

**Welcoming
the Unwelcomed:
A Social Justice Imperative
of African-American Female Leaders
at Historically Black Colleges
and Universities**

By Gaetane Jean-Marie

The social movements during the last 50 years of the 20th century were among the most tumultuous years for people of color. African Americans, among other groups, confronted obstacles on what they could be and do. Negative social attitudes and the status of ethnic and racial groups were challenged and underwent change (Valverde, 2003). African Americans experienced harsh treatments in educational institutions and had to develop unconventional ways to advocate for themselves and those in their community (Jean-Marie, James, & Bynum, 2006). As the civil rights movement became a full-scale struggle, like many people of color, the African-American female leaders in this study confronted and disrupted institutions thought to be responsible for their oppression (Jean-Marie, 2005).

The purpose of this paper is to explore the experi-

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Gaetane Jean-Marie is an assistant professor of educational administration in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies of the College of Education at Florida International University, Miami, Florida.

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ences of three African-American women leaders in historically black institutions in one southeastern state. This paper documents how individuals committed to social justice and racial uplift connect their professional work with social and political activism in the quest for equality and justice for African Americans and all people. Presented are women whose elementary and secondary educational foundations were formed in segregated schools (i.e., fewer resources, lack of funding, limited teachers and classrooms). Their coming of age was inextricably linked to the larger changing consciousness of African Americans who challenged the existing social order in new ways (Ladson-Billings, 1997; Robnett, 1997). When the 1954 landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling declared that schools should be desegregated with all deliberate speed (Valverde, 2003), these African-American women were among the freedom fighters who integrated public schools, and later pursued higher education and professional careers (Jean-Marie, 2005). According to Valverde (2003),

Education in general and higher education in particular became important for the individual, but especially for persons of color, who were consistently denied access to formal school early in the development of the United States and were more recently denied access to desegregated and good schools. (p. 12)

The women leaders in this study come from a tradition of protest [that has been transmitted] across generations by older relatives, black educational institutions, churches, and protest organizations (Morris, 1984).

Similar to these participants, many African-American professionals dedicate themselves to ensure that future generations are successfully prepared to embrace personal and societal challenges. The participants' commitment to racial uplift is related to their own experiences: born, educated, and started their educational career in a segregated America, both *de jure* and later *de facto* (Valverde, 2003). In particular, the perspectives of African-American women who were born and raised during the pre- and post-Civil Rights Movement are uniquely shaped (Loder, 2005b; Robnett, 1997) by their experiences. The *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling had an impact on the social lives of African-Americans who were previously denied equal access to education.

Theoretical Framework

The historic ruling of *Brown v. Board of Education* redefined what public education should be for people of color in a time where separate but equal dominated social institutions in the United States. The ruling was met with resistance by the dominant class who wanted to maintain the status quo. African Americans, nonetheless, persisted in their struggle to end social injustices, bigotry, and discrimination, and dismantled institutional practices and structures that hindered their advancement in society. Rather than a cry of "let us in," there were increasing calls for self-definition and self-determination among African Ameri-

cans and other people of color (Gordon, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1997). The collective mission of racial uplift became the mantra that African Americans proposed as their mission. According to Collins (1990),

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this philosophy [racial uplift] simply meant that the educational attainments of all African Americans, male and female, would be for the advance and uplift of the race. (Collins as cited in Hill-Brisbane, 2005, p. 2)

African Americans' participation in the Civil Rights movement crystallized their thinking and made them more committed to the ideals of equality and democracy (Jean-Marie, 2005; Loder, 2005b; Valverde, 2003). Based on the resilience of African Americans' struggle for social justice and racial uplift during the Civil Rights era, I interconnect the following theoretical constructs to frame this article: (a) the symbolic and educational significance of historically Black colleges and universities (hereafter, HBCUs), (b) racial uplift and African-American women's involvement, and (c) the meaning and practice of social justice leadership.

HBCUs: A Repository of Hope for Universal Education for All

During the period when higher education opportunity was almost non-existent for African Americans, HBCUs played a significant role in the lives of African Americans who wanted to pursue higher learning. They continue to be a driving force for social change and racial uplift. According to Roebuck and Murty (1993), HBCUs are Black academic institutions that were established prior to 1964. Their principal mission was, and continues to be, the education of African Americans. Since their inception which dates back to 1854 (Garibaldi, 1984), HBCUs' mission was three-fold in their first century. First, they provided education to newly freed slaves that was rich in Black history and tradition. Second, they delivered educational experiences that were consistent with the experiences and values of many Black families. Thirdly, they provided a service to the Black community and the country by aiding in the development of leadership, racial pride, and return service to the community (Sims, 1994). Located throughout the United States, HBCUs symbolize models that educate underserved and underrepresented individuals who traditionally do not have access to institutions of higher learning (Heath, 2001; Verharen, 1996). Making higher education accessible for every capable individual without compromising quality is an important imperative for HBCUs that continues today.

