Greyerbiehl & Mitchell, (2014). Three of the nine women earned bachelor's degrees, five obtained master's degrees, and one held a doctoral degree. Participants represented a range of years in the field, from one to thirty-five, and from one to fifteen years in their current positions at

New York State colleges. Brief demographic information on these women is shared in Table 1. As purposeful sampling was used, all the women professionals were Black. This format was used to ensure the voices of Black women, as the foci of the study, were exclusive in efforts to collect information-rich related data. Creswell (2014) defined purposeful sampling in qualitative research as an approach used to identify and access a particular sample group to gain better knowledge on the studied phenomenon. Greyerbiehl and Mitchell (2014) asserted that Black women in higher education possess educational and workplace experiences that are understudied yet valuable to research and unpack.

A sampling frame of Black women college administrators was sought in efforts to solicit participants that would yield relevant data mostly attributed to their scarcity in higher education leadership. Their small-in-number representation reflects a mosaic of the larger embodiment of Black women in the field. Full-time employment status was desired due to the day-to-day consistency of their time on campus and presumed interactions that may enable them to more completely know the respective campus climates. Stratification to secure participants representing early (1-5 years), mid (5-20 years) and late (20+ years) career field categories involved a deliberate search of three from each.

Table 1

Summary of Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Participant	Pseudonym	Education Level	Years in Higher Education	Position/Level: E: early, M: mid, S: senior	Years in Current Position
1	Anna	Bachelors	1	Counselor (E)	1
2	Beulah	Masters	20	Dean (S)	15
3	Lillie	Master's	18	Asst. Director (M)	11
4	Marjorie	Doctorate	35	Asst. Vice President (S)	6
5	Ethel	Bachelors	10	Advisor (M)	5
6	Margaret	Masters	4	Clinical Coordinator (E)	1
7	Lavinia	Masters	28	Director (S)	15
8	Lucy	Masters	19	Associate Director (M)	5
9	Marie	Bachelors	3	Success Advisor (E)	3

Data Collection

Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained prior to conducting interviews and focus groups for data collection. Semi-structured interviews were the primary method used, with focus groups as secondary. The inclusion of documents, for corroboration, was as an additional data source, when presented. Meaningful documents, in the form of personal journals, inspirational quotes, travel Bibles and desk tchotchkes were shared by the participants and were introduced in the interviews and focus group discussions. They were read aloud, displayed or shown for sentimental reflection. What the participants felt were personally impactful items were considered in the context of this study. As major sources of data collection, triangulated use of interviews,

observations, or documents are considered most comprehensive (Creswell, 2014).

These methods, per Maxwell (2013), were used to effectively answer the research questions. To gain further knowledge on this study's phenomenon, mentoring, semi structured interviews and focus groups data collection methods were conducted. The inclusion of documents, for corroboration as an additional data source, were made available. To ensure consistency, follow-up interviews via telephone or video conferencing with participants after second interviews, as necessary, were conducted.

Interviews

Informed Consent was appropriately obtained prior to the start of scheduling interviews. Permission to audio-record the interviews was an important detail and part of established protocol. An assurance of confidentiality of question responses and real names was safeguarded by using pseudonyms. Open-ended questions were used to provide options for participants to respond in their own voices and to further expound on their respective situations. Due to the exploratory nature of this research, two semi-structured interviews with each participant, ranging from sixty to ninety minutes were conducted. The interviews process holds importance for establishing context in qualitative research (Maxwell, 2013). The intent, to yield robust data through exploring perspectives, perceptions and experiences of the interviewees, Black women college administrators.

Convenience and availability are factors to consider in attempting to schedule interviews (Creswell, 2014). The onset of a pandemic, COVID-19, compelled a pivot away from in-person interviews and focus groups. The National Network of Public Health Institutes (2020) opined that modifications be made where online video conference and teleconference tools be used for data collection. Resultantly, it created flexibility in conducting the interviews, focus groups, and discussions.

Focus Groups

There were two two-hour focus groups with four to five participants in each group. They were conducted virtually on various dates, based on the availability of the participants. Inquiries included perceptions of benefits that resulted from their informal mentoring experiences; their perspectives on Black women mentoring other Black women; the role of technology-mediated mentoring; and mentoring's impact on their leadership growth. The participants were reminded of their voluntary participation; that said, they could decline to answer any question or if uncomfortable may end their participation. At the conclusion of data collection processes, I used transcription programs (i.e., Rev and TranscribeMe) as tools for data analysis.

