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Images of Black Leadership and Mentoring in Higher Education: Personal Narratives from Faculty and Staff

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Cover Page Footnote
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Selena T. Rodgers and Tiffany Cudjoe

ABSTRACT

In order to raise awareness about positive images of Black educators, administrators and staff in higher education, the researchers used photography and oral narratives from 11 employees at *The City University of New York, York College*. Data were analyzed using content analysis. The significant themes found were: (a) Mentor, (b) Leader, and (c) Educator—with the latter emerging as the most frequently identified theme among participants. Sub-themes were also found: (a) Leadership Starts At Home, (b) Each One, Teach One, (c) I Found My Leadership Voice, and (d) "Knowledge makes a [wo]man unfit to be a slave." – Frederick Douglass. This article underscores critical reasons to explore the Black family's role in early mentoring, gender-based messages of leadership, and positive images of Blacks in higher education.

Keywords: Blacks, mentoring, leadership, higher education, positive images

Introduction

Federal Legislation, most notably the Civil Rights Act of 1964, forbade discrimination based on gender as well as race in the realms of hiring, promotion and firing of employees (Maherand &Tetreault, 2011). In recent years, the number of Black professors and Blacks in leadership roles in higher education has increased (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2009; National Center for Education Statistics, 2008). According to the *Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System* (IPEDS), in 2010, American institutions reported employing approximately 3.9 million individuals. For example, the City University of New York is the nation's leading and largest public urban university. According to *The City University of New York (CUNY) Affirmative Action 2011 Summary Report*, Blacks at CUNY were among an estimated 23.5% of full-time and 19% of part-time instructional and classified staff. At York College of The City University of New York, the number of Blacks is even fewer.

Despite diversity efforts, Black women (Madden, 2011; Nettles, Perna, & Bradburn, 2000; Stroud, 2009) and men (Heggins, 2004) remain abysmally underrepresented among higher education faculty. Slavery and racial oppression are responsible for the continued injuries that have made it difficult for Blacks to move through the educational system

successfully (Bynum, Burton, & Best, 2007; Pascoe & Smart Richman, 2009; Picca & Feagin, 2007). Discussions of the aforementioned inequalities have occurred within the theoretical frameworks of Black Feminist Theory (Collins, 1986; 2008), Womanist (Walker, 1983), Critical Race Theory (Crenshaw, 1989; 1991) and the concept of Intersectionality (Crenshaw et al., 1995; hooks, 1984). Similarly, documentary photography has brought attention to discrimination and oppression (Provenzo, Ameen, Bengochea, Doorn, Pontier, & Sembiante, 2011).

Consequently, the literature is replete with assertions that a major step toward addressing freedom from institutionalized oppression includes strengths inherent in Black communities, families, students, educators, and mentors (Asante, 1991). Although the relationship between the mentor and mentee is a complex exchange that has yet to be clearly defined (Goldberg, 2001), a mentor typically provides career-related information and conveys knowledge and wise advice to enhance the mentee's professional performance and development (American Psychological Association Centering on Mentoring Task Force, 2006). Moreover, several types of mentoring relationships exist, including formal, informal, vertical, horizontal or peer (Casto, Caldwell, & Salazar, 2005; Combs, 2003; Daniel, 2009).

In terms of leadership, differences in gender have been associated with how women perceive themselves and roles of leadership in higher education (Madden, 2011). Black women, as do other women of color, face both sexist and racist stereotypes that obstruct leadership roles in higher education (Wilson, 2012). Eagly and Carli (2007) contend that there are two styles of leadership—agentic and communal. Agentic behavior is task-oriented and focused on outcomes,

whereas communal behavior is focused on group dynamics and the process of leadership and decision-making (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Gendered expectation ascribed to women suggests that they are more communal (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

Because of the small number of Black women in leadership roles in higher education (Wilson, 2012) and preparing Black males for the professorate (Heggins, 2004), this article is based on a qualitative study that explored positive visual images, accompanying narratives, and successful examples of mentoring and the leadership ideology of 11 Black educators, administrators and staff at York College of The City University of New York. The researchers undertook this study project with a very deliberate agenda—to use photography and oral narratives to raise awareness about positive images of Black educators, administrators and staff in higher education. Each participant answered four main research questions: (1) What are two adjectives that best portray how you view your role in higher education? (2) How would you describe your pathway to leadership? (3) What would you describe as best practices for a successful mentor/mentee relationship? and (4) What are 3-5 books you've read that helped foster your role as a pillar at York College?