Verharen (1996) argues that a college education is the right of every competent citizen and HBCUs pave the way through outreach programs and educational resources to make higher learning obtainable to African Americans. In an era of increased standardization that aims to limit who should have access to higher learning, other factors beyond traditional criteria (i.e., SAT scores, grade point average, class ranking, financial resources, etc.) ought to be considered to make quality education available for those who would not otherwise have the opportu-

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nityî (Verharen, 1996, p.53). Among institutions of higher learning, HBCUs seek to bridge the gap between the haves and the have-nots. To bridge that gap, transformative leaders (Foster, 1986; Grogan, 1994; Shakeshaft, 1993) are needed at HBCUs to be the voice of social change and influence policy decisions that impact who can and cannot have access to higher education. Transformative leadership according to Foster (1986) is about social change with a belief that transformation is a process that occurs over time. The transformation is not only in structures but also with leaders and followers. The civil rights movement was transformative: gaining equal rights for people of color and women, securing equal opportunity for employment, and providing access to education. HBCUs, as a social institution, have provided transformative leadership throughout African-American history (Jean-Marie, 2004). Staying close to that mission, Verharen (1996) states:

HBCUs must use their institutional power to make it possible for the powerless to seize the freedom that comes from being chosen. . . Choosing the unchosen must come from individuals rather than institutions. . . We must make sure every member of the community is welcomed in the community . . . We must make sure that someone is joyfully awaiting every infant. (p. 54)

Beyond universal education for all, HBCUs continue to serve as educational citadels and cultural repositories for the African-American community, as well as centers for social and political development of students, faculty, and communities, and the regions and states in which they are located (Sims, 1994). Although HBCUs were established to serve the educational needs of African Americans, today they serve students from a wide range of cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. HBCUs not only have racially diverse student populations but many also have a racially diverse faculty and administration. With respect to their enrollment and staff, HBCUs are presently more racially desegregated than historically White institutions (Roebuck & Murty, 1993).

Given the limited research on the significance of HBCUs in higher education, Verharen (1996) proposes a renewed charge for HBCUs in their second century. He states:

HBCUs are strong enough to accept their higher mission: to design models that make radical departures from mainstream education. The radical nature of the problems faced by members of communities that make the existence of HBCUs possible justifies these new models. (p. 53)

Whether it is at an HBCU or a predominantly White institution, the mission of educational institutions is to educate the people, to prepare promising members of society to contribute to society in manners that will provide the well-being of the societyî (Brown, 1996, p. 59). HBCUs lead such efforts and challenge other institutions to fulfill similar promise. But, this mission necessitates leaders who have a moral compass to lead the way (Gordon, 2000).

Racial Uplift and African-American Women's Involvement

In the history of African Americans, many men and women emerged as leadership figures to fight against decades of oppression and injustices that people of color encountered in American society. Black communities organized for change as a force to transform race relations in America (Gordon, 2000; Morris, 1984). A number of historical figures (i.e., Booker T. Washington, Marcus Garvey, Adam Clayton Powell, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., etc.) are associated with a variety of movements about civil rights, racial solidarity and Black nationalism. Historical accounts too often excluded the contributions of African-American women in the social movements. Although the contributions of African-American women sometimes went unrecorded, significant progress has been made highlighting the contributions and leadership of African-American women (Hine, 1994) in these movements.

When communities were segregated by race, many African-American women embraced and accepted the social responsibility of ensuring that African-American children had the necessary tools to be successful in a world that would deny them a quality of life (Jean-Marie, James, & Bynum, 2006). Valverdeís (2003) interviews exploring the perspectives of young African-American men in White programs of study conclude that their strong character building was informed by their early life experiences:

A major character-forming experience for these African-American higher education leaders was their involvement in the Civil Rights Movement during the 1960s. Their early values and hopes nurtured by family, church, and teachers as role models were reinforced by leaders of the Civil Rights Movement. (p. 77)

Similarly, African-American women's characters were also informed by the Civil Rights Movement. Many became deeply involved in social change activities and were committed to the ideals of equality and democracy (Hine, 1994; Jean-Marie, 2005; Robnett, 1997; Valverde, 2003). When educational institutions provided inferior equipment and inadequate facilities, many African-American women took the initiatives to make up the difference. They used their creativity and knowledge of the world, inside and outside formal educational processes, to mentor African Americans in their communities so that they can be successful, educated and respected (Jean-Marie, 2005; Jean-Marie, James, & Bynum, 2006). Young African Americans did not only learn the standard curriculum, but they were taught community ethics, racial pride and how to protect themselves from the potential brutality that await them in a White-dominated society (Jean-Marie, 2005; Jean-Marie, James, & Bynum, 2006).