Field Notes

Matrices and researcher notes were also helpful in supporting which codes coincided with the research questions. Field notes

are used for researcher reflective practices to ensure the collected data can be thoroughly reviewed and interpreted for expanded meaning (Deggs & Fernandez, 2018). The notes also served to capture and later recall observed expressions and body language. Participants in both the interviews and focus group had access to the commentaries for inclusion and clarifications as part of a debriefing and member check process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Understanding the crucial importance of member checking, I provided tangible data transcripts for correction, verification and/or further clarification to the study participants. They were used to help recount details such as body language, colloquialisms, and emotional responses.

Data Analysis

Open coding was used to find common statements that could be used as codes as shown in Table 2. This open coding process of reviewing each transcription also involved highlighting significant and relevant statements to identify emerging meaningful categories from the dataset. Following Saldana's (2015) outline for data analysis, the codes were developed through repetitive review of the transcripts to find pertinent data that can be further analyzed based on commonalities. Following the initial data analysis, umbrella categories were created. The categories were then expanded to themes that were germane to the data.

Reliability

Creswell (2014) emphasized providing measures used to support reliability in research studies. Several strategies may be employed to enrich the quality of collected findings in qualitative research (Maxwell, 2013). Audit trails and triangulation were employed to ensure comprehensive data collection and analysis as recounted and coded data from the interviews. Maxwell (2013) asserted that coding is a categorizing strategy important for data analysis in qualitative studies. Per-line review of the interviews and focus group transcripts were initially done by hand to familiarize with the analytical process of coding and to capture frequencies.

Findings

Seven themes emerged. Four themes are related to the first research question discussing informal mentoring experiences of the participants. Related to the second research question, there are three themes about leadership growth through the lens of Black women college administrators in this study. The seven themes are: (a) Defining Supportive Relationships; (b) Relevancy of Race and Gender in Mentoring; (c) Cultivating Kinships and Networks; (d) Identifying Salient Challenges; (e) Navigating Campus Culture; (f) Penetrating Boundaries to Leadership, and (g) Leveraging for Leadership. Table 2 provides details on the phrases used in conceptualizing the themes.

Table 2

Categories and Subcategories Based on Research Questions

Categories	Subcategories (Items coded)
Black Women internalization	exclusion or isolation (14), racism and sexism (17), not all Black women support each other (7), on our own (12), stereotypes (11), African American women have few to no seats at the table (9),
Defining Supportive Relationships	authenticity matters (12), informal relationships (9), gender versus race (11), informal or friendly relationships (16), multiple connections (7), climates of trust (4),
Salient challenges of mentoring relationships	competition (7); 'no time.' responses (7), benefits (9),
Leadership growth	success strategies (21), coping strategies (13), sponsorship (4),
Campus Culture	little support (5), glass ceiling (12), recommendations (17) no mentors (10), work twice as hard (8), lack of social capital (8),

Defining Supportive Relationships

The nine participants shared their thoughts on how they viewed their respective informal mentoring relationships to provide insight and on how those relationships were conceptualized, formed, and sustained. They reported that they had to seek support externally due to lack of women who looked like them on campus and even less in senior leadership of whom they could emulate. Anna resounded a common sentiment of most participants: her support came from external people, and she is “okay with that.”

Marie relayed:

Being a Black woman in higher education administration can be difficult when you don't know anyone else of Color on campus. Role modeling is important to survival and being new I feel that I need that. Someone to be in my corner and show me what to do and not to do, but in a caring way and not condescending. We get enough of that.

Marjorie stated:

On my campus White males are dominant in leadership and it's not a great visual. I often feel devalued and deflated seeing that. If I were to see women that looked like me, I would feel like someone on campus has an open-door for me.

Ethel responded to conversations on support through informal mentoring as:

There are things that are not necessarily in a [employee] handbook, whereas a mentor is kind of walking you through the not so official things on campus. My mentor was actually a retiree of the college. She says that she didn't want me to have the same experiences, and since I was new to the field, there were certain things I needed to know that were different from the corporate world. She told me my degrees don't really matter when sitting in meetings.

They would only see me one way—as a Black woman.

The participants illustrated examples of how supportive kinships with other Black women provided them with needed emotional releases and the values placed on them. In dealing with workplace issues, having informal external mentors and sisterly relationships provided security of thought, emotion, and camaraderie. They leaned on one another, outside of work, because they knew an understanding of the challenges was familiar.

