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A Profile of Black Women in the 21st Century Academy: Still Learning from the "Outsider-Within"

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Cover Page Footnote
Note: For the purpose of this article, we will be using the terms Black and African-American interchangeably. It is important to note the various historical and contemporary institutional barriers that have denied black males complete access to many areas in higher education. While black women have also faced structural challenges in higher education, there are distinctive factors shaping the educational outcomes of black males. For a more detailed discussion of these barriers, refer to Frierson, H. T., Pearson Jr. W., & Wyche, J. H. (2009).

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ABSTRACT

In 1986, sociologist Patricia Hill Collins published the groundbreaking essay, "Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought." In that pivotal piece, she describes the unique experiences and perspectives of Black women faculty in academia, specifically within predominately-white institutions (PWI's). Today, Black women faculty account for only 3 percent of all faculty nationwide (Ryu, 2010), and face a myriad of challenges related to their social location. Racism, sexism, and other interlocking oppressions create troubling obstacles for Black women at all levels in academia (Benjamin, 1998; Collins, 2000; Gregory, 2001; hooks, 1989; King, 1988). Using Collins' work as a starting point and theoretical grounding, this article will offer a demographic portrait of Black women's participation in American higher education, present a review of the literature, and provide recommendations for future research.

Keywords: Black women, higher education, faculty diversity, diversity in academe

Introduction

Today, there are many reasons to celebrate the achievements of Black women in higher education (Gregory, 2001). The Civil Rights era and the second-wave of feminism enabled more Black women to enter institutions of higher education to obtain degrees and to transform the academy. As students, faculty, and/or administrators, Black women's presence in American higher education has increased significantly since the 1960's (Evans, 2007; JBHE, 2006). Currently, Black women account for 55 percent of all Black full-time faculty (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011) teaching at colleges and universities.

African-American women account for 64 percent of all the doctoral degrees, 72 percent of all master's degrees, and 66 percent of all bachelor's degrees earned by Blacks in the United States (Ryu, 2010). As the Journal of Blacks in Higher Education [JBHE] (2006) reports, "Black women hold a large lead over Black men in almost every facet of higher education" (p.26).

In spite of the continued progress of Black women in higher education, there is still room to grow (Evans, 2007; Howard-Vital, 1989). As in previous eras, Black women continue to face numerous challenges in higher education (Collins, 1986; Evans, 2007). Racism, sexism, and

other interlocking oppressions create troubling obstacles for Black women at all levels in academia (Benjamin, 1998; Collins, 2000; Gregory, 2001; hooks, 1989; King, 1988). Through the vehicle of Black Feminist Scholarship, Black women have been able to express their voices within the marginal spaces crafted for them inside the academy. In 1986, sociologist Patricia Hill Collins published the groundbreaking essay, "Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought." In that pivotal piece, Collins (1986) notes that Black women in academia occupy an "*outsider-within"* status—a position in which they live on the margins of white society, specifically in higher education. Although Collins was not the first to openly discuss the plight of Black women, her work—situated within the context of a *Black Feminist Thought* framework—has been heavily utilized by Black women scholars examining the status of Black women in higher education (see for example, Alfred, 2001; Bertrand Jones, Wilder, Osborne-Lampkin, in press; Brewer, 2001; Harley, 2008; Harris, 2007; Henderson, Hunter & Hildreth, 2010; Patton, L., 2009; Patton, T., 2004; Pittman, 2010).

Using Collins' work as a theoretical framework, this article will offer a demographic portrait of Black women's participation in American higher education, present a brief review of the literature, and describe the successes and persistent barriers facing Black women as outsiders-within the 21st century academy. This paper concludes with recommendations for future research and a discussion of the importance of the continued growth of Black women in the academy given the changing landscape of diversity in higher education.

Profile of Black women in the Academy

As previously noted, there is an achievement gap between black men and women at all levels in higher education. What follows is a detailed profile of trends in Black women's participation in undergraduate and graduate programs, within the professoriate, and in administrative capacities.

Undergraduates

Between 1988 and 2008, the number of Blacks in the traditional age group (18-24) enrolled at four-year colleges and universities increased from 22 percent to 34 percent (Ryu, 2010). Blalock and Sharpe (2012) noted that the percentage of Black women enrolled as first-time freshmen was greater than the percentage of any other non-white group. In general, African-Americans lag significantly behind Asian American and white college students (63 percent of Asian-Americans and 45 percent of whites between the ages of 18 and 24 were enrolled in college in 2008) in undergraduate student enrollment, and slightly above Hispanic and Native American undergraduate college student enrollment—at 28 and 24 percent respectively (Ryu, 2010).

