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# The Experiences of African-American Males in Academic Leadership Positions at Public Predominantly White Institutions in North Carolina

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## **Keywords**

African American Male Leaders in Higher Education, African American males Experiences at Public Predominantly White Institutions



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## THE EXPERIENCES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES IN ACADEMIC LEADERSHIP POSITIONS AT PUBLIC PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTIONS IN NORTH CAROLINA

Dalton Dockery and Comfort O. Okpala

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this narrative study was to explore the experiences of African American males in academic leadership positions at public predominately-White institutions in North Carolina. Four African American males in academic leadership positions that met the selection criteria were purposefully selected for the study. For the sake of confidentiality, a pseudonym were used for the participants and universities to protect their privacy. Multiple data collection and analytical methods were utilized to document the experiences and voices of the participants. While the experiences of the participants varied, they overwhelmingly identified their faith in God, mentorship, qualifications and preparations made them successful in their academic leadership positions at their various institutions. The findings from this study have policy, practical, and leadership implications.

### **Introduction**

Northhouse (2004), described leadership as a process that involves influencing others to accomplish organizational goals. Other researchers have used different terms and characteristics to define leadership like sociability, persistent, adaptability, verbal acuity, self-confidence (Bass & Avolio, 2000; Gordon, 2000; William 2011). African American males in academic leadership have the potential to influence the growth and development of the next generation of African American leaders in higher education. In 1994, Blake and Darling concluded that society views African American males as being lazy, violent, and naturally inferior to Whites and those similar stereotypes occur in higher education especially at predominantly White institutions (PWIs). Jackson (2003) emphasized that the number of African American males in cabinet positions at (PWI) increased slightly during the last decade, so, it is important to explore their experiences at those institutions. Research is replete in terms of studies on African American profession in general, but sparse on the experiences of African American males at PWIs (Turner & Myers, 2000). This research was intended to bridge the gap by exploring the experiences of African American males in academic leadership positions at public PWIs in North Carolina.

African American faculty at PWIs often faced isolation, tokenism, loss of personal

uniqueness, alienation, and a feeling of symbolically representing their whole race (Alexander & Moore, 2008, Jackson, 2003). African American male administrators also faced prejudice and stereotypes held by members of the dominant community (Allison, 2008). African American members of the U.S. professorate often encountered obstacles that constrain their ability to move up the academic hierarchy. Two obstacles of particular concern are: (a) the tendency of African American faculty to be overburdened with teaching and service responsibilities more so than other groups and (b) the inflexible expectations of universities and colleges about research and publications (Allen, Epps, Guillory, Suh, & Bonous-Hammarth, 2000). African American faculty also faced student resistance and a difficult or biased administration (Schwarz & Hill, 2010).

### **Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to explore the experiences of African American males in academic leadership positions at predominantly White public universities in North Carolina. The following research questions guided the focus of this study:

1. How do African American males in academic leadership positions at predominately-White institutions in North Carolina describe their experiences?
2. How do African American males in academic leadership positions at Predominately White Institutions in North Carolina describe factors that influenced their success?

### **Theoretical Framework**

The study was grounded in the social dominance theory in order to gain a better understanding of the experiences of African American males in academic leadership positions at public PWIs in North Carolina. Social dominance theory provides a framework that was appropriate for this study. According to the social dominance theory, intergroup dynamics are affected by a group's relative position in the hierarchy. The social dominance theory posits that organizations with dominant groups that is at the top of the social hierarchy inherently results in marginalization of the groups that are at bottom of the social hierarchy (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). According to Hummel (2012), the dominant group enjoys the privileges of being the dominant group, which could consist of better promotions, job tenure, wealth or status while the subordinate group(s) are often faced with negative or a lower social status that consist of poverty and limited prestige (Hummel, 2012 p.36).

### **Methods**

In this study, a narrative qualitative research methodology was utilized. Narrative inquiry is increasingly used in studies of educational experience and has a long intellectual history both in and out of education (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Narrative researchers are interested in gathering as much information as available on the narrative environment to understand the contextual basis in which narratives have meaning (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015).

