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ABSTRACT

This narrative describes a study that examined the stories of black women administrators in traditionally white colleges, identifying coping strategies, patterns, and themes relating to their success. Participants completed interviews that examined such issues as the role of family in preparation for their current leadership positions, current job satisfaction, communication and management styles, support systems, and rejuvenation techniques. Overall, participants believed that they had something to offer to the institution. They were learned, well-read scholars who were passionate about education and published in mainstream journals within the areas of their expertise. They worked hard to remain emotionally balanced, spiritually centered, and academically focused. Most often, God and family were at the center of their lives. They embraced their roles as leaders and understood the relationship of their individual positions to the overall university. Participants had accepted the fact that nobody would fight their battles for them, and if they were to survive in the academy, they had to understand the cultural differences regarding communication between men and women, understand the social and political fears and bias of the majority race, and act accordingly. Despite difficulties surrounding racism, sexism, isolation and pressure to succeed, all were extremely satisfied in their positions. (Contains 12 references.) (SM)

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**“CAN’T YOU LIGHTEN UP A BIT?”
BLACK WOMEN ADMINISTRATORS IN
THE ACADEMY**

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“Can’t You Lighten Up A Bit?” Black Women Administrators in the Academy

It’s the end of your day and a brief, almost “in passing” conversation with a colleague has left you slightly taken aback. It is apparent that the ignorance of your “melanin-deprived” colleague has been a bit more obvious today. What was a smile on your face is now slightly joined with a “what did he say?” furrowed brow and your blood pressure is creeping. It was just a joke, maybe, or perhaps you’re just feeling a bit oversensitive today. It caught you off guard for a moment but you choose to take the higher ground and not pull out your pistol and fire the shot in the direction of the unassuming perpetrator which would probably send many of your fellow colleagues of color cheering, as you have take action that they have long imagined. You remember, however, that this is America, the land of the legal lynching by the white collarsmen, the land where the good old boys to reign and justice, all too often, depends upon the color of your skin.

You remember where you are at this comfortable height in your career and have a faint remembrance of why you

accepted the offer from this financially well-endowed 4-year research institution in the first place. You know better than to be surprised—your degrees, your skills, publications, and proven track record are no armor against the isolation, the constant requirement of being on guard, poised for imminent battle. Your familiarity with racism, coupled with sexism, however, does little to soften the sting. You have, of course, learned to persevere.

Still, every verbal slash, slap, sling shot, or jab, only re-opens and deepens old wounds that you have spent most of your professional life trying to mask and appear unaffected—unharmd. With each blow, each razor sharp gash, you are left with a little less of yourself than you began with this morning, a little less hope, a little less of your own personal...softness.

But, of course, you are reminded that what does not destroy you makes you stronger. And so you tend to your wounds propped up by those whose crusted scars have rendered them not bitter, but wiser, stronger, and with re-focused determination. You cover your neck burns behind your Da Vinci scarves, the slashes underneath your Evan Picone designer blouse and suit. You hide the sling shot bruises in the

creases of your corporate-like smiles and learn to return the jabs with intentionally ambiguous combinations of wit, wisdom, and humor.

Sharing in similar tales, we are sisters and brother, united in this battle. We are scholars of law, literature, medicine, mathematics, finance, history, and the like. We are also Black female scholars holding academic administrative positions, conducting research, and teaching in the academy. Our numbers are low but our triumphs sizable—and we realize that the telling and passing on of our stories and learned strategies are essential our own survival and for those preparing to follow in our footsteps.

This pilot study was conducted to identify some of those stories, lessons, and survival strategies as told by Black women holding administrative positions in the academy. The purpose of this study was to identify coping strategies, patterns, and themes that are directly related to the success of the Black women in these unique positions of leadership.