However, Black women have celebrated the greatest achievement over time in completing bachelor's degrees. For example, statistics reveal that Black women have consistently earned undergraduate degrees at higher rates than black men (Evans, 2006; McDaniel, DiPrete, Buchmann, & Shwed, 2011). In 1940, 2 percent of Black women earned college degrees compared to 1 percent of black men (McDaniel, DiPrete, Buchmann, & Shwed, 2011). In 2000, 15 percent of Black women completed college compared to 10 percent of black men, reflecting a "consistent advantage in college completion over men for more than 70 years" (McDaniel, DiPrete, Buchmann, & Shwed, 2011, p. 892). The trends for white college students are reversed. White men dominated the share of white college

degree earners until the 1980's (McDaniel, DiPrete, Buchmann, & Shwed, 2011).

Graduate Students

According to the 2010 Census, white Americans account for approximately 76 percent of the total U.S. population. Black Americans, however, make up roughly 13 percent of the U.S. population.   Although there have been increases in the numbers of African Americans earning master's and doctoral degrees, white students are still more likely than Blacks to earn graduate degrees. In 2007, for example, white students accounted for 58 percent of master's degree earners, and 60 percent of the doctoral degrees recipients. During the same year, black students represented 9 percent of master's degree earners and 6 percent of doctoral degree recipients (Ryu, 2010).

As in the case of undergraduate students, at the graduate level, Black women were more successful than black men. Mikyung Ryu (2010) reports, "As of 2007, African-American women received nearly three times as many master's degrees as [black] men, and twice as many doctoral degrees" (p. 49). In general, Black women hold the advantage in the attainment of master's degrees in business management, education, health professions, public administration and services, and the social sciences fields (Ryu, 2010). The only discipline in which black men outnumber Black women is the master's degree in engineering (Ryu, 2010). These trends are identical at the doctoral level, where black men earn more doctoral degrees in engineering than Black women (Ryu, 2010).

Faculty

Among higher education faculty, Black women do not represent a critical mass. According to the American Council on Education (2010), African-American female professors make up only 2.9 percent of all faculty teaching in colleges and universities, while white female faculty represent 32.1 percent of the professoriate. Of all tenured faculty (those holding the rank of associate or full professor), Black women compose 3.9 percent of this sub-group. The overwhelming majority of Black women faculty teaches either at predominantly black colleges and universities, or in the community college system (Gregory, 2001). In fact, only 1 percent of Black women faculty teaches at predominately white institutions (The American Council of Education, 2010).

Administration

According to a recent study conducted by the American Council on Education (2010), the average American college or university president is white, male, married, 61 years old, and with seven years of service in the position. This profile has not changed greatly in the last 25 years since ACE began compiling the data. While the number of black male college and university presidents remained steady over the last 25 years, the percentage of Black women presidents has almost doubled. In 1986, Black women accounted for 3.9 percent of all presidents. By 2011, the percent had increased to 7.7 percent (ACE, 2010). Similarly, in the fall of 2009 and 2011, Black women made up 5.8 percent of executive /administrative/ managerial positions in higher education. In contrast, white men accounted for 38 percent, and white women represented 41 percent of higher education employees in these positions.

A Review of the Literature

"Learning from the Outsider Within" is a pioneering work placing Black Feminist Scholarship at the forefront of sociological and feminist discourse (Brewer, 1997). In this essay, Collins (1986) posits that Black women live as "outsiders-within" the academy—a marginalized status that produces a distinctive voice and epistemological

standpoint. This perspective is rooted in the intersections of race, class, and gender and "creates a special standpoint on self, family, and society" (Collins, 1986, p. S14). Collins (1986) argues that the goals of proponents of the black feminist school of thought is to re-articulate the voices of Black women who have been long silenced, challenge oppression through activism, and "empower African-American women within the context of social injustice sustained by intersecting oppressions" (p. S22).

It is important to note that Collins is not the first black woman scholar within the academy to articulate the uniqueness of Black women in higher education. The richness and strength of Black women's consciousness and scholarship have persisted for centuries. In previous eras, other Black women, notably Sojourner Truth, Anna Julia Cooper, Maria Stewart, and others openly challenged racism and sexism through a black feminist doctrine (Evans, 2007; King, 1988). Moreover, the work of Beale (2008), Hull Scott, and Smith (1982), Ladner (1971; 1998), among others (see for example, Dill, 1979; hooks, 1981; King, 1988) provide a concrete foundation for the development of black feminist social theory. Nevertheless, Collins' "Outsider-Within" essay remains a classic contribution to Black Feminist Scholarship, influencing countless empirical explorations of Black women in higher education.

