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ABSTRACT

The mentoring experiences of African American women and the potential of mentoring for improving their circumstances are explored. To develop insight into mentoring, a brief pilot survey was designed using a definition of mentoring derived from the literature, specifically from the characteristics described by J. E. Blackwell. The 21-item instrument was sent to a sample of members of the Association of Black Women in Higher Education. The 63 usable responses represented a 28 percent response rate. Slightly more than half of the respondents identified themselves as administrators, and most earned appreciable salaries. Most were working in 4-year public institutions with a majority of non-African Americans. Fifty of the respondents described present or past mentoring relationships. Mentors were usually older, and respondents reported socializing with them beyond school or work functions. After reviewing their mentoring experience, 96 percent of the women said that they would like to be mentors. The most frequently perceived function of mentors was building self-confidence, heightening self-esteem, and strengthening motivation. The next most frequently identified function was socializing proteges regarding role requirements, expectations, and organizational imperatives. Findings seem to reinforce Blackwell's definition of a mentor, but do not identify any gender or race-specific functions of a mentor for these women. (SLD)

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African American Women and Mentoring

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Introduction

Limited by both race and gender, women of color face significant and unique obstacles as they pursue academic and administrative careers in higher education. The literature on mentoring, however, does not focus on mentoring relationships that include the combined effects of race and gender nor does it identify any gender specific characteristics of mentoring. From the literature, however, there are some generally identifiable characteristics of mentoring. Mentoring is mutually agreed upon by both parties, and mentors enjoy demonstrable power in the organization or society (this power can be in the form of achievement, privilege or insight).

Even as we move towards more diversity, African American women are still perceived by many to be the least powerful in our society and in most organizations. They rarely enjoy positions of power or experience the inner workings of an organization from the vantage point of an insider. Since African American women cannot depend on the "old boy network," will their mentoring experiences be different? Should African American women in academia attempt to mentor other, even less powerful African American women through careers in higher education? What are some essential ingredients for such a relationship to be mutually beneficial?

FRAME OF REFERENCE

In an attempt to provide insight into the aforementioned questions, Blackwell's research on the career effects of mentoring and networking on African American students in graduate and professional schools was examined. Blackwell observes that African American graduate and professional students rarely report exposure to true mentoring. His study suggests that true mentors are difficult for African American students to acquire while in graduate and professional school. Rather, these students appear to be aided or directed by sponsors, teachers, advisors, and peers than by mentors.

A higher percentage of African American students participating in the mentor--protege relationship was found for students who graduated from traditionally white institutions than

those who graduated from traditionally black institutions. A considerably higher percentage of students from TBCUs had advisors, teachers, and peer guidance than African American students graduating from TWIs. These differences were not statistically significant, however (1983). It could be that students in TBCUs felt less alienated in their surrounding, and therefore, in less need of mentoring relationships. Blackwell's study does not provide any data that suggest that mentoring experience for African American women are identifiably different.

Given the dismal lack of mentoring for African American students, Blackwell recommends that institutions of higher education aggressively increase the recruitment, hiring, and tenure of African American faculty and administrators into positions of power and influence. He also suggests that in order to provide visible role models of success to outsider groups (such as African American students) and to combat demeaning stereotypes about minority groups, members of those groups need to be present in important positions in large enough numbers to undermine stereotypic beliefs many others hold about their groups. Thus, mentoring can benefit the protege as well as contribute to the overall social environment. The need to recruit or retain a critical mass of persons from diverse backgrounds to improve the social environment for risk taking, development of competence and success is reiterated by Baker (1991) and others.

In studying mentoring, Blackwell originally identified 17 functions of a mentor and some qualitative dimensions of mentoring. He later refined the 17 functions into ten functions while indicating that there was a need for more information about the developmental aspects of mentoring. Blackwell's ten functions of a mentor were used to examine respondents' perceptions of mentoring in our study focusing on African American women in higher education.

Blackwell distinguishes between mentors, sponsors, advisors, guides and peer pals on a continuum which highlights the degree of power and influence each can exercise as patrons for potential proteges. On the continuum "mentors" are the most powerful and influential, "sponsors" are a little less able than mentors to shape and promote the protege's career; "guides" point out pitfalls to be avoided and short cuts to be pursued and provide intelligence to proteges; while on the low end of the continuum "peer pals" primarily have a reciprocal helping relationship sharing information and strategies, as mutual sounding boards, advising each other, confiding and commiserating with each other. Important factors found in the selection process between mentors, sponsors, or guides and proteges are the characteristics of race, social class, gender and religion (1983).