Relevancy of Race and Gender in Mentoring

The importance of race and gender mattered in choice of mentors, and the participants largely felt that it was relevant to have Black women as mentors. Ethel commented, “So because there's so few of us we don't have any mentors. I sought my mentor out because she was a Woman of Color.” Beulah expressed a viewpoint on the need for a Black woman mentoring her:

Absolutely, 100 percent. To me, you need to have someone that has experienced the same things you've experienced. I'm not saying that you can't have a good mentoring relationship with someone who doesn't look like you; I just think you have a better mentoring relationship when it includes someone that looks like you and has experienced the same things you have experienced.

Lillie expressed why it matters to her, saying, “I absolutely do because there's a different conversation that I can have with you about things I should improve upon if you are my same race and gender versus if you are a [White] woman or another gender.”

While most participants believed having a Black woman mentor was critical, there were other opinions regarding whether the mentor had to be a Black woman in establishing relationships. There were those who had varied experiences with non-Black women mentors that were significant. Anna stated, in the focus group, “Race shouldn't be a factor. Because we are two different people, even if we are the same race. Nobody's alike.” She further expounded:

I don't think sex really should be a factor either... I don't think sex or race should be a 'something.' Because when you put sex involved, it becomes very limited. And then you could learn from a male. You could learn from a female. So therefore, I never think sex or race should be something that we should put as factors in mentoring.

Beulah expressed how she viewed men as having different positionalities than women and their abilities to establish social capital. She circled back to the overall preference of a Black woman mentor. The participants all agreed that men have an easier career ascent than women.

The participants described their perceptions on race and gender-based implications on the mentoring relationships and experiences as Black women. While the expressions leaned more towards mentors being Black women, due to feelings of familiarity and alliance, there was openness to it not being an absolute necessity.

Cultivating Kinships and Networks

The participants spoke about the various methods of establishing and nurturing their informal mentoring relationships. It was important to most that they would have comfortability in discussing their truths. They found relief in various outlets, such as sororities, churches, social outings, affiliate organizations, and sister circle meetups. Marjorie described these kinships, saying:

Personal relationships that are mutually caring and trustworthy are very important. You can only trust certain people, you can't share all your information with everybody. The "crabs in a barrel" mentality is very real out here! So, you have to have a few trusted like-minded people in your circle who won't turn around and gossip. For real, I do have a short key group of ladies, my "day ones" (long-time friends).

Climates of trust were important to the participants where they expressed how they trusted one another and that safe spaces allowed them to say what they wanted. Having confidants was a common thread, the women embraced wanting to trust the company they kept. Collins (2000) addressed trust and why it is considered essential in the scheme of Black women's relationships: "this process of trusting one another can seem dangerous because only Black women know what it means to be Black women. But if we will not listen to one another, then who will" (p. 104).

Rapport building within defined safe spaces were viewed as valuable experiences. For Lucy, she relayed, "I would just call it maybe a sister circle, where you all get together and discuss issues that are going on on-campus without worrying about outside ears or eyes inquiring." Marie had an outlook that was holistic in nature. She said, "You will be less likely to give up, knowing you have someone who is monitoring your life and cares about you as a whole person."

Identifying Salient Challenges

The dynamics of competitiveness, Black racial stigmas, institutional obliviousness, and lack of support contributed to how career blocks were perceived by the women in this study. Marie espoused, "Our obstacles are more difficult than White, even Asian women, they have implicit bias and there's no training on how to work with other cultures." Lucy felt, "There's a large cluster of secret allies [air quotes] who do not believe that Black women belong in academic spaces." While Black women college administrators face having to resist race and gender prejudices, and barriers to advancement, they also endure various challenges in securing mentoring, mentoring

relationships, and development thereof (e.g., see Commodore et al., 2016; Hague & Okpala, 2017; Irby, 2014). Lucy recollected:

I always felt subpar and invisible. Like going into these meetings where it's mostly non-people of Color where I'm the only Black person in the room. Then going back to my office and being the only Black person there, feeling alone. I think it would have been helpful to have a Black woman mentor to help me navigate those emotions. It's not healthy to keep things so bottled up waiting to get off work and go tell somebody.

The participants discussed how their feelings of isolation, being alone and unsupported contributed to their unhappiness and insecurity in workplace settings. Their workplaces struggles and concerns were not recognized. These issues also spurred their desire and need for mentors yet had to acknowledge a hurtful and disappointing reality—the lack of internal support from their own. Lavinia frankly stated about working with Black women: "But a lot of times when you're in power, you're so comfortable right there. You don't want anyone to know the real secret of how you got there or how you sustain your position there." Ethel also addressed this issue, saying:

And a lot of times when someone is in a position where they feel comfortable, and I put that in air quotes, sometimes they don't want another person or another woman to come in and mess up that dynamic. So, I think that's a hindrance in the mentoring relationship. If you establish this relationship with your predominantly White coworkers, then someone else comes into the mix and just might throw that off and you don't want to do that. So, you kind of maybe keep to yourself and not engage with that other Black woman. You get your mentoring from outside. Less competition there.