Black scholars are still challenged with the "outsider-within" status articulated by Patricia Hill Collins in 1986. The literature clearly documents how Black women in academe face questions of intelligence, competence, and legitimacy (hooks, 1989; Johnson-Bailey, 2004; Woods, 2001). Some accounts take the form of autobiographical narratives while others utilize larger-scale empirical data to illustrate how racism, sexism, and other interlocking oppressions create troubling obstacles for Black women at all levels in academia (see, for example, Allison, 2008; Bailey, 2004; Carter, 2008; Chambers, 2011; Harley, 2007; Harris, 2008; Hendrix, 2008; Pittman, 2010). On all fronts—in the classroom, at the departmental, and administrative levels—there are personal, organizational, and political dynamics that can deter Black women's achievement and success.

Research indicates that Black women deal with such issues as invisibility, exclusion, tokenism, poor mentoring and academic support, physical and emotional burn-out, and lack of respect. Seminal texts centering on problems faced by black female graduate students, faculty, and administrators include: *Black women in Academe: Issues and Strategies* (Moses, 1989); Lois Benjamin's *Black women in the Academy: Promises and Perils* (1997); *Black women in the Academy: The Secrets to Success and Achievement* (Gregory, 1999); and Green & Mabokela's *Sisters of the Academy: Emergent Black women Scholars in Higher Education* (2001). Recent works by Evans (2007) and Bush, Chambers, Walpole, and Lee (2010) offer both historical and contemporary analyses of black collegiate women. These key works revisit old themes, present new perspectives, and offer a window into the dynamics and complexities of Black women learning and working in academe.

By virtue of being Black and female, there are parallel experiences shared by Black women in all areas within the academy. However, the success of black female undergraduates is fraught with particular challenges. Howard-Hamilton (2003) argued that understanding Black women's experiences should be based on their "cultural, personal, and social contexts" (p. 20). As such the published literature abounds with examples of issues black female undergraduates face in terms of student involvement (Mina,

2011), social integration (Miles, Bertrand Jones, Clemons, & Golay, 2011), mentoring, stress, micro-aggressive behavior (Lee Williams & Nichols, 2012; Robinson-Wood, 2009), and gender and racial identity (Henry, 2008; Jackson, 1998).

Current research on Black female undergraduates provides insight into their experiences in community colleges (Johnson McPhail, 2011; Turner, 2011), historically black colleges and universities (Bond, 2011; Suggs & Mitchell, 2011), and predominantly white institutions (De War, 2009). Additionally, the research on Black female undergraduates also includes the experiences of nontraditional-aged college women (Sealey-Ruiz, 2012; Williams, 2011); Black female student-athletes (Harmon, Doss, & Donahoo, 2012); and women who identify themselves as lesbian, bisexual, or transgender (Walton Guyton & McGaskey, 2012). Researchers have also realized the importance of documenting the voices of Black women in underrepresented areas such as the STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) fields (Fries-Britt & Holmes, 2012; Lee, Guyden, & Harris Watkins, 2012; Wilson-Jones, 2011). This diversity in literature allows for a more complete and accurate picture of the diversity among Black female undergraduates.

Programs such as the McNair Scholars Program, Southern Regional Education Board fellowships, McKnight (Florida Educational Fund), and others focus on recruitment and retention of undergraduate and graduate students of color. These programs offer financial support through scholarships and fellowships and mentoring through relationships with alumni and other scholars of color. Similarly, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's New Connections Program, the National Center for Faculty Diversity Faculty Success Program, and the Sisters of the Academy (SOTA) Institute Research Bootcamp have been identified as professional development programs that provide coping strategies, and writing support for Black women academics (Davis, Chaney, Edwards, Thompson-Rogers, & Gines, 2012).

While the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation New Connections Program and the National Center for Faculty Diversity Program are focused on underrepresented scholars broadly, Sisters of the Academy Institute programming specifically targets Black women. These professional development opportunities provide counter-spaces for receiving research support, mentoring, coaching, and networking. Receiving support from a community of scholars is integral to the professional development of Black women in academia (Bertrand Jones & Osborne-Lampkin, in press).

Directions for Future Research

Since the time that Black women first began to produce scholarship, there has been a progression and evolution of work that remains grounded in the central tenets of black feminist thought. With more Black women contributing to this intellectual storehouse in the 21st century, more themes will undoubtedly evolve to sustain, empower, and transform Black Feminist Scholarship. It seems intuitive that the body of literature addressing issues affecting Black women in the academy will continue to grow.