There are several reasons why this type of study is necessary. The “browning of America” speaks to issues regarding representation of the total United States population

within the academy. Recent affronts to affirmative action threaten to inhibit these numbers. There are other issues:

First, of all there are Black women in this country who are struggling, not only with the predictable stresses of the task of leadership, but are doing so feeling isolated and lonely, conscious of the importance of their work as trail blazers but longing desperately for support. They are too often the “only Black women” or the “only Black person” in their setting and this alone makes them ripe for multiple emotional pitfalls. This is not to imply that they will not be successful but at times this success will seem to be at an unnecessarily high cost to their self-esteem and physical and emotional well-being.

There is much to be said for not only sharing the wisdom of these trail blazers but, more importantly, for creating a safe space for them to tell their stories, to find empathy, to articulate their own frustrations and successes to someone who respects their efforts and understands some of the walls facing them. It is sometimes necessary for them to hear their own words, especially when they are in settings offering limited opportunities for mentoring or even for fair assessment of their performance.

Currently, there are approximately 162,000 full-time female faculty members in the academy. Only 11,400 are Black women (*Black Issues in Higher Education*, 1995). Unless these leaders are supported and nurtured, the numbers of Black women in the academy will continue to stall.

The second reason for the importance of this study pertains to the uniqueness of the university as an institution. It is true, that there are now many more financially lucrative careers for Black women outside of education. Additionally, there exists a huge disparity between the \$40,000 median salary for white males in higher education and \$26,000 earned by Black women who are on the bottom of the pay scale in higher education (*Black Issues in Higher Education*, 1995). The role of Black scholars in the academy, however, is uniquely important. First, the college and university setting presents a highly respected and formal opportunity for the discourse and exchange of ideas. There are tables around which faculty members decide upon the nature of intellectual discourse to be explored by incoming student populations. Women bring to the table nurturing intuition and a natural

spirit of collaboration that is unique to women. Margaret B.

Wilkerson describes the role eloquently:

Black women are a prism through which the searing rays of race, class, and sex and first focused, they refracted. The creative among us transform these rays into a spectrum of brilliant colors, a rainbow which illuminates the experience of all mankind. (Hine and Thompson, 1998, p. 18)

If Black women are not at the table, who will raise these issues from the perspective that only a Black female scholar can?

Second, the lack of African American women in the academy has sizable negative impact upon the number of both Black faculty and students (Gregory, 1995). Black faculty numbers coincide with the enrollment, retention rate, and graduation rate students of color (Blackwell, 1983). The mere presence of Black faculty members does much to encourage Black college students and affirms the perception of themselves as scholars and professionals (Deflour, Hirsh, 1990).

Finally, it is important that Black scholars engage in research issues that involve Black communities. We cannot continue to give non-Black researchers the additional opportunity to study Black culture and reach conclusions from

biased premises and present conclusions which perpetuate negative attitudes against us (Moore, Wagstaff, 1974). Andrew Billingsley (1970)

American social scientists are much more American than social and much more social than scientific. They reflect all the prejudice, ignorance, and arrogance that seem to be endemic to Americans of European decent. Furthermore, because of their skills at communication and their acceptance as authorities on race relations, social scientists do even greater damage to the understanding of Blacks...than do ordinary citizens. (p. 127)

The Study

Twenty-one Black women, ranging from age 39 to 61 holding administrative positions in 4-year traditionally white universities were identified via e-mail and solicited for the study. Upon agreeing to participate, a questionnaire was e-mailed to the respondents. The questionnaire served as a guide for the 90-minute individual in person or telephone interviews. The questions were designed to identify topics germane to the role of Black women in the academy and patterns in several areas: the role of family in preparation for their current positions of leadership, details surrounding current job

satisfaction or lack of, communication and management styles, key support systems, and rejuvenation techniques of these administrators.

Data Summary

All of the respondents participating in the pilot study held earned doctorate degrees. The range of time in their current positions was from 2 to 32 years. None had held more than 3 administrative positions since the completion of the doctorate. Less than half were still married, 5 had never been married, and only 7 had children.