According to American Council on Education's Minorities in Higher Education (1991), Blackwell and other sources, African Americans made little progress in increasing their college completion rates in the 1980s and early 1990's. Blackwell affirms that because of this lack of progress it is even more imperative to develop mentoring relationships. He estimates that only one out of five African American students participate in true mentoring relationships. As mentioned earlier, the consideration that gender plays in a mentoring relationship is

addressed only briefly by Blackwell. He states, "mentors tend to select as proteges persons who are of the same gender and who share with themselves a number of social and cultural attributes or background characteristics such as race, ethnicity, religion and social class" (1989, p.11).

Smith and Davidson's study (1992) of mentoring African American graduate and professional students demonstrates the disproportionately heavy load borne by African American faculty and staff who mentor. They found that although African American faculty and staff comprised only four percent of the university's total staff, they were 40 percent of those at the university who helped African American students through mentoring and other supportive relationships. This major role places extraordinary strain on African American faculty who are also required to engage in scholarly activities (as are other faculty). This strain also jeopardizes the ability of African American faculty to survive in their academic careers.

The results of the combined effects of race and gender on success in higher education and mentoring need to be explored for African American women and men. According to ACE data, there are noticeable differences in the completion rates of African Americans when focusing on gender. Jennings, Alford, and Boatwright (1991) aver that there is a necessity for the combined efforts (of parents, high school counselors, social and academic leaders) to provide effective assistance to African American males as they make college and career choices. Although the current gains for African American females in completing undergraduate degrees appear to be slightly more than those for males, African American women have held steady and still lag behind white women in the completion rates of undergraduate and graduate degrees (Carter and Wilson, 1991). African American women also have the least representation among tenured faculty in institutions of higher education.

In the past, leadership positions in the African American community typically obtained through education or the black church, had been dominated by males. When discussing the role of African American women over ten years ago, Rhetaugh Graves Dumas states:

The mass of black women in America are still at the bottom of the heap--among this country's underclass. And although increasing numbers of black women are beginning to occupy important positions of authority and prestige in organizations within and outside black communities, there are forces at work today as in the past that tax the physical and emotional stamina of these women, undermine their authority, compromise their competence, limit the power that they might conceivably exercise and thus limit their opportunities for rewards and mobility in the

organization - not to mention the impact of these on job satisfaction (1979, p. 205).

Adding to the difficulty in obtaining success in the academic community and otherwise, according to Dumas, are the myths of the "black mammy" which limit power or options in organizations by painting a one-dimensional picture of the African American female leader as being a mother, a trusted confidant, compassionate and loyal subordinate, and pillar of strength for others in the organization. Predispositions about African American women often translate into long work hours with heavy workloads performed in front of scrutinizing eyes. Aspiring African American leaders, who attempt to handle the workloads while confronting the stereotypic expectations of others, are challenged to develop identities and credibility within organizations while serving as mentors for others facing similar obstacles.

Carter, Pearson and Shavlik (1988) in an article entitled, "Double Jeopardy: Women of Color in Higher Education," almost a decade after Dumas, state that "for women of color, the combined effect of these pressures can be destructive if they are not recognized and if the faulty premises that underlie them are not addressed" (98). They also state that African American women, despite their numbers in the academic community are the "most isolated, underused and consequently demoralized segment of the academic community" (98). From stereotyping to tokenism women of color face unique realities in the academic environment.

In such an environment, as delineated by Blackwell, mentoring can minimize alienation by helping women of color develop self-confidence, take risks, and increase competence. The institutional environment, thus, can be enhanced for productive academic and career development for diverse groups. By serving as mentors, African American women can help actively with the development of future symbolic images of women of color in organizations while at the same time developing a sense of connectedness to some component of the organization. Hopefully, this will help more women of color transcend the racial and sexual limitations posed by others and enhance the development of academic networks and coalition building with other groups.

Dumas views the development of future images of African American women as extremely important, she states, "Herein lies the most significant challenge to black women executives, to those who claim an interest in promoting the upward social mobility of minority groups and women in America, and to all who are concerned with the development of social and psychological theories of organizational leadership" (215).

To develop more insight into the mentoring experiences of African American women in higher education, a brief, pilot survey was designed by the authors utilizing Blackwell's definition of the functions that mentors perform as a basis for item construction.

The instrument, twenty-one questions in all, provided an opportunity to gain descriptive data concerning mentoring experiences, to explore perceptions of mentoring from African

American women who had been mentored and to clarify areas for more in depth inquiry. Two hundred instruments were sent to women whose names appeared on the 1989-1990 membership list of the Association of Black Women in Higher Education (ABWHE), a national organization of approximately 481 women in the United States. From an alphabetized list, every other name was selected. Two hundred thirty-five surveys were mailed to ABWHE members. Some respondents chose not to identify themselves by names on their completed survey. Approximately 65 surveys were returned. Of these, 63 were usable. The response rate was 28 percent.