Not only do African-American women as teachers and mothering (Loder, 2005a) in their communities play a significant role in the lives of young people, many do so in leadership roles too. African-American women have gained more opportunities to be appointed leadership roles in higher education institu-

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tions. Lee and McKerrow (2005) assert there is a renewed interest in social justice and many women in leadership are advancing its causes:

As women achieve positions of influence and participate in policy decisions, they have opportunities to open up access to knowledge and resources to those with less power. Women from all levels of the social hierarchy, not just those with official status positions, have a role in social justice leadership. As social justice leaders, women work to alter the undemocratic culture and structure of institutions and society, improving the lives of those who have been marginalized or oppressed. (p. 1)

As African-American women make gains in educational attainment and inroads into professions and occupations previously dominated by Euro-American women (Mullings, 1997; Schiller, 2000) and men, they continue to have an impact on the representation of African-American women of all echelons. Their entry into these traditional settings, however, will present challenges— isolation, exclusion from informal networks, and systemic discrimination (Glazer-Ramo, 2001). Like their predecessors (i.e., Sojourner Truth, Anna Julia Cooper, Harriet Tubman, Ella Baker, Fannie Lou Hamer, etc.) commitment to social justice and resilience to thrive in the face of adversities, these African-American women leaders are vigilant in their struggle for justice. Their predecessors believed the cause was as equally important for them and generations to come:

Just as Frances Harper (1866) declared in her speech, "We are all bound up together: 'Born of a race whose inheritances has been outraged and wrong, most of my life had been spent in battling those wrongs' and Sojourner Truth's famous "Ain't I a Woman?" speech given at the Women's Rights Convention Center, so too do African-American women leaders continue the fight for social justice. How they fulfill that commitment is through their leadership practices. (Jean-Marie, 2005)

The unfinished journey towards justice for all continues, as possible exemplary models appear in the leadership practices, behaviors and attitudes of contemporary African-American female leaders. These women leaders advance social justice, espouse the belief that democracy matters and exemplify the torchbearers of democratic ideals.

Social Justice Leadership: Is There a Definition for It?

The discourse of social justice and leadership are inextricably linked, which calls to question whether a definition for social justice leadership exists. Some research (see Bogotch, 2005) insists that social justice has no one specific meaning. Rather, "its multiple a posteriori meanings emerge[d] differently from experiences and contexts" (p. 7). Bogotch (2005) zeros in on a key component of social justice by stating that "social justice, like education, is a deliberate intervention that requires the moral use of power" (p. 2) and concludes that it is "both much more than what we currently call democratic schooling and community education, and much

less than what we hold out as the ideals of progressing toward a just and democratic society and a new humanity worldwide (p. 8). Furman and Shields (2005) argue the need for social justice to encompass education that is not only just, democratic, emphatic, and optimistic, but also academically excellent (As cited in Firestone & Riehl, 2005, p. 123).

While a review of the literature on leadership and/or social justice did not present a clear definition of social justice, there is a general framework for delineating social justice leadership. Lee and McKerrow (2005) offer such framework in two dimensions. First, social justice is defined not only by what it is but also by what it is not, namely injustice. By seeking justice, we anticipate the ideal. By questioning injustice, we approach it. Integrating both, we achieve it (p. 1). The second dimension focuses on the practice of social justice:

Individuals for social justice seek to challenge political, economic and social structures that privilege some and disadvantage others. They challenge unequal power relationships based on gender, social class, race, ethnicity, religion, disability, sexual orientation, language, and other systems of oppression.

... Theory and practice, advocacy and action to counter injustice have emerged from civil rights, feminist, postmodern, critical, multicultural, queer, postcolonial, and other movements. Grounded in these movements, social justice leaders strive for critique rather than conformity, compassion rather than competition, democracy rather than bureaucracy, polyphony rather than silencing, inclusion rather than exclusion, liberation rather than domination, action for change rather than inaction that preserves inequity. (p. 1-2)

Lee and McKerrow's (2005) framework postulates the necessary acts for which leaders committed to social justice ought to engage in. As a focus on who and a specific setting in which social justice leadership is practiced, three African-American female administrators in HBCUs provide a snapshot view of stories of justice and racial uplift. These three women leaders, who are discussed more in depth in the findings section, are actively involved in policy decision-making that impact the education of African Americans at their universities. According to Bakhtin (1981), they exercise response-ability as village elders. They become organic intellectuals of and for the community (Gramsci as cited in Forgacs, 2000). The experiences of African-American female leaders in HBCUs provide a particular scope of the challenges, struggles and successes they experience.