Margaret added, "And so we always feel like there has to be few of us instead of thinking that there can be a multitude of us."

The aspect of internal competition among Black women was a distinguishable barrier for them forming workplace networks. Feelings centered around only very small few that can occupy spaces on campus, so needing to be guarded impeded developing kinships. It is clear from the participants that in trying to establish camaraderie or workplace mentoring relationships, specifically with other Black career women, competition was an area for which they had many thoughts and conflictions.

Navigating Campus Culture

Navigating was a common word used in describing the participants' voiced goals. The situations and occurrences at work led them to believe that in their respective workplaces

they needed to be strategic. As they recounted how their workplaces were difficult to digest and the accompanying hurdles they faced, they were eager to be strategic. Ethel gave an example of her experience and how her support outlet played a role in her maneuvering. She said:

Oppression olympics is what I call it...why do I have to work harder, code-shift or be scrutinized because I'm a Black woman. But I do and I am. My support groups helped me survive higher education while I wait to thrive in higher education.

Marjorie said this about her mentor:

Well, she showed me how you should conduct yourself in a meeting, depending on the type of meeting and how to navigate others looking at you like you don't belong. Like how you should negotiate, how you should cut in to make sure you're heard. This is how you should handle this or do that. So I have in my head, okay I'm going in as a Black female so I walk in, you know, different.

Lavinia stated, "I think in higher education, that we tend to look at the cream of the crop to work with, as opposed to approaching others and developing one and blooming one up to greatness." She iterated how within certain campus cultures, Black women can be overlooked or discounted in leadership and said she worked hard to make sure she was valued for what she has accomplished.

Beulah expressed an understanding of the sacrifices that leaders make and how her mentors were integral in challenging her to self-advocate on her campus. Her mentor said:

Be persistent. Do not let a situation stop or hinder you to the point where you feel like you can't move forward. Find a way or make one. They will expect you to fail or need them. You must be on your toes all the time. So that's what I try to do, without risking sounding like an Angry Black Woman, of course. You can't be assertive, without acknowledging the risk.

Penetrating Boundaries to Leadership

Black feminist thought through its tenets of social justice and change are what Collins (1990) asserted Black women should use as catalysts to counter, and not be influenced by, institutional barriers. Lucy remembered how guidance she received was beneficial for her growth. She said:

It has certainly urged me to seek much more professional development. It has served me in terms of being elevated in my position and understanding my positionality within predominantly White institutions and being able to maneuver within certain spheres of the university.

Lucy shared a perspective of how professional development coupled with educational achievements give Black women better positioning. She relayed:

Being a part of a community of professional women, like ABWHE [Association of Black Women in Higher Education], has strengthened me with interpersonal and networking skills. We need more of that, as I do think the culture of higher education will change, slightly. If we as women of Color get into more leadership positions, to basically, for lack of a better term, have a seat at that table in making decisions at a Board of Trustees table or being at a director's table, those are the things that need to happen for change. But we all know that those things do not happen if you do not have at least a master's and in addition to that, a doctorate. You're not sitting at that table if you don't at least have those two things. So, I feel like once more of us get those things, then that's how we'll be able to have a seat at the table and we can move more into positions of power in higher education.

Although Lucy felt strongly about her position, others were differently expressive. For instance, Beulah said:

Keeping it real, the ivory halls of academia will always look out for who they want to look out for, and it's usually not the ebony in their ivory. If you don't have an influx of Black women in higher education we're just going to be where we are now in 10 years, in 20 years, in 30 years. I don't see it changing.

The importance of mentoring to penetrate certain boundaries in higher education spaces was evident though the affectual responses from some of the women. They clearly took advantage of available mentoring with their own expectations and experiences. These women voiced how their mentors' guidance set them on a path of preparation in dealing with settings, people and experiences at work. Ethel, recounted a scenario where her mentor told her to use her workplace dismay to her advantage. She illustrated:

My office was just recently moving to another part of campus, and it was going to be smaller and staff broken up. It turned out my office ended up in a basement, along with the student workers' space. Now, call me sensitive, but I'm the only person of Color out of a staff of six. I had to decide if I wanted to make a case out of this or not. I spoke to my mentor, and she told me, "No, don't!"