A little more than half of the women responding (55%) to the questionnaire identified themselves as administrators (assistant/associate deans, directors, coordinators, assistant to the president, vice president, or president/chancellor). Three respondents were presidents, four vice presidents, and four were deans. Seventeen percent held a variety of instructional and staff positions. Eighteen percent of the women responding were in faculty positions as either assistant professor, associate professor or full professor. Thirty-five percent of those responding had earned either a Ph.D. or Ed.D., five percent had earned J.D. degrees and three percent were still A.B.D.'s. Thirty-seven percent had masters degrees; thirteen percent had bachelor's degrees, and 18% had associate degrees or had not yet completed degrees. The majority of women were age 36 or older and were not pursuing advanced degrees.

The women responding to the survey earned respectable salaries with 44 percent earning salaries over \$50,000 a year and 22 percent, of that group, earning salaries over \$70,000 a year. (It would be interesting to compare the salaries of the women administrators with salaries of their male counterparts.) In terms of supervising staff, 19 percent of the women supervised staff of more than 20 persons, and 26 percent supervised a staff of at least six persons but less than 20 persons. Twenty-seven percent of those responding did not supervise any staff.

A little more than half of the women responding (57 percent) were single (either single and never married, widowed or divorced) with no children. The next largest category of women had only one child and 24 percent had two children. Eighteen percent had three or more children.

The majority of the women who responded were in four year, public institutions with a majority of non-African Americans. A very small percent of the women (only 5 percent) were working in a traditionally black college or university. Thus, the respondents to the survey were for the most part, middle-aged, highly-educated, African American women who earned salaries in excess of \$50,000 a year working in predominately non-African American four year, public institutions in higher education.

When asked if they have, or had a mentoring experience, according to Blackwell's definition, 22 percent or 14 of the African American women responded that they did not have a mentor. Even though no further data were obtained from African American women who did not

have mentors, it is acknowledged that further study concerning their academic and career experiences would be beneficial. The 50 respondents who described present or past mentoring relationships indicated that they meet, or met, with their mentor frequently- from several times a week to several times a month, as needed. Overwhelmingly the response was that mentors were, or are, five to ten years older than their mentees. Seventy-four percent of the women reported that they socialize, or did socialize, with their mentors beyond school or work functions. Additionally, fifty-three percent of the women still associate with their mentors even though the mentoring relationship was in the past. In her study of mentoring, Merriam (1983) states that mentoring relationships usually last 3 -5 years. It would be interesting to conduct further investigation into the length of time of mentoring relationships among women of color. Do these relationships actually tend to be longer in time?

After reviewing their mentoring experience, ninety-six percent indicated that they would like to be a mentor to another. Of the 50 survey participants who indicated that they had experienced one mentoring relationship, the greatest percentage (70%) of those experiences were during professional careers. Fewer women described mentoring experiences that occurred as undergraduate or graduate students. This supports Blackwell's claim that most African Americans do not engage in mentoring relationships in higher education. In view of the current research on the importance of the freshman year for subsequent retention (Gordon and Grites (1984), Gardner, (1986), and (Fidler 1991), establishment of early mentoring relationships could be very important for the retention of both African American females and males.

ABWHE survey respondents revealed that they had or currently experience relationships with mentors of the same and of different gender and race. Ninety-five responses on the survey provided data on mentoring experiences.

According to Blackwell's refined listing (1989, p.10), mentors perform ten functions for mentees which include:

- providing training
- stimulating acquisition of knowledge
- providing information about educational programs
- providing emotional support and encouragement (and helping protege develop coping strategies during periods of turmoil)
- socializing proteges regarding the role requirements, expectations, and organizational imperatives or demands of the profession
- creating an understanding of the educational bureaucracy and the ways one can maneuver within the system
- inculcating, by example, a value system, and a professional work ethic
- providing informal instructions, again by example, about demeanor, etiquette, collegiality, and day-to-day interpersonal relations

- helping the protege build self-confidence, heighten self esteem, and strengthen motivation to perform at one's greatest potential
- defending and protecting the protege, correcting mistakes, and demonstrating techniques of avoiding unnecessary problems

Subjects' responses to our inquiry, "what was discussed in sessions with your mentor?" were ranked, and the following frequency of identification emerged.

- future career opportunities and future job prospects
- problems encountered acclimating to the University environment (role expectations, political problems, etc.)
- strategies for developing competence
- coursework
- how to get things done, short-cuts for coursework, promotion, etc.
- emotional or personal problems
- projects working on together: papers, presentations, etc.

Two open-ended questions on the survey were designed to encourage respondents to identify what functions their mentor served and how they benefitted from the mentoring relationship. An analysis of the responses, in light of Blackwell's functions of a mentor, indicates that the most frequently perceived function of mentor, by respondents is building self-confidence, heightening self-esteem, and strengthening motivation to perform at one's greatest potential. This is also considered extremely important in terms of retaining freshmen students. Some responses were "I learned patience/self-motivation.... confidence... to trust my developing knowledge....to take risks... courage... to visualize myself in top positions, then create the vision... self-determination... I am intelligent, worthwhile.... how to bite the bullet and maintain self-confidence."