Method

In 2013, through purposive sampling, the researchers recruited 17 educators, administrators, and staff at York College of The City University of New York who met inclusion criteria--Black, and employed at York College of The City University of New York for six or more years--to participate in the study. Three of the initial 17 potential participants did not respond, two indicated that they were unavailable due to competing projects, and one person declined to participate.

Therefore, the final sample consisted of 11 participants. The project took place at York College, Jamaica, New York. Individuals who consented to participate in the project were emailed semi-structured interview questions and informed that participation was voluntary.

Participants

Six men and five women agreed to participate in the study. Participants varied in educational levels: Doctorate (N=5), Master's Degree (N = 5), Bachelor's Degree (N = 1). Slightly less than half (N = 5) were York College Alumni. Participants were from diverse disciplines (Black Studies, Business and Economics, Cultural Diversity, English, Gerontology/Health & Physical Education, History, Research and Sponsored Programs, Teacher Education, Political Science, Performing and Fine Arts, Sociology, and Social Work).

Qualitative Data Collection Procedures

Photography. Photographs were taken and produced by the second author. Participants' photographs were taken in two environments that portrayed photo-narratives. Perry (2006) posits that photographic images have the ability to capture attention, stimulate creative thinking and create community. All photos were taken with a Nikon D3100 camera within the professional environment.

Intergroup Panel Dialogue. Intergroup dialogue is a process of human interaction and conflict resolution that has traditionally been used to promote social justice and change (Dessel & Rogge, 2008). The intergroup panel dialogue offered participants an opportunity to process and share leadership and mentoring perspectives with students and other members of the college community. The protocol for the intergroup panel dialogue included open-ended semi-structured questions regarding the experience of participation in the project,

such as (a) What has your participation in this project meant to you? (b) How do you go about mentoring your students? and (c) How has York College helped you expand your leadership skills?

Electronic Reflective Journaling

Reflective journaling is evolving in higher education (Norton, Russell, Wisner, & Uriarte, 2011). For the current study, reflective journaling--written experiences and critical questions--were used to capture the interactions between participant observers and participants (Corey & Corey, 2006).

Analysis

Consistent with cognitive anthropology methodology (Collins & Dressier, 2008) data analysis included a combination of techniques such as photography, content analysis of individual meetings, follow-up final comments, and insights from participants. The qualitative data were analyzed from interview questions generated from Intergroup Panel Dialogue. Researchers performed qualitative analysis by codifying and analyzing data from each participant to contextualize salient themes until saturation was achieved. An e-journal captured the experiences. Narratives were written by participants and copy-edited by the first author.

Findings and Interpretations

This study focused on four questions about leadership and mentoring perspectives.

Question 1: What are two adjectives that best portray how you view your role in higher education?

In response to the question, "What are two adjectives that best portray how you view your role in higher education?" participants identified various themes associated with being "Black Pillars in Higher Education." The main themes were *Educator, Leader and Mentor with*

Educator emerging as the most significant theme.

Figure 1. *Mentoring and Leadership Themes*

Frequency distributions of participants' written responses are shown in Figure 1. Words that were mentioned frequently are enlarged. (e.g. Educator). Further inspection of qualitative themes revealed that Educator, Mentor, Leader, Administrator were cited more often than other themes (e.g. Author, Learner, Scholar).

With regard to the *Intergroup Panel Dialogue*, participants shared firsthand experiences about this study project as a positive way for them to reflect on mentoring practices, leadership and photography endeavors. Eight of the eleven participants were available for the intergroup panel dialogue. The remaining three had scheduling conflicts.

Question 2: How would you describe your pathway to leadership?