Methodology

Capturing the early life experiences of three African-American women during the 1960s and 1970s in this study give insights on how their experiences influenced their roles as leaders in HBCUs. This study explores the imprint of social change on women's life stories (Heilburn, 1998; Loder, 2005b). The focus of the study was to create a space for African-American females to talk about their roles as educators, agency, and

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administrators (Jean-Marie, 2005). Cooper (1995) asserts that stories speak of the power of narratives in human lives. The life stories of the participants' interpretations of leadership practices reveal how they are experts and authors of their own lives.

The qualitative approach used was narrative research (Casey, 1995-1996; Reissman, 1993). The participants' life stories described the diversity of their experiences providing an opportunity to hear voices rarely heard within the public domain (Benjamin, 1997; Fonow & Cook, 1991; Gilligan, 1982; Gluck & Pataia, 1992; Reinhartz, 1992). With a purposeful selection of African-American female administrators in HBCUs in one southeastern state, the data collected for use in this study were first obtained by Jean-Marie (2002) for her dissertation research on 12 African-American female leaders (i.e., college presidents, deans, academic and vice-chancellors, etc.). Thematic issues explored in the study included identity, the impact of racism and sexism reflected and reinforces in historically Black and White institutions, communal value, and spiritual/religious, economic, and political discourses in HBCUs.

For the purpose of this discussion, the focus is on three participants whose leadership practices advance social justice for African Americans who have limited opportunities to pursue higher education. The findings are consistent with and representative of the major themes found in the original study. Pseudonyms are used to identify participants to minimize disclosure of information about individual lives.

The primary data collection procedure included open-ended and semi-structured interviews. Supplementary sources included field notes and a review of documents. The element of structure from the conceptual framework and the open-ended dimension allowed for the mining of new data and openness to fresh observations and new concepts. Data were collected over a period of four months. The use of a combination of interviewing, anecdotal field-notes, and document analysis allowed for validation and cross-checking of findings (Patton, 1998).

Participants' narratives provide a glimpse of how African-American female leaders from a common social location (Collins, 2000) enact a social justice leadership that is cognizant of the potential dropout rates experienced by many African-American students when they enter institutions of higher education. As these stories were shared, elements of the participants' backgrounds (education, experiences, church, and family) that informed their identities were considered.

Findings

The findings in this study on African-American female leaders in HBCUs represent the kind of advocacy and practice associated with social justice and political projects necessary in making and sustaining the concept of community/ racial uplift. The participants' belief and commitment to a quality education were more than a motto; they are realized in the experiences they provided for every student admitted to their universities. Their interest in students' success began with developing an authentic relationship between administrator and student. Recog-

nizing that they were in a position to make a difference, the leaders were guided by a vision for young African Americans which focused on developing students' talents and gifts to become contributors to their community and society.

These African-American leaders were ordinary women responding to their calling through their work inside and outside of educational institutions. The following is an analysis of intricately woven stories of the lives of three female leaders. Echoing the sentiment of the researcher of this study, Philips (1997) shares what she recalled about her work on Black women professors:

. . . As I listened to them, it seemed that they were having a conversation with one another . . . that this conversation was taking place across time (history), across individually located perspectives and across historically located social experiences. (p. 303)

A glimpse into the life experiences of these women administrators reveals that these women were having a conversation with one another about education and the plight of the African-American community. Findings are presented under various themes that emerged from the data.

I Carry the History of My Experience

The first finding is the common historical background of the participants being born and raised during the most conservative political and economic eras of segregation to desegregation which have shaped the perspectives of the participants. As Loder (2005b) asserts, inequality was a way of life for Blacks during the turbulent years of the pre- and post-Civil Rights Movement.

Gwendolyn Smith was a dean in the school of nursing at her institution. Smith, born and raised in North Carolina, pursued her studies in nursing at both historically Black and White institutions. The oldest of the three female leaders, her life story reflected what American society was like during segregation. The baby of six, she lived on an 84 acre farm that her father owned, unusual for African Americans during her childhood years. Her life story depicted the importance of attaining an education (i.e., character building, overcoming hardships, and believing in self):

We went to a three-room school house with teachers who had nothing but our future at point. Everything they did was in the vein of telling us we have to make it. You cannot live the way we have lived and these are the things that you have to do to make it . . . They [her teachers] took the old books that the school systems gave us and taught us like you would never believe.

Smith not only recalled the supportive school teachers, she also talked about the important influence her religious parents had on her. Throughout Smith's description of growing up in the south, she did not conjure up a traumatized segregated experience.