## **Participants**

The concept of purposeful sampling was used in this narrative qualitative research study. Four participants who met the selection criteria were purposefully selected for the study. Two participants were in high-level academic leadership positions while the other two were in mid-level academic leadership positions from four public predominantly White institutions in North Carolina. The participants included one academic dean, a vice chancellor for academic affairs, a department head, and one student affairs leader. The researchers worked with the participants on site selected for the study because it allowed the researchers to gain an understanding of the research problem (Creswell, 2007). The names of the participants as well as their institutions were not used to preserve their identity and for confidentiality purposes.

## **Data Collection**

Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was sought and received through the universities in the study. Open-ended interview questions were developed and were the primary method of data collection. The questions were pilot tested on two participants that fit the selection criteria prior to the start of the study for content validity. The questions were modified based on feedback from the pilot study. The researchers met with the participants after agreeing on pre-arranged dates and times at their perspective campuses. Each participant was interviewed twice and the interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. University documents were reviewed and analyzed for background information on the diversity of the university. Each interview was tape-recorded with approval from the participants.

## **Data Analysis**

Yussen and Ozcan's (1997) analytical method which involves analyzing text data for five elements of plot structure, which are characters, setting, problem, actions, and resolution was utilized in this study. Data were reduced, simplified, transcribed, and coded for themes. Interviews were separated and segmented by reading and re-reading the transcripts thoroughly for readily identifiable themes and patterns (Wolfe, 2007).

As the themes and patterns emerged from the data, the researchers rewrote the stories into chronological sequences, and incorporated the settings of the participants' experiences to gain a better understanding of the experiences of each participant. Follow-up interviews were conducted to ensure clarity, accuracy and validation. This allowed the participants a chance to provide any additional information. Trustworthiness was established through member checking and triangulation. Participants and peers reviewed their statements for accuracy and overall quality of the report. Triangulation was achieved with multiple data sources. The researchers provided opportunities through email or one-on-one follow-up for participants to comment or clarify their responses as it relates to the personalized events in their lives. Also other sources of data includes any information observed at the site of the interview or any archival records provided by the universities that would be corroborating evidence increase the trustworthiness of the data and study.

## **Results**

The participants varied in their experiences, age, and positions. Their ages ranged from 40 to 65 and their experiences varied from positive to challenging. All the participants were educated at PWIs. Through reading and re-reading the transcripts and mindful of the setting in which these African American male academic leaders operate, several themes emerged. These themes were:

(a) faith in God; (b) preparation and qualification; (c) mentorship (d) delayed promotions and added responsibilities; (e) the need to prove yourself; and (f) racism and being overlooked emerged from the study. When asked to describe their experiences as an academic leader at PWIs, majority of the participants reported that they experienced the true spiritual awakening and transformation through their faith in God. They also reported that they were highly trained and qualified for their academic leadership positions. Few reported challenging experiences of tokenism and marginalization. All indicated that mentorship was an important factor in their success as academic leaders at PWIs.

## **Discussion, Conclusion, and Implications**

The purpose of this narrative study was to explore the experiences of four African American males in academic leadership positions at public Predominantly White institutions in North Carolina. The findings show that the experiences of the participants vary. Most of the participants had positive experiences while few had challenging experiences. It is interesting to note that all the participants received their education from predominantly White institutions. All the participants indicated that they experienced success in their academic leadership roles because of their training, skills, and qualifications rather than diversity mandate. It is important to note that all the participants indicated a true spiritual experience based on their faith in God. Other themes that emerged like mentorship corroborate with other studies (Blake & Darling, 1998; Bonner, 2003; Jackson, 2001; Tillman 2001).

The results from this study have policy, leadership, and policy implications. There is a critical need to address the social justice issues at it relate to underrepresentation of African American males in higher education administration especially at PWIs. It is the hope of the researchers that this study will make modest contribution to literature. The researchers do recognize the small sample size in the study and suggest replicating the study with a larger number of participants in academic leadership positions. It is also recommended that further studies be conducted with participants with educational training from historically black institutions.

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