Exploring participants' pathway to leadership revealed several sub-themes (described below). Identification of these sub-themes is a noteworthy roadmap for Blacks seeking a successful career in higher education. Moreover, participants have paved a pathway to leadership by networking with positive roles models, continuing their education, providing guidance to others, maintaining strong work ethics, family support, and strengthened spirituality.

Question 3: What would you describe as best practices for a successful mentor/mentee relationship?

We observed several types of mentoring relationships between participants and students. These relationships are described below. Noteworthy, participants revealed several practices (e.g. providing support, respect, humor, active listening, boundaries, professional and personal experiences, and modeling) essential for a successful mentoring relationship. Below, excerpts are quoted from *'Beyond February PhotoVoice Project' Mentoring and Leadership Booklet* (Rodgers & Cudjoe, 2013).

Data revealed four sub-themes: (a) Leadership Starts At Home, (b) Each One, Teach One, (c) Theme: I Found My Leadership Voice, and (d) "Knowledge makes a [wo]man unfit to be a slave." –
 Frederick Douglass. The themes indicate that positive images of Blacks in higher education were realized through mentoring and leadership.

Theme: It Started At Home. More than half (N = 6) of the participants expressed that leadership behavior began at home with family.

> Participant #1: "My working-class family background and activist participation in civil and human rights activities of the 1960s led me to an inclusive and participatory philosophy of teaching."

> Participant #2: "My journey to leadership began at home; watching my mother raise ten children with

humor, love, selflessness, generosity, hard work and discipline…This was an ideal model for a leader."

Participant #3: "My pathway to leadership started with a dream to be an airline executive. As a child, my Dad took the family to St. Martin in the summers and those airplane trips inspired me to be a leader in the airline industry. The trips did not only inspire a dream they provided a forum for my Dad to demonstrate skills I would use to realize my dream… My Dad demonstrated to me that you have to be versatile and not be afraid of hard work. He showed concern for me by making sure at the end of each day, no matter how tired he was, he took me for an ocean swim. He showed me that planning was important; he could not have accomplished so much in two weeks without a plan…"

Participant #4: "…My parents always encouraged my siblings and me to have confidence. Additionally, through active participation at Corona Congregational Church, Rev. S. and youth advisors encouraged us to learn from mistakes, grow and develop."

Participant #5: "My pathway to leadership can be traced back to the small beautiful island of Trinidad where I was born. As a child, I distinctly remembered my Granddad always encouraging my sibling and I to "be a leader, not a follower… My dear parents were also not relenting and instilled in me a fierce sense of independence and fortitude. I can safely say that my pathway to leadership was formulated at home and has now transcended to my personal and professional life."

Participant #6: "My pathway to leadership began in my family. My parents and grandparents, aunts and uncles, were my first teachers. They motivated me to learn and helped me to see that my education was not simply an individual achievement but a communal accomplishment that came with certain responsibilities."

Theme: Each One, Teach One. The comments documented below were particularly poignant, because several participants' (N = 7) spoke about mentoring, received and shared.

Participant #6: "If I am a leader, it is because of my willingness to follow and listen, as well as to speak and point the way."

Participant #7: The Democratic District Leaders (who were the executive members of the club), were F.W. and V. C., and both taught me about leading people, working on behalf of their constituents, and bringing resources to the community. After F.W. passed away, the new District Leader T.W. Jr. began to mentor me after we ran on the same political slate and were both elected. I became a Democratic State Committee member at the age of twenty one (the youngest elected Democrat in the history of New York State)…My success is due to our instructor, Ms. C., who promised results if we applied ourselves."

Participant #8: "Mrs. D. modeled mentorship with vision and excellence. For whom much is given, much is required. Mentoring is a part of the requirement of paying back…My job is to mentor future educators…as I have been mentored…leading by example." Participant #8 also stated: "Each student, like each educator/mentor has a role to play in the universe and I believe there are no chance encounters. Students who have crossed my path were sent my way for a reason and for them to have learned something from the encounter and also for me to have learned something from them which possibly I can pass on to another student."

Participant #9: "I try to offer a different perspective on issues they encounter, but most importantly I offer them an ear, an ear that listens to them without judgment."