Similar to Smith, Veronica Murphy was born and raised in Florida and, while

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growing up, both of her parents were instructors at an HBCU. Her identification with and analysis of the forces in her life that have influenced her were borne out of that experience with her parents. She also described her college experience and upbringing as one in which she was surrounded by highly educated individuals such as her grandfather who was one of three Black physicians in her southern town.

Murphy, the 10th and first female president of a private HBCU, earned a degree in early childhood education at a historically Black institution. She obtained her graduate degrees in curriculum development and educational administration at historically White institutions. The analytical thread woven into my interview with her referenced the role that HBCUs played in her child- and adulthood years. She stated:

Back in the day, those colleges functioned a lot like small towns and municipalities. There was an unwritten and unspoken commitment in the college community to ensure that the kids in the college community had access to everything that everybody in the world did. The underlying philosophy was that, We were as good as everybody else.

The dominant message she received from her family and community was that Education was a given! We never talked about if I were going to college. The discussion was where you were going to go. The strong messages about the value of education and family support helped these African-American women, like many in the community to overcome discrimination, racism and sexism they encountered in their educational and professional pursuits.

Born in the same era as Smith and Murphy, Keenya Royster, a vice chancellor for student affairs, was a native of Virginia. She earned her graduate and undergraduate degrees in business administration from HBCUs. Her primary experiences were from the business sector and she later transitioned to higher education, what she called, my second career. Her use of concise yet passionate language communicated the sense that her ideas were carefully reasoned. Royster recounted her decision to be among the many who integrated public schools after the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling.

I was in 8th grade in 1963 when they [school officials] integrated the school system in Hampton, Virginia. My parents said to me, Yes, you have a choice about whether you should go to the all Black high school or help integrate this White high school. It was really no choice. It was something I had to do.

Faced with the difficult decision to integrate public schools, Royster concluded, That's what the struggle was all about. From that day forward, Royster became an advocate for social justice. For all these women, the plight of the African-American community was a social responsibility they did not/could not abandon; it was imperative that they engaged in oppositional discourses to challenge the status quo of that time period.

Social Justice Advocacy Borne Out of Personal and Professional Struggles

A second finding focuses on how the African-American women's experiences during the 1960s and 1970s shaped their professional work at their universities. All three of the women talked about incidences of injustices that they directly or indirectly experienced in their personal and professional lives. President Murphy's path to fight inequities and injustices was carved out soon after graduating from college and started her 1st year of teaching:

It was the first year [city] had mass busing and I taught in an elementary school. It was set on a hill in the middle of an all-White neighborhood and they [school officials] bussed kids from the poorest section of [city] to one of the more affluent communities in [city]. It was a more unlikely match you could have made. Those [African-American] kids endured a horrendous and horrific year.

I was the youngest teacher on staff by 23 years and I was one of four African Americans. I watched what was happening to those kids who didn't have anyone to stand up for them. I then realized what happens to people who look like me but who didn't grow up charmed and have an advocate to address their injustices... It was at that point I realized there was a whole population of people that didn't have an advocate.

Witnessing the struggles of disadvantaged children in the African-American community, Murphy felt compelled to be the lonesome voice and risked her job to challenge the daily inequities she witnessed. Despite her failed attempts to change the conditions of these students while a teacher at the school, she became more determined to be a voice for underrepresented children and have done so throughout her years in public and higher education.

For Dean Smith, she experienced prejudice in her undergraduate nursing program. She spoke of an incidence between herself and the dean of the nursing program. She stated:

I remember in my senior year, [the dean] told one of my classmates that I was not going to make it. She told her, "You need to leave her alone. She is not going to make it." My classmate told me about her conversation with the dean. So I went to talk to the dean about that... I have been taught if things aren't right, you go see what's going on... While I'm over there talking to the dean, my mother was on the phone with the president of the college. I said to the dean, "I don't understand what you're saying. Why wouldn't I make it?" She sort of backed out of it and said, "Well, Ms [name] just because I don't like you doesn't mean that I'm not going to give you what you deserve." I said, "Well Ms [dean], just because I don't like you does not mean that I'm not going to make it." I did make it.

Smith's experience was a defining moment about mischaracterization and mistreatment of oppressed groups but more importantly, it was about confronting bigotry. It was common for African Americans to encounter professionals in educational settings who would discourage their efforts to achieve academically. As Smith stated, "learning how to deal with a lot of prejudices and biases that were

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pronounced in the South were lessons she remembered into her adulthood. At her alma mater, Smith later became a faculty member and the dean of nursing. In defiance to subordinate position forced upon African Americans by the larger White society during the pre- and post-Civil Rights Movement, Smith made a commitment to always guide students with identifying their goals and provide the necessary resources (i.e., one-on-one tutoring, scholarships) for them to achieve success. She explained, "I want to show you where that came from. It went back to my former dean who said to me years ago, 'You're not going to make it. I wanted to make sure that I in no way made students feel that I thought less of them.'"