Not surprising, most of the respondents noted their perception as children of the importance of the role of their parents in the community. Sharon, vice president for academic affairs in a northwest university commented,

My parents always came home and talked about work. Dad worked with the veterans on fairness issues and Mom worked for the social security office. In the morning everyone left the house either for work or for school and that was serious business—everyone had a job to do. Of evenings, the events of the day were important discussion topics.

The importance of the role played by individuals outside of the immediate family surfaced repeatedly. Jackie, who is currently the dean of a school within a Big Ten Midwest University, was raised by her grandmother who had only a third grade education. Her grandmother was essential in insisting that she know the church and her Bible. In the absence of any other family, it was a Sunday school teacher who noticed her academic potential as a nine year old and played an important role in encouraging her throughout her educational career.

A spouse, significant other, and children—even nieces or nephews, also played a very significant role in lives of 16 of the interviewees regarding the ability to maintain a sense of balance and rejuvenation. Michele, assistant provost and single mother of an 11-year-old daughter and 14-year-old son, refers to her children as “giant erasures.” She comments that however stressful the challenges of the university, hearing the daily accounts of simple adolescent frustrations and small triumphs in the lives of her two children at the end of the day, serve to remind her of what was importance in her life. She says of her children, “They keep me humble, focused, and smiling.”

Each of the respondents spoke, to some degree, of the importance of taking time for themselves, either with a close friend who is a good listener or simply engaging regularly in prayer or meditation. The most overwhelming message was the necessity to do whatever necessary to stay in touch with themselves both spiritually and culturally.

When the interviewees were asked how their colleagues might describe their style of communication and management, the words most often chosen were “assertive,” “kind of person I would want as my mentor”, “kind,” “democratic and collaborative,” and finally, “soft-spoken but carrying a big stick.” Only 2 respondents described themselves as aggressive. Nia, a 47-year-old west coast dean in arts and sciences noted

White women are blatantly assertive. I’ve seen white men cut to the quick by some white women to whom they answer. As a Black woman I can’t get away with that. We’ve always had to cover ourselves. We’ve learned that we have to watch our backs and work to be perceived as less threatening.

She continued:

A successful Black female president once told me about herself. She said, ‘As bright as I am, I can’t appear to always have the answers. A Black woman can’t be too smart.

Only one respondent, Evelyn, 61 years of age, who has been associate dean in administration for 32 years, commented that her subordinates would probably define her as “friend” and “confidante.” She also stressed the importance of maintaining a manner of formality at all times in the work place.

Unless I am in my office in a one on one conversation of a causal nature, I always address my faculty as Dr. So-in-so or Mr. or Mrs. So-in-so. This doesn't mean you are distant but that you maintain sense of formality and respectfulness at all times. Even if I'm stapling papers with or having lunch with a group of graduate students and we are laughing as we work or eat, I still maintain a climate of comfortable professionalism.

When asked of the interviewees how their subordinates might describe the Black female administrators, only one respondent choose the word “brilliant.” Several stated that their subordinates would describe them as administrators who “get the job done” but they explained that this was not necessarily viewed as a genuinely positive compliment. None of the administrators described herself as “visionary” although there is a wealth of literature which points to the correlation between the leader's articulated vision and effectiveness of the work environment. (ed. Rosenbach, Taylor, 1998)

Several noted that they had, on occasion, worked with white men who would describe them as “overly aggressive.” Nedra, who has served as associate dean for 18 years in the same institution recalled a white male colleague who told her

The reason people have a problem with you is because you look them straight in the eye when you talk to them.

She told him politely that was “his problem.”

Nineteen of the twenty-one of the respondents noted their attempts to involved as many of their subordinates as possible on decisions and policy making matters. Most described a democratic-collaborative style of management. Carla, 41, who heads a team of 17 faculty members, puts her style of communication and management in a historical context for her department. She explained,

The former woman in this position used her ‘sweet womanly ways.’ I don’t do that. I ask for their input individually and then I let them speak in a group. I hear their intentions for action and I expect them to carry out the approved decision. If they don’t give a reasonable amount of time, I tell them what needs to be done and tell them to do it.