The next frequently identified function of a mentor was socializing proteges regarding role requirements, expectations and organizational imperatives. Some responses were "how to look professional.... professionalism/professional development....keep abreast of trends in education and the workplace....valuable insights on surviving academic organizations...the importance of time management, setting priorities and organizing.... networking strategies, professional networking....how to get things done with little time."

Also perceived to be very important was the function of creating an understanding of the educational bureaucracy, at specific institutions, and the ways one can maneuver within higher education. A little less than half of the responses stated that this was a valuable function of their mentor. Some responses were that a mentor "helped me learn how to avoid pitfalls....negotiate the system.... be careful of campus politics/negotiate politics/read the political climate.....be more politically savvy/assessing the politics of the situation....how to use situations to my own

advantage and to the advantage of others involved." Seventeen responses focused on the mentor's role in providing emotional support and encouragement in developing coping strategies in periods of turmoil. Mentees learned, "personal and professional survival skills....to be persistent and persevere....to maintain a positive mental attitude.... the importance of working hard and playing hard (maintaining balance in life, the importance of rest and relaxation time).... staying level-headed in situations."

The responses of African American women concerning their mentoring experience fell clearly in nine of the ten functions of a mentor described by Blackwell. The mentor's function of providing information about educational programs was mentioned rarely except for a few references to discussion of specific courses.

In responding to the query, what did you like most about your mentoring relationship, 18 of the 50 African American women discussed how they appreciated the "great sounding boards often an emotional "oasis" where I can cast aside my "aura" and be myself, and ask naive questions; be irrational in my anger, and not have to worry about having my weaknesses used against me. But most importantly where I can get honest "no holds barred" assessments of what's going on....openness to discuss any issue... open, honest and caring relationship.... the open and honest dialogue we have developed.... we were able to be honest and direct with each other.... relaxed and open, there when I needed him... genuine, real, equality, open, and honesty... all things were shared in confidence and I trusted him.... having someone to turn to in an atmosphere of mutual respect." Ten other respondents discussed the respect, caring, sense of belonging, or support provided by their mentors. One respondent indicated what she liked most about her mentoring relationship was that she enjoyed, " the same kind of small educational and professional advantages that are common to my white colleagues." Another stated that her mentor was someone "you could rely on."

Conclusion

The findings in our analysis and pilot survey seem to reinforce Blackwell's perception of the functions of a mentor, but do not identify any gender or racial specific functions of a mentor. Respondents seem to need the function of a mentor associated with developing self-confidence and political insight into the organization. Mentors were applauded for being caring and honest.

Additionally, our preliminary study adds to the perception that inclusion of more African American and other minorities of color in academia at the graduate and undergraduate level could result in more mentoring relationships with African American males and females. The frequency of comments that focus on "openness, respect and honesty" of the mentor should be noted. Possibly the process by which mentors help mentees develop self-esteem is through respectful dialogue that is open, honest and supportive. To what degree the open discussions and types of discussions vary in reference to the gender and race of the mentor is not clear from our pilot study.

The authors led discussions on mentoring, this exploratory study, and Blackwell's functions of a mentor at the 1991 Annual Conference of the Association of Black Women in Higher Education; these discussions demonstrated the need for professional development in the area of mentoring. The conference discussants expressed a need for pre-mentoring experiences for the mentor and mentee which lend themselves to the development of beneficial mentoring relationships. The majority of the discussants also indicated that they had not been mentored as undergraduates or graduates; nonetheless, they expressed their interests in learning how to mentor. For some who have attained some measure of success, despite being in "double jeopardy," it is not "natural" to interact in a manner that would be beneficial to the mentee in terms of college persistence and the development of self-esteem. Pre-mentoring experiences for faculty could be in the form of faculty development and/or include a more structured pairing of faculty with students in programs like the freshman year experience advocated by some universities. Yolanda Moses' comments in her article in The Chronicle of Higher Education (1993) also lead the authors to advocate for more structured, institutional, mentoring programs for faculty, administrators, and students similar to programs discussed by Margo Murray in Beyond The Myths and Magic of Mentoring (1991).

Since beginning this examination of mentorship, one of the authors, an African American administrator in a predominately white institution, has engaged in a structured mentorship relationship with her university president. Because of the visibility of this mentorship, it has done much to eliminate some of the barriers often faced by minority administrators and women administrators in higher education as delineated by Moore (1990) and Moses (1993). Because of one author's mentorship experience, and other such experiences, the authors strongly endorse such institutionally-based, structured mentorships as a means of dispelling stereotypes, going beyond tokenism, and providing sustained support for professional development and effectiveness in institutions of higher education.

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