Not only did personal tribulations of the African-American leaders influence their social justice advocacy but they also watched and observed their parents and family members' stance on injustices. These experiences also had a tremendous impact on them. Murphy called her mother and grandmother "crusaders who fought a lot of causes and engaged me primarily to help fight those causes." Royster observed her father's tenacity to enlist in the Marine Corp. She stated:

At that time in 1942, the Marine Corp was segregated and there were few African Americans enlisted. But my father persisted. . . They endured a lot as African-American marines, but it was worth it because they felt that they were part of something bigger than that. That sense of social justice influenced me.

In addition to personal and family injustices these women experienced, they also experience challenges (i.e., racism and sexism) in their professional settings. This was a common refrain among many of the participants in the larger study on African-American women administrators. For Vice Chancellor Royster, who worked in both the business sector and higher education, she encountered sexist and racist experiences among Blacks and Whites. In sharing her experiences as an administrator, she talked about some of the challenges she has had to overcome:

As a Black woman trying to lead in an environment that is historically dominated by men, you learn quickly that negotiating with them is the best approach. And, sometimes you don't get the same recognition that a man does. It makes you mad. But, you figure out a way to press on. . . Sexism is real. Racism is real. I've experience that. Some of it is subtle. Some of it is overt. But, I have tried to learn from it and process it in constructive ways, so that I wouldn't let it bruise me so much that I couldn't go on.

When asked to elaborate on her life struggles, President Murphy responded:

You know I didn't talk about those because a lot of times you can focus on the negative and lose sight of the positive. In the overall scheme of things, I encountered struggles that related to gender, race, economics, and with being a single parent. But when I look back right now, if I were to die today, I would be very happy with the life that I have had. . . I really am not one to focus on the negative. I much prefer to focus on what is good and what is possible.

Dean Smith also talked about her challenges she faced because of her race. All three women confronted prejudices and resistance during the transitional years of

integration, and encountered racists and sexists demarcations within historically black and white institutions (i.e., as students and professionals). They credit these experiences for igniting their commitment to social justice and advocacy for all children.

***Rebellious Spirits and Acts of Protest:
Helping the “Unwelcomed” Students Achieve***

Figuratively speaking, the rebellious spirits and acts of protest these leaders engaged in to help students achieve success (i.e., personally and academically) at their institution is a third finding. Upon earning her doctorate degree and transitioning to higher education, President Murphy became involved in policy decisions that had an impact on students’ educational experience. Although a major undertaking and had resistance from her governing board and staff, Murphy developed a plan to attract African-American students who ordinarily would not be admitted to her private university or any other higher education institution (i.e., low SAT scores and grade point average; limited to no financial resources). Her approach was:

Next year, we’re going to start what we’re calling a pilot program and admit about 150 of our freshmen class. They will be kids who may not have good SAT scores or have all the credentials, but somebody in that community whether it is in the school or the church says, “This is a kid to take a chance on. Trust me. Take a chance on this kid.” We are going to admit this kid and introduce them to a curriculum that is outside the box. . . We are going to prove that by staying close to the mission—that is, if you provide access to education for kids, SAT scores mean absolutely nothing. It is potential that makes a difference. That is the real predictor of how well kids are going to succeed.

Garnering the support of the local community, schools, and churches, she identified and admitted 150 students who ordinarily would not have attended college. Understanding that these students would confront numerous challenges to complete their academic studies, she developed a five-year program that included year-round academic support, remedial classes, financial resources, and mentoring for the students she admitted. This act of tenacity illuminated her commitment to social justice advocacy which she started in her early teaching career. Only this time, she was in a leadership position to implement educational programs for disadvantaged African Americans. She asserted, “We’re going to take a kid who nobody else thinks they ought to take a chance on except some momma, some daddy, some preacher, some teacher or some faculty member. We’re going to educate them.” President Murphy has taken the lead in guiding her university and constituents to a level where social inequities are addressed and access to education for all students became a priority.

Royster’s advocacy continued into her professional career in the business sector and into her career in higher education. Keenly aware of the challenges her university students faced, she discussed the kind of students who attended her institution:

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These young people have tremendous potential; but they don't have the same resources available to them, not now and certainly not in the last 18 years and probably not the next 18 years going forward. And they come with some unique, I don't even call them handicaps, but they haven't had the same opportunities in the educational system. They are predominantly African Americans; so I want them to come into our institution. I want to take these diamonds in the rough and I want them to shine with brilliance when they leave. I want them to have confidence that they can do it.