Evidence from the review of literature reveals that researchers have largely focused on the experiences of individual black female populations and sub-groups, which suggests that more integrated and comparative studies of black female experiences are worthy of further examination. Broad topics for suggested study and further inquiry may include comparing the experiences of Black women at PWIs with those of Black

women attending Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU's); examining the intersections of class (i.e., first generation college students vs. second or third generation), ethnicity (Afro-Caribbean vs. African immigrants), and sexual orientations; and examining the impact of institutional policies on the recruitment, retention, and success (e.g., tenure, promotion, degree completion) of Black women in the academy. These topics, among others, may also lend themselves to multiple or smaller topics that can further inform the status of Black women in the academy.

In spite of the rich descriptions of the experiences of Black women that have been so well documented through extensive qualitative studies, there has been limited quantitative empirical data that tell the story of Black women's experiences in the academy. Employing a mixed-methods approach (e.g., combining qualitative interviews with quantitative survey data), can provide a more comprehensive portrait of the status and experiences of Black women in the academy. Researchers can also corroborate (i.e., strengthen evidence) or capture evidence that can be missed using a single or different approach, by using different methodological approaches to explore the same phenomenon. For example, a well-designed study that is based on a survey may allow researchers the opportunity to examine the status and experiences of Black women across different populations and subgroups.

Finally, educational researchers have begun to use Critical Race Theory as a lens for framing policies (Honig, 2009). In this context, the basic premise is that "implementation [of] research methods should aim to tap policy actors' lived experiences with various forms of oppression, such as through first-hand narrative" (Honig, 2009, p. 343). These "structured, storytelling opportunities," as

Honig (2009) refers to them, "help participants grapple with how aspects of their situation may reflect racist biases but also how they themselves carry such views and act in ways that frustrate implementation--especially the implementation of policies that aim to confer benefits on traditionally disadvantaged students or groups" (p. 343).

Ladson-Billings (1999, 2000) also suggests that this approach "embraces subjectivity and personalizes qualitative research in a way that reveals how mainstream institutional structure constrain individual agency" (Honig, 2009, p. 344). While some researchers have begun to frame how aspects of Critical Race Theory can be useful, as a lens for examining policy implementation processes, Critical Race Theory is still in its nascent stages (Honig, 2009). In the context of the status of Black women in the academy, using Critical Race Theory to examine how policies are implemented at various university levels, particularly those policies aimed at recruitment and retention is potentially a promising area of research.

The Future of Black women in Higher Education

In this article, the authors have provided a brief profile of Black women's participation in the academy. As three Black female faculty, the authors deeply understand the achievements and challenges facing women of color in higher education. The growing presence of Black women at colleges and universities—as students, professors and/or administrators—is changing the academic, social and cultural landscape of higher education in the 21st century.

Research that focuses on the experiences of Black women in the academy is encouraging. This line of inquiry can provide insight into the barriers and challenges they have faced as students and scholars. Furthermore, looking to the

key principles of black feminist thought as an avenue to frame the dialogue of Black women's experiences in the academy is quite useful. Patricia Hill Collins (1986) concludes "Learning From the Outsider Within" with a discussion of how an "outsider-within" status can be a valuable starting point in empowering Black women and in transforming the academy. Collins suggests that Black women have the ability to embrace the "creative potential of their outsider within status and use it wisely. In doing so, they move themselves and their disciplines closer to the humanist vision implicit in their work—namely, the freedom both to be different and part of the solidarity of humanity" (p. S30).

While some Black women still occupy a marginalized, "outsider-within" status, they nonetheless bring a multitude of diverse perspectives, talents, and ideologies to the academic classroom and workplace. Grounded within a matricentric tradition of inclusiveness, empowerment, and advocacy (Benjamin, 1997), the legacy of the black feminist tradition continues to impact current and future generations of Black female students and scholars. Moreover, the continued growth of Black women at all levels of higher education adds value to all facets of academic life. As more Black women enter the academy in pursuit of higher education, hopefully, fewer will be forced into the "outsider-within" category.

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Note:

[1] For the purpose of this article, we will be using the terms Black and African-American interchangeably.

[1] It is important to note the various historical and contemporary institutional barriers that have denied black males complete access to many areas in higher education. While black women have also faced structural challenges in higher education, there are distinctive factors shaping the educational outcomes of black males. For a more detailed discussion of these barriers, refer to Frierson, H. T., Pearson Jr. W., & Wyche, J. H. (2009).

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