Participant #10: "I witnessed teachers who showed no passion and no care for their students or their responsibilities. However, there were a few examples of what happens when a person finds their purpose and those individuals helped me to challenge myself and succeed. There were those however, who were not so lucky but ended up on paths of desolation and destruction…If I can perhaps inspire or encourage someone to take a different path, then my pathway to leadership is not in vain."

Theme: I Found My Leadership Voice.
Examples of participants' journey to find

diverse leadership voices are described below.

Participant #2: "I also learned that standing up for your colleagues as well as being forthright with your colleagues creates dedication and respect."

Participant #3: "By age 25, I was a vice president at one of the largest regional airlines in the world. I continue to use these skills today as I provide leadership through my roles at York."

Participant #4: "As a student activist, I helped organize York College's first homecoming for the Nomads basketball team in 1985, challenged the B. Administration to recognize evening students with better academic services, more convenient library hours and better course selection. I was not unknown on campus by any means and graduated in 1990."

Participant #5: "My pathway to leadership has resulted in my obtaining a license as a Clinical Social Worker (LCSW-R). I have many years of clinical as well as administrative experiences in various Social Work, Nursing home and Home care settings."

Participant #6: "If I am a leader, it is because of this worldview which is very common in Black communities in Africa and throughout the African Diaspora. As common as it may be, not everyone is willing or eager to "lift as they climb…Thus, another aspect of my pathway to leadership is voluntary…"Humor is also with me on my pathway to leadership."

Participant #7: "…All of these roles have helped me learn how to become a leader who works to provide services to others."

Participant #8: "I never thought of myself as a leader…Under her mentorship I grew from a new student, entering a brand new high school, designed to integrate Black adolescents into the high school setting… into a leader.…"Dr. B., inspirer of new teachers, leader of a department and an unabashed believer that there "ain't no stopping us now."

Participant #10: As the song says, "If I can help somebody as I pass along; If I can cheer somebody with a word or song; If I can show somebody he is traveling wrong, then my living shall not be in vain."

Participant #11: "I view my role as a pillar in higher education as definitely grounded in my passion to collect, use and share "motivational quotables" with my students. I am an avid collector of affirmations, quotes, inspirational and motivational sayings that add to various teaching endeavors. My motivational skills have enhanced my teaching style, as well as being a mentor for my students."

Question 4: What are 3-5 books you've read that helped foster your role as a pillar at York College?
Theme: "Knowledge makes a [wo]man unfit to be a slave." – Frederick Douglass.
All of the participants identified books that help shape the personal pathway to leadership in higher education. Many participants overlapped in their identification of Black classics (e.g. *Narratives of the Life of Fredrick*

Douglass: An American Slave Written by Himself; The Souls of Black Folk; The Autobiography of Malcolm X).
Participants also reported reading books containing diverse subject matter provided a strong framework for this discourse, including conscious cartoons, novels, and parables (e.g. *The Boondocks; Invisible Man; Parable of the Talents*), gendered issues (e.g. *Fifty Black women Who Changed America; The Black Male Handbook: A Blueprint for Life*), mentoring and motivational (e.g. *Fifty Black Women Who Changed America; Letters to a Young Brother*), leadership and management (e.g. *The Tipping Point*), and spirituality (e.g. *In the Spirit: The Inspirational Writings of Susan L. Taylor*). See Rodgers and Cudjoe (2013) for complete list.

Discussion
Findings suggest that participants contextualized their roles in higher education as educators, mentors, leaders, administrators, authors, learners, scholars, and student activists. Findings also highlight that early memories of family members were important determinants for present mentoring styles. It is likely that lessons learned early helped play a critical role in navigating the pathway to leadership. Perhaps these lifelong family lessons helped promote participants' formal and informal mentoring (Casto, Caldwell, & Salazar, 2005; Combs, 2003) and leadership styles—charismatic leadership, visionary leadership and transformational (Madden, 2011). Some studies have attributed much of these successes to past and present mentoring relationships (Heggins, 2004), asserting that establishing positive relationships with faculty is vital to the success of Black male and female college students' academic success (Davidson & Foster-Johnson, 2001). Johnson (2002) asserts that a good mentor discerns a mentee's personal and

vocational dream, endorses this as realistic, and offers an environment conducive to facilitating this dream—thus parents are mentors.