To accomplish this undertaking, she did not rely on her solitary efforts; instead, she became involved in student affairs, challenged her staff, partnered with her constituents to move the university forward for the purpose and the benefits of students. She practiced this by getting members of her university, from top to bottom, to focus on excellence:

Whether it's in the classroom or in the Vice Chancellor's job or the Chancellor's job or the house keeper's job, everybody's got to be about excellence. If we are all about excellence then we'll all succeed. We'll get more money, we'll get more students. And I believe in taking care of people at the bottom. I believe in social justice. So I don't want to neglect anybody in the community.

We can't make it without the grounds keepers. We can't make it without the house keepers. The people in the cafeteria are just as important as the Chancellor because they're the ones that are cooking that food. And they are the ones that are delivering the food. And if they don't do that with the right applause, and smile, then our young people aren't so pleased with it.

It was the collective efforts of many that contributed to the development of students. If everyone is not committed to those efforts, the university and the [African-American] community will not thrive. Therefore, affirming everyone in their work created a value system that said everybody was important. As stated by Royster, "As we move up in this pyramid and go down, we're all in it together." Everybody serves a function in this business—even the cooks.

Dean Smith also had a similar leadership philosophy. Throughout her professional life, Smith established herself as a practitioner in the health profession. She became a role model to students and created an environment in her nursing program where every student can excel in their academic studies. When the opportunity was presented for her to become dean of her alma mater, she hesitated. Despite her reluctance, she accepted the appointment to become dean; as a result, the nursing program experienced tremendous success under her leadership. She helped establish a physical and occupational therapy program in addition to securing millions in grant money. The program became involved in outreach programs that included a health care center in public housing to serve those with needs. In addition to these programs' success, the most important one was the impact Smith had on students:

The students keep me grounded. That is what I'm here for and that is where I get my reward. For instance to admit a student into one of our health programs and my first

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assessment of that student is, 'You are going to have a hard time because you don't have the background skills.' Then to start working with that student and to see that student become one of the best health care providers that we've produced. That feels good to me.

Speaking proudly of her students, Smith expressed a firm commitment to help students succeed. As she acknowledged, 'My students at this university are students that I know most other universities would not touch. Not because they don't have the ability because they do. But they [universities] have such high standards and just don't want to bother with these kinds of student.' She stated, the reasons students come to her university is 'because they know there is flexibility and a caring environment.' In her 12 years at this public HBCU, she developed a program that was rigorous but also embraced the challenges of a diverse population of students in the health sciences. The level of support and care that she provided were reminiscent of what her schoolteachers and parents provided during her years of public schooling. Echoing the sentiments of all the participants, Royster asserted, 'My job is to make sure that the playing field is levelled so that we have justice and equity.'

Leadership for Social Change and Community Uplift

The final finding is that all the participants articulated a leadership that is tied to social change, institutional reform, and structures and processes of power and influence—what the Civil Rights movement was about. Their involvement and ongoing interactions with students, staff, constituents at their institutions and community characterize a social and political activism that is reminiscent of leadership practices of their predecessors of the Civil Rights Movement. For President Murphy, she described her leadership characteristic as one that involves putting together a team of people of different strengths:

I've got to make sure I've got people working that do enjoy it and who are good at it. I am continuously encouraging others to think outside of the box. I think that I'm a leader that validates people's strengths and competencies.

Her expectations were based on high standards and quality education for students because anything less compromises the opportunities her university students seek. The ultimate goal was giving students the best education possible. Murphy held the highest ideal of education and believed 'all' students whether they have the means or not should be given the opportunity to succeed and become contributing members of society.

Drawing from her experience in the business sector, Royster approached her leadership practices through an economic mindset. Articulating her vision for her university, she asserted:

I'm interested in building confidence in young people . . . I want young people and myself to understand the business aspects of what we do because this is a business.

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The business is education. You have to understand the competitive forces out there in the environment. . . To be competitive, I've got to have first class products. I have to deliver services in a first-class way.

To deliver the goods, she placed value in collaborating with her colleagues, staff, and students. They were driven by success and as Royster claimed, "You have to be about excellence day in and out as partners in this whole enterprise." Speaking most passionately about her hopes for her students, Royster spoke in a forthright manner about the difficulties many of them experience. Through mentorship and academic preparation, she believed the "diamonds in the rough" can succeed in their pursuit of higher education.

In the closing moments of my interview with Dean Smith, she described her leadership role as one who is a servant leader. "If I cannot serve my students or serve this university or community, what good is it?" In her final remarks, she asserted, "I've come back to the place where I started so I can give something back." Although manifested in different ways, all three of the participants continued the struggle of African Americans to achieve freedom, equity, and equality. In theorizing about black leadership, Gordon (2000) purports:

In the quest for freedom, racial equality, civil and political rights, and economic and educational advancement, Black Americans, both during and after slavery, responded to the proposals and rhetoric of leaders drawn from their own ranks. (p. 1)

HBCUs lead such efforts and challenge other institutions to fulfill similar promise. This mission necessitates leaders who have a moral compass to lead the way. The participants in this analysis embody this kind of leadership.

