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Voices of African American Women Leaders on Factors that Impact their Career Advancement in North Carolina Community Colleges

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Keywords

African American Women Leadership, Community College Leadership, Women's Study.



VOICES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN LEADERS ON FACTORS THAT IMPACT
THEIR CAREER ADVANCEMENT IN NORTH CAROLINA COMMUNITY COLLEGES

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative research was to examine the leadership experiences of African American women leaders in North Carolina community colleges and to shed light on the factors that impact their career advancement. Twelve African American women leaders (directors, chairs, deans, vice presidents and presidents) who met the inclusion criteria were interviewed for this study. Through a triangulated data collection and analytical approach, a number of themes emerged on their experiences and factors that impacted the career advancement. The themes include race and gender, leadership preparation, networking and building relationships. The findings from this research have leadership, policy, and practical implications.

Introduction

African American women have served as college and university presidency positions since the beginning of the 19th century (Coleman, 2012; Gaston, 2015). The lineage of African American women presidents began in 1904 when Mary McLeod Bethune found Daytona Normal and Industrial Institute for Negro Girls in Daytona, Florida. During the course of her twenty-year presidency the school experienced growth from five students to over two hundred and fifty. In 1930, Dr. Anna Julia Cooper became president of Frelinghuysen University and served as a president and registrar for twenty years. Frelinghuysen University was designed to provide access to higher education for students in Washington, D.C (Gaston, 2015). In 1987, Dr. Johnetta Besch Cole became the first African American woman to lead Spelman College, which is an elite private historically Black liberal arts college for African American women in Atlanta, Georgia (Collins, 1987). In 1990, Marguerite Ross Barnett became president of the University of Texas. Dr. Barnett was the first African American woman appointed president of a major public institution of higher education in Texas (Glasrud & Pitre, 2008). In 1999, Dr. Shirley Jackson became the 18th president of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. It is significant to note, that Dr. Jackson is reportedly one of the highest paid university presidents in the country (Gaston, 2015). In 2001, Dr. Ruth Simmons became the first African American woman to become president of Brown University, which is an Ivy League university. In 2007, Julianne Malveaux, a nationally known economist and author was selected to be the 15th president of Bennett College, an all-women private college located in Greensboro, NC (Pluaise, 2007).

Historically, African American women have successfully led colleges and universities for more than 100 years with little research on their leadership experiences and factors that impacted their advancement. Studies that examined the experiences of African American women administrators in community colleges were limited. The focal point for the majority of studies

and surveys on Blacks in higher education were on Black males. This study was intended to bridge the gap in literature by focusing on the experiences of African American women leaders in North Carolina community colleges. In 2006, women comprised of 23% of community college presidencies, however, White women were mostly represented in those leadership positions (American Council on Education, 2012). Eddy (2008) concluded that the next decade anticipates impressive changes within community college leadership in the United States based on the number of leaders that will retire from those positions.

The purpose of this qualitative research was to examine factors that impact the career advancement of African American women leaders in North Carolina community colleges. Another focus of the study was to examine their experiences as leaders in those community colleges. The state of North Carolina is known for its fifty-eight (58) community colleges and it is the fourth largest community college system in the country with enrollment of over 880,000 students pursuing degrees in many fields. This study is significant as there is limited research on African American women in leadership positions in North Carolina community colleges.

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the leadership experiences of African American women leaders in North Carolina community colleges?
2. What are the perceptions of African American women leaders on factors that impact their advancement in leadership positions in North Carolina community colleges?

Research Worldview and Theoretical Framework

This research was grounded in a transformative worldview which supports that research inquiry needs to be connected with politics and a political change agenda to confront social oppression at any levels (Mertens, 2010). The research ends with an action plan for reform that may change the lives of the participants and the institutions in which the individuals work. It is important that research portray important social issues of today, such as inequality and oppression. This philosophical worldview targets the needs of groups and individuals in society that may be marginalized (Creswell, 2014). Research has shown that African American women encounter bias and discrimination in the workplace based on gender and race (Hamilton-Mason, Everett, & Hall, 2009).

The theoretical framework for this research study is Black Feminist Theory which emerged out of the continuing marginalization perpetuated in and by the feminist movement, capturing the intersection of race and gender and recognizing the oppressive nature of gender construction and race as a social construct, which directly affect one's experience (Harris, 2007). Black feminist thought came about during the era of abolitionists to end slavery. Black women were denied rights as humans, citizens, and were continually confronted with a system that desired to destroy them as both humans, and as women. The liberal reformer and abolitionist Sojourner Truth is dignified as the originator of Black feminist thought in the 19th century. Sojourner Truth was born as a slave and preached that slavery denied Black women motherhood, protection from exploitation, and devaluation of their innate feminine, womanly qualities (Ann, 2007).