Carla has been functioning in that position for 5 years but has been within the institution for 20 years. She acknowledges that

her style is very direct and feels that she has worked hard to develop a sense of trust among her colleagues. She says that she loves her job.

Each interviewee was asked to comment upon the extent to which incidents of sexism or sexual harassment had been a hindrance in their job satisfaction. Seventeen of the 21 responded affirmatively. Dianne spoke directly about the difficulties she had experience with her white male supervisor. Single, at 42 she has been an assistant vice president for 3 years. She explains,

I never realized how much one person can make my life so stressful. For all or my life either my schoolwork or job has for me represented the measure of success in my life. He's a nice man but he's threatened by my competence. As long as I don't offer any suggestions, never ask for changes, and at all cost don't offer unsolicited evaluation of issues, even in our administrative meetings, he's fine. I realize he is simply terrified that I will do or say something, which will reflect poorly upon him. Every discussion we have is doubting, questioning, and fearful that I'll make him look bad even though he has never commented poorly on my performance.

When asked how other faculty members respond to him she continues:

They have their research, their teaching, and their sabbaticals. They don't have to deal with

him regularly. As a fellow of his, I have no choice.

Much to her credit, Nia has identified why his lack of approval disturbs her so much:

I realize that I equate his approval with that of my mother, even at this stage in my life but she was always pushing my bothers and I. We had to be perfect. And now in the absence of any one else evaluating my work, sometimes I let his lack of support devastate me.

Rita, an assistant provost, also describes the harassing comments among her fellow assistant and associate provosts and vice presidents. She says,

I am the only women and the only person of color in an administrative position at my university. They're a nice group of fellows, intelligent and well meaning usually, but I get so tired of them commenting on my hair. It's shoulder length and during the summer months I braid it. I've also been known to straighten it and wear it natural. I have to think 3 times before I change styles—trying to understate my appearance but it's as if they don't have anything else to say to me and that just can't be true.

One of the most disturbing stories came from a 39-year old director of the performing arts department. Charlotte, feels that she probably could file several sexual discrimination suits

but has neither money nor time to fight the white financial powerhouse. She explains:

I was the first woman and the first Black person to hold this position. Our department is about 75% full-time male with many female part-time faculty. Comments from the male faculty like ‘I like your outfit. I have one just like it in my closet’ and ‘Your skin is so smooth. Maybe you could give my wife some make-up tips.’ These were regular occurrences when I first came. It’s slacked off some now. I’ve learned how to let them know that I don’t appreciate the comments. Sometimes I ignore the comments and other times I just give them a look.

In a similar capacity, Marla, 51, serves in an institution where the central administration claims to want to increase the number of faculty members of color. During a recent faculty search committee meeting the committee chair asked her,

“Marla, don’t you know any Black authors who would love to work here?”

She replied that she could “name many notable African American authors” and that she was “surprised that (he) couldn’t do the same. Whether or not they’d want to work here is another matter.”

There were a variety of other comments from different respondents like:

“You have one of those faces where I can’t tell what you’re thinking.” (comment from respondent’s supervisor)

“Why do we have to call them “ethnic courses?” Can’t we just say “other course options?” (comment made in curriculum design meeting.)

“I really like short natural hair on women. Makes me want to run my fingers through it.”

“I just love your clothes. They make me want to consider cross-dressing.”

Several respondents were asked why these comments were never reported. The responses fell into two categories: either they stated that they had mentioned the comments to their supervisors, white men, and the complain had been dismissed almost jokingly or the respondent decided to address the colleague themselves, feeling no other university support would be available. All of the interviewees felt that they had learned to verbally address these comments and in doing so had lessened the incidents. Lily, comments upon the similar experience remarked

It’s sad that you still have to fight these types of comments and you don’t really have anyone within the institution to turn to. Comments like that are an accepted part of the institutional culture although they won’t admit it. You either learn to stop it on you own or you just decide to leave. There would probably be a similar battle

at any white university so you just try to learn
not to let it bother you.