The results revealed gender differences; the male participants appeared to assume and assert roles of leadership at an early age—"I learned about leadership as a teenager, when I became the president of a youth council that was affiliated with a local Democratic club…" On the other hand, gendered expectations ascribed to women suggest that they are more communal in their leadership style (Eagly & Carli, 2007) as was more pronounced in a female participant—"I never thought of myself as a leader. It wasn't until members of my Department of Teacher Education asked me to lead the department as chairperson, during one of the most critical times in the life of a department, NCATE, national reaccreditation that I took the lead," stated a female participant. Conceivably we might connect these varying experiences to societal gendered, oppressive images. Further studies suggest that some Black women assume the subordinate Mammy stereotype, fearing being perceived as the overly strong superwoman (Bent-Goodley, St. Vil, & Rodgers, 2012; Hill-Collins, 2008). Conceivably we might connect these varying experiences to societal gendered, oppressive images. Research tells us that one of the ways in which stereotypes impact real behavior is when they become internalized (Thomas et al., 2004). In other words, people assimilate stereotypes and believe them in reference to one's own behavior (Bennett & Gaines, 2010; Thomas, Speight, & Witherspoon, 2004).

The Beyond February Project emerged as a pilot project to support positive examples of Black mentoring and leadership in higher education. The project included interactive dialogue among faculty and students as a resource to encourage and affirm the significant roles of Blacks in higher education. Currently,

participants are actively engaged in formal and informal mentoring. There were several lessons learned from this project. Foremost, participants shared that the project was instrumental in presenting positive images of Blacks in higher education. It was especially important for us (the authors/participant observers) to reassure participants so they would be fully comfortable with the photo-shoots. Participants reviewed and approved all photos (Rodgers & Cudjoe, 2013). Second, we designed a mentoring and leadership booklet using photos to show positive images of Blacks in higher education (Rodgers & Cudjoe, 2013). Booklets were distributed among students and the college community. Third, in response to requests from attendees and members of the academic community, we want to expand the project to include additional participants as they celebrate profoundly inspiring and illuminating mentoring and leadership experiences and positive images of Blacks in higher education. Fourth, participants set the stage for positive engagement and modeled leadership with students from various disciplines. These findings indicate that the mechanisms which underlie positive images of Black leadership in higher education and the decision to form mentoring relationships with students stems from preceding role models. One implication of the findings might be to make certain to continue projects that observe all aspects of positive images of Blacks in academe.

Limitations of the project were related to scheduling appointments and technical mechanics of photos. Although all participants expressed enthusiasm about involvement in the project, it was challenging to schedule appointments because of unexpected meetings (this was the case for most participants). Finding natural lighting in dimly lit areas within

the school was another limitation. The latter might be addressed by taking photographs in the exterior of the identified academic
setting.

The current project is significant and when merged together with positive visual images and accompanying narratives, pathways to mentoring and leadership can have profound positive outcomes for Blacks in higher education. One observant remarked, "… and I was so positively impressed with your great program celebrating Black leadership held in the African American Studies Resource Room on February 26th that we just had to send this note of praise. The remarks shared by the guest speakers were informative and inspiring. I identified closely with the message that as educators, we have the dual responsibility of inspiring critical thinking in students along with cultivating mastery of the academic curriculum material" (E. Anderson, personal communication, February 28, 2013). Consistent with The City University of New York's Diversity Study Objective, *this study aimed to develop recommendations for improving representation, retention and satisfaction of faculty from underrepresented groups as well as strengthening the climate for diversity and inclusion* http://www.cuny.edu/about/administration/offices/ohrm/diversity/study.html.

Mentoring and leadership voices of participants narrated in previous pages included crucial messages about individual journeys and perceptions. These insights are consistent with the model of AABHE's Leadership and Mentoring Institute that provided students, faculty, staff and the college community with the "requisite information" essential to prepare them for leadership roles. In conclusion, this project underscores critical reasons to explore greater insight into the role of Black families, gendered messages of leadership and positive images of Blacks in higher education.

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