Black feminist theory has contributed significantly to contemporary and critical thinking about the social condition of African American women in the United States. Intersectionality and double jeopardy are both connected to Black feminist theory. In 1989, Black legal scholar Kimberle' Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality in her astute essay, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine,

Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics” (as cited in Smith, 2014). Intersectionality examines the belief that race, gender, and social class intersect to produce a system of granting African American women with unequal levels of power and privilege (Lloyd-Jones, 2009). Intersectionality advocates the view that African American women’s experiences are different because they deal with issues of their race and gender.

Black feminist centralizes and validates the intersecting dimensions of race and gender experienced in the lives of African American women. It is grounded on the assumption that the majority of Black women share commonalities, perceptions, and experiences (Henry & Glenn, 2009). Lloyd-Jones (2009) conducted a qualitative single case study approach to examine the lived experiences of an African American woman working as a senior level administrator in a predominantly White research university. At the time of the study, the participant was one of the highest-ranking African American women administrators employed at a predominantly White research university in the Southwest United States. Data were collected through in depth interviews held over two consecutive days and archival records. The findings suggest that the participants’ lived experiences are consistent with other African American women administrators in predominantly White campuses described in literature. Precisely, her experiences include both achievements and challenges, which suggest a dichotomous experience in that type of setting (Lloyd-Jones, 2009).

Distinctive tenets of contemporary Black feminist thought include:

1. The belief that self-authorship and the legitimization of partial, subjugated knowledge represents a unique and diverse standpoint of and by black women.
2. Black women's experiences with multiple oppressions result in needs, expectations, ideologies, and problems that are different from those of Black men and White women.
3. Black feminist consciousness in an ever-evolving self-reflective process toward Black women’s liberation through activism (Few, 2007; Ritzer & Ryan, 2011).
4. The placement of deleterious images of Black womanhood (Ritzer & Ryan, 2011).

However, this study focused on the second tenet that those Black women experiences with multiple oppressions result in needs, expectations, ideologies, and problems that are different from those of Black men and White women. This tenet explains the importance women's experiences with multiple oppressions resulting in needs, expectations, ideologies, and problems that are different from those of Black men and White women (Ritzer & Ryan, 2011).

History of the Community College

The creation of the community college in America evolved from the need for skilled workers during the industrial revolution of the Twentieth Century (Historical Information, American Association of Community Colleges, n.d.). The first community colleges were housed on the campuses of local high schools. These community colleges were woven in the fabric of the communities that they served and existed in order to provide skilled and trained workers into the local industrial workforce. This community college model was created based on the belief that students were not attending universities due to their reluctance to relocate from home. These small community colleges were both public and private; however, they worked together to serve the needs of the local industries that existed in the towns (Historical Information, American Association of Community Colleges, n.d.).

North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS)

The North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS) was created in 1963 (North Carolina State Board of Education, 1966) and is the fourth largest community college system in the country. A population of over 800,000 students is served through curriculum and continuing education courses (North Carolina Community College System [NCCCS], 2008) in fifty-eight

community colleges across the state. The number of women in leadership positions as presidents for these colleges has been gradual. In early 2005, the North Carolina System had 10 female presidents (Leatherwood & Williams, 2008). The number of female presidents increased from 3% in 1995 to 33% in 2012, which is quite significant (NCCCS, 2015). The number of female presidents currently serving in the NCCCS is eighteen (18), with only one African American female president (NCCCS, 2015).

Research Approach

In this study, a qualitative narrative approach was used to examine the leadership experiences and factors that influence the career advancement of African American women leaders in North Carolina community colleges. This approach is well suited for this research as it allows the participants to express their respective realities. In 1998, Bogden and Biklen emphasized that qualitative research methodology is appropriate for this particular research study because it allows for the expression and interpretations of one's life. The narrative inquiry approach is also suitable for this study because it draws out the perceptions, complex experiences and allows the participants to tell their story, using their voice. Narrative research is a strategy of inquiry in which the researcher studies the lives of individuals and asks one or more individuals to provide stories about their lives.

Participants were recruited through convenience and snowball sampling techniques. Convenience sampling involved selecting participants who were willingly available and who met the study criteria (Creswell, 2014). The selection process started with the identification of a convenience sample of five African American women in leadership at community colleges in North Carolina currently working in mid-level up to executive level leadership positions (e.g. directors, chairs, deans, vice presidents and presidents) or retired at mid-level up to executive level leadership positions. Additionally, a snowball technique was utilized whereby consenting participants referred other potential participants (Patton, 1990). Participants were recruited by email, phone call, and in person. At the end, 12 African American women currently working in mid-level up to executive level leadership positions or retired at mid-level up to executive level leadership positions were selected for the study. Participants were provided a pseudonym for purposes of confidentiality during the process. Creswell (2014) specifies that in qualitative research, researchers respect the privacy of participants by providing false names or pseudonyms for participants and their organizations.