Analysis

So what are the topics cited for further research in the stories of scholars? The literature citing the importance of social support systems in reducing stress in the work place is extensive. The importance of these social support systems in the lives of female workers is even more important (Perkins, 1989). It is essential that where support systems are not readily available, particularly in white institutions, Black women must find support outside of the specific institution.

Men and women have different styles of communication (Glass, 1992) whoever most of the women practiced collaborative approach to problem solving and in establishing new initiatives or ideas. Unfortunately, often times the perception of the woman who works collaboratively is that she cannot make a decision. Traditionally, white men have established an authoritative style of management. When a Black woman's credibility as a leader is questioned, simply because she is NOT a white male, it can be difficult for white men to appreciate the value of this collaborative style.

Black feminist writer bell hooks has candidly described the oppression subjected onto Black feminist thought and Black women. Unfortunately, the blame for ignoring the importance of the Black women cannot entirely be blamed upon white America (hooks, 1995). All too often Black are not perceived as credible scholars and unfortunately Black men and white men find camaraderie in their disregard of the importance of the voice of Black women. Barbara Smith (1998) states,

Black women are seldom asked anything. Racism is what happens to Black men. Sexism is what happens to white women. When public discourse occurs about race, gender, sexuality, class...Black women's opinions are generally not sought (p. xi).

The respondents interviewed in this study have accepted that fact that no one will fight their battles for them. If they are to survive in the academy they must understand the cultural differences regarding the communication between men and women and understand the social and political fears and bias of the majority race on these predominately white institutions and act accordingly.

All of the women interviewed were obviously skilled and effective in their positions of leadership, this indicated by the positions held and the number of years in the positions. In spite of the difficulties surrounding racism and sexism, the isolation and pressure to success, all were extremely satisfied in their positions. At some point during the tenure of their current positions they made the conscious decision to stay in the setting in spite of the difficulties. This is commendable of these scholars, however, one questions how many rising Black female scholars will find these positions in the academy sufficiently rewarding in spite of these difficulties which, as described by the respondents, are extremely energy and time consuming. Are there sufficient intrinsic rewards in these types of positions given the lack of support, low salaries, and constant psychological and emotional assaults which will warrant these Black woman scholars staying these positions and encouraging other Black women to follow?

Conclusion and Recommendations

Finally, what are the necessary strategies according the respondents in this study? Who are they at the core of

themselves and what advice do they pass on? First of all they are Black women scholars who have dared to take their swords onto the sacred battleground of the academy because they thoroughly believe that they have something to offer to the institution. They are learned, well read, scholars who are passionate about research, writing, and teaching. They have refused to be silent, closet scholars. They have long ago lifted their pens from their personal journals and now publish in the mainstream journals in their areas of expertise. They work hard to stay emotionally balanced, spiritually centered, and academically focused. Most often God and family reign at the center of their lives.

In expanding their thrones from their homes to the board and conference rooms, they have brought into those chambers a strength, wisdom, passion, and tenacity exercised by no one else. They embrace their roles as leaders and they understand the relationship of their individual positions to the overall university. They speak clearly and directly and truly understand the value of listening.

They are proud women who have skillfully and willfully accepted their roles as directors, deans, provosts, and

presidents and although there are still those who have invited them to the table only to serve as silent brown seat warmers, intending for them to simply offer aesthetic diversity to the decor, they will not only defend their right to sit at the table and be heard but they will take overt responsibility for the education of their colleagues of non-color. They not only believe that they have the right to these halls but they recognize their spiritual, social, and political responsibility to take their place as leaders in the academy. The challenges are great but greater are the rewards.

In closing, I offer the words of George Fraser (1998):

Stay the Course

The ship of life sails at sea in search of life. As captains of our fate, we must steer the course confident that our inner compass will always be true. The seas will be stormy, but stay the course. You scope will view danger, but stay the course. You will be tempted to change directions but stay the course; your crew may threaten mutiny, but stay the course. Stay the course, and you will land on an island where no one else has landed. It is there that you will build your paradise”(p. xxviii).

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