Ethel further explained the advice she was given that helped her make a progressive decision. She recalled the mentor added,

"What you're going to do is use this privacy to work on you. To strengthen your skills, get a certificate, or look at graduate

programs. You can use this to your advantage.” She said, having the privacy would be good for me. I didn’t know how I felt about that because I was still the Black person in the office occupying a basement office space. But I took her advice and now I’m beginning a master’s program. So, what I’m saying is, with her help, I turned that into a positive that I can be proud of.

Leveraging for Leadership

It was unveiled that the Black professional women from the study placed extreme importance on the roles their relationships with other Black women had on their leadership development. The advice, counsel, and real talk from their informal mentors was well regarded in helping them establish their leadership goals and be prepared for increased leadership. Their mentors helped them improve their career and interpersonal skills for more weighty responsibilities. Lucy said of her mentor: “My coach, or mentor, would tell me not to take things personal, you know, you have to have thick skin and stand in your Blackness. You have letters behind your name, too. She said, don’t let that get taken away from you!” Margaret, in her reflections, said:

If I didn’t have networks that poured encouragement into me, I’d have a different story to tell. I have grown emotionally and professionally because of the supports I get outside the workplace. I’m able to hold my own in meetings and respectfully make my stance on issues that involve my area.

Marjorie’s sentiment from a focus group discussion was prophetic; she said, “Mentoring never stops for me. It shouldn’t for you.” That sentiment spoke to the impressions of mentoring as ongoing, encouraging, and possibly reciprocal.

Discussion

The focus of this study was on how Black women college administrators in the northeastern United States employed external resources to meet their needs for mentoring. They intentionally sought support that could potentially aid them in dealing with workplace challenges, career stagnation, and possible sponsorship for advancement opportunities. The lack of formalized mentoring and scarcity of Black women in leadership at the participants’ campuses added to the feelings of marginalizing, imposter syndrome and pigeonholing their leadership growth. The answer to that was to find support through organizations, professional conferences, affinity groups outside of campus and technology mediated groups—all considered counterspaces for the support of Black women in higher education.

While there are studies that indicate the benefits of mentoring (e.g., see Agosto, et al., 2016; Baltodano et al., 2012; Irby, 2014), few were directly related to how Black women college administrators can access mentoring at their workplaces. Finding mentorship at work had an additional caveat, the underrepresentation of Black women in leadership available to

mentor as they are stretched thin (Wandix-White & Boyd, 2022). While literature exists that addresses workplace mentoring, there are noted challenges for those relationships: lack of clarity in mentoring needs and expectations, diverging from mentorship to friendship, lack of time or lack of desire to mentor and disconnects (Wandix-White & Boyd, 2022). The participants also found commonality with competition being another issue and reason why workplace mentoring among Black women was not optimal.

Remarkable were the stories shared, during the interviews and focus groups, on how the women were open to mentoring from any subgroup, so long as it was genuine and for the betterment of their leadership growth. They were candid about how they had more than one mentor that met a particular focus they had. It was evident that the women took charge of exploring how to identify and connect with mentors. Collins’ (1986) Black Feminist Thought addresses how Black women need to be proactive to break cyclical norms and self-advocate for their personal and professional lives. She described the marginalized and isolated status of Black women in various professional and academic settings as the “outsider within.” This phrase, coined by Collins (2000), noted that African American women in higher education have been invited into places where their minority status renders them outsiders because they are still invisible and have no voice.

Implications

The implications of this study demonstrate how informal mentoring is a modality by which Black women in higher education navigate workplace silos where they are also often underrepresented. The successes of their efforts to solidify increased leadership growth through mentoring does not appear to outweigh the psychosocial benefits that are embraced by the participants. Further, increasing representation of Black women in senior leadership positions on college campuses may result in greater inter-campus connections and mentoring possibilities that would benefit the mentors, protégés and commitments to diversity of the respective institutions.

While research exists on how mentoring helps in the workplace (Arora & Rangnekar, 2015 ; Hall et al., 2012), it is noticeably not present on a marginal scale to address the lack of it for Black women college administrators and the impact of its scarcity. Future research that focuses on a correlation between lack of sponsorship for positions and the underrepresentation of Black women in higher education leadership may highlight existing obstacles they face in the workplace. Another area of research could be one that explores the retention or exodus of Black women in higher education spaces that do not feel valued or can no longer envision upward mobility at their institutions.

Note

1. Since the study focuses on college administrators in the United States, I use Black and African American interchangeably throughout the article. In addition, I use both terms to align with authors' use of the terms within their original works.

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