Data Collection and Analysis

In 1998, Merriam echoed that in qualitative research, data collection and analysis must be a simultaneous process. Qualitative data analysis includes classifying things, persons, and events and the properties that characterize them. A structured interview protocol was used that included open-ended questions that were tape-recorded and annotated with detailed notes as a backup. Each participant received an invitation to participate in the research study after an Institutional Review Board approved the research study. The participants who agreed and volunteered to participate were interviewed at their chosen site. The interview lasted for about 65 minutes. As a guide to narrative research, the use of a hierarchical approach similar to Creswell's outline was utilized for this research. The hierarchical approach includes:

-Organizing and preparing the data for analysis by transcribing interviews and notes- The meanings are organized into themes, and these themes evolve into theme clusters, and eventually into theme categories. A color-coded system was used to highlight specific themes/categories to perform a preliminary analysis.

-Once all data was transcribed and organized- Meanings were formulated from the significant statements. The significant statements and phrases about their experiences and factors that impacted their career advancement were coded and extracted from the transcripts.

-A final step in data analysis involves making an interpretation in qualitative research of the findings and results in terms of lessons learned.

-Validation and triangulation were achieved through sharing findings with the participants to compare the researchers' descriptive results with their lived experiences (Creswell, 2012).

All participants were contacted after the interview to review the accuracy of the interview transcripts and to confirm the accuracy of any other information compiled about the participant from the study. The final report was written in both aggregate and individual responses and did not include any identifying information. When using individual responses, pseudonyms were applied.

Findings

The results from the demographic data show that nine (9) out of twelve (12) participants had earned doctoral degrees while three had masters' degrees. Six of the participants were married; three were single, two divorced, and one widowed. Out of the twelve African American women in leadership working in mid-level up to executive level positions (e.g., directors, chairs, deans, vice presidents and presidents) or retired at mid-level up to executive level positions, seven were currently working in those positions while five retired from their respective leadership positions. About seven of the participants were 55 years and over while five were between 35-44 years of age. About 58% of the participants served in their leadership roles for more than five years while 42% served less than four years.

The participants' experiences varied when asked to describe their leadership experiences. Those experiences ranged from leadership growth based on mentoring, networking, experience, and professional leadership development to lack of leadership growth because of race and gender, discrimination, and mentoring. The majority of the participants indicated that they experienced leadership growth during their transition in the NCCCS because of their ability to seek out mentors and their ability to network with people in leadership positions, such as Mable who is the only African American community college president. She stated:

My leadership experience is not surprising at all. I was strategic in seeking out mentors and consistently participated in professional leadership development activities that propelled me to this office. I had many opportunities to grow and I took advantages of those opportunities. Doors were opened because I was ready with leadership knowledge and skills. (Mable, 2016)

Although Mable experienced growth, Sandra, a retired leader with over 30 years of experience had a different perspective on her leadership experience at the community colleges in North Carolina as she emphasized:

My experience has not been an easy one. It is one that is marred with discrimination based on my gender and race. Although I can say that I happily retired as a leader, I cannot forget that I interviewed for one leadership position that perfectly matched my training and experiences but did not get it. The position was given to someone with a masters' degree from another institution. That was when I realized that I could never advance into those top leadership positions because of my race and gender. Therefore, I retired. (Sandra, 2016)

When asked about the factors that impact their leadership career advancement, similar themes from their leadership experiences emerged. Themes like race and gender, leadership preparation, networking and mentorship, and building relationships emerged. The majority of the

participants indicated that their race and gender influence their leadership growth in the North Carolina Community College System. Mable, the only college president was able to progress to the highest level because of her leadership knowledge, skills, and experiences coupled with her abilities to strategically seek out mentors and networking opportunities. Other participants also emphasized the importance of leadership training and development as Victoria stated:

One factor that impacted my leadership advancement is my leadership training coupled with my academic background. I will tell those women that want to climb the leadership ladder that those positions will not come if they are not prepared for it. You cannot sit and wait for those positions to be handed to you. You have to be trained for it and you must show that you are going to be a competent leader. People need to take advantage of community college leadership training and development that prepares leaders for community colleges. The investment is worth the money. (Victoria, 2016)

Victoria who retired as a Chief Academic Officer echoed the importance of leadership training and professional development participation. Other participants like Mable, Karen, Kate, and Mary also emphasized this factor. Research shows that the path to leadership positions could be through leadership development programs (Gillett-Karam, 1999). The North Carolina Community College Leadership Program (NCCCLP) was established in 1989 as an interdisciplinary approach to leadership training through professional development. The purpose of the NCCCLP is to prepare and train future community college leaders on how to respond to challenges visible in community colleges today (NCCCLP, 2015). There are other leadership programs for people who aspire to become leaders in higher education. These programs provide networking opportunities to participants.