Discussion of Findings

As presented in the findings, the participants spoke of a commitment to African Americans and the community that was borne out of their social justice advocacy. In accepting the responsibility to lead, they attached to that responsibility reflective inquiry and discourse on how to transform practices that hinder students from equitable access to education (Jean-Marie, James, & Bynum, 2006; Valverde, 2003). They articulated an ethic of care and support of students; they embodied the essence of a social justice leadership in an effort to not let the past be repeated. In their leadership roles (i.e., president, dean, and vice chancellor) at HBCUs, they have committed themselves to taking marginalized students to a level of academic and personal success. The imprint they wanted to leave on students was that they become academically competent in their professions, intellectually informed about social issues, culturally knowledgeable and socially attentive to their own community as well as to the larger society.

The participants also recognized their students were the hope and future of the African-American community; therefore its preservation rest upon them (Jean-

Marie, James, & Bynum, 2006; Verharen, 1996). When school systems provided inferior equipment and inadequate facilities, these African-American female leaders stepped in to make up the difference. They use their creativity and knowledge of the world, through the formal and informal educational processes, to show adolescents in their institutions that they can be successful, educated, and respected (Jean-Marie, James, & Bynum, 2006). With the culmination of their lived experiences and conscious awareness as African-American women who grew up in a segregated society, they are determined to impart knowledge, wisdom and critical stance that enable young African Americans to be agents of change.

Through a collective voice, African Americans in academic settings such as these female leaders give attention to discriminatory practices that emerge inside and outside academia. In so doing, they confront injustices and inequities (Lees & McKerrow, 2005). These women's leadership practices seek to advance social justice by challenging social and educational structures that have a direct impact on the African-American community.

The participants understand what they do as educators is important for the future of African-American students. The collective mission of these women is to provide students with the necessary tools to succeed academically, emotionally, and socially in the dominant society. There appears to be a strong correlation between the participants lived experiences growing up in the segregated South during Jim Crow, and their belief in education as liberation that is endemic. They are concerned about the lack of preparation and the academic achievement of many African-American students in public schools and universities.

A careful analysis of the dissonance associated with the home and school environment of African-American students has led to the resurgence of a political and social discourse reminiscent of the past. The strategic interventions advocated by the participants include: caring, nurturing, and sensitivity to the experiences of their students, and the belief that given the proper support African-American students can achieve academic success. The participants are the bridge between school and community.

The formal leadership role of the women administrators at HBCUs was one of considerable visibility. These administrators were careful to point out that without HBCUs many of their students would not be considered worthy of a college education. These professionals actively engaged in academic environments, and viewed education as one of the most important assets for the economic success and survival of African-Americans.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Historically, HBCUs were established to challenge the general practice of exclusion based on discriminatory policies that explicitly or implicitly kept many from having access to education. Higher education institutions, whether histori-

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cally Black or White institutions are challenged to be more inclusive of individuals of diverse racial, ethnic, class, and gender background. The current state of increased standardization broadens the gap of who and who cannot pursue higher education. Nationally, there is an increase in admission standards (i.e., higher SAT scores, grade point average, class ranking, school involvement, etc.) and in the financial cost to attend college. Budgetary cuts in federal funding for universities and colleges exacerbate students' opportunity to secure financial and educational resources. What alternative models and equitable distribution of financial resources should be available so that all capable individuals have an equal start to pursue higher learning? These issues are important considerations for universities that aim to educate the mass. In so doing, higher education institutions will guard against what Verharen (1996) cautions—the power of professionals of all sorts, not merely politicians, to do harm has grown exponentially (p. 48). To combat that, he asserts, "The populace must be more educated to defend itself against professional expertise, even to the point that a college education has become the right of every competent citizen" (p. 48). If only a few have access to quality education and increased knowledge, will an egalitarian republic tolerate this kind of elitism (Verharen, 1996)?

While higher education institutions are challenged to be inclusive in their admission policies and provide educational resources to help students achieve academically, educational leaders also have a role to play in ensuring that education is accessible for all. Lee and McKerrow (2005) observe that over the last few years, there has been a renewed interest in social justice. However, this ideal cannot be in theory only. It needs to be pursued with actions that deconstruct institutional practices and structures that oppress people. As leadership programs prepare new leaders, men and women of all echelons, the discourse of social justice is an important objective in the curriculum of preparation programs. Leadership preparation programs have an opportunity to shape the