Another participant, Grace mentioned that building a strong relationship with others helped her to advance in her role. As she stated “Building stronger relationships with others may lead to unlocking the doors of opportunities that can come from others that may hold the key to your advancement.” Debbie, another participant echoed similar sentiments about mentoring and building relationships:

I had a White male mentor who literally opened doors for me. He assisted me in getting an internship, a full scholarship for my doctoral studies, and a leave of absence with pay until the doctorate degree was complete. He continued to be a mentor for me and he encouraged me to do things beyond my career. Getting a great and committed mentor is the key to career advancement for any one especially for an African American woman. (Debbie, 2016)

Other participants indicated that their race and gender limited their advancement into leadership positions due to negative perceptual views of African American leadership abilities and styles. As Terry eloquently stated:

I believe that being Black, single, and a female became the subtle stumbling blocks in my quest for leadership positions here. Those factors were not written in stones, but you always know when others were promoted, they were perceived as stronger leaders. I knew that I have limits to how far that I can go and travel because of my gender and marital status and it has nothing to do with my abilities to lead effectively. (Terry, 2016)

Conclusion and Implications

The purpose of this narrative qualitative research was to examine the leadership experiences of twelve African American female leaders at North Carolina community colleges and to explore the factors that impact their career advancement into leadership positions. The women eagerly described their leadership experiences and the factors that impact their career advancement into their respective leadership positions. The findings from the data show that the

participant's leadership experiences vary. These variations may be attributed to their age, years in leadership positions at the community college, and their level of education. Their experiences ranged from leadership growth based on mentoring, networking, leadership experience, and professional leadership development to lack of leadership growth because of race and gender, discrimination, and mentoring. Race and gender, leadership preparation, mentoring and networking, and building relationships were the factors that impacted their career advancement into leadership positions.

Some participants indicated that their gender impacted their career advancement into leadership positions at community colleges in North Carolina. This finding aligns with the findings from Davis and Maldonado (2015) study that concluded that African American women attributed their lack of advancement to issues of race and gender in academia. The participant's in their study voiced that the intersection of race and gender affected their advancement in leadership positions according to the authors. Similarly, Myers (2002) in her work on Black women in the academy revealed that a primary source of stress for these administrators is derived from their experiences of intersectionality.

Tillman (2001) identified three dominant factors that also present barriers to African American women's advancement into leadership positions in higher education as: (a) lack of socialization to faculty life (b) lack of significant mentoring, and (c) the inefficiency to articulate a feasible research schedule. The women in this study indicated that a lack of mentoring was a factor that impacted their advancement. However, it is important to re-emphasize the significance of seeking out mentors as Victoria, a participant from this study eloquently stated. Leadership development is another theme that emerged from the study. It is reasonable to assume that the path to leadership positions could be through leadership development programs. Such programs like the North Carolina Community College Leadership Program (NCCCLP), and BRIDGES provide networking opportunities and valuable leadership learning outcomes for individuals who aspire to lead higher education organizations. Gillett-Karam (1999) studied midlevel managers in North Carolina community colleges and concluded that professional development and training programs groom leaders to become more effective in their roles. Based on the findings from this study, the following three action items were recommended for African American women aspiring to become leaders at community colleges:

1. It is important for African American women to take ownership in their professional development, training, and education. There are several opportunities for leadership training and development and it is recommended that those with the desire to become leaders should engage and invest in those professional developments.
2. African American women should seek out mentors by identifying individuals who are current or past top-level administrators to serve as mentors or sponsors.
3. African American women should build professional networking relationships through professional services at state, national, and international professional associations.

The findings from this study have practical, policy, and leadership implications. There is a critical need to increase the number of African American women in top-level leadership positions in the NCCCS. The authors do recognize the low sample size for this study and recommend that further studies be conducted with larger sample sizes. It is also recommended that further studies with similar research approaches be conducted in other community college systems. Other studies can be achieved with a different research approach like a phenomenological approach or mixed-method research design. The authors hoped that the findings from this study do contribute to knowledge on the leadership experiences of African American women in North Carolina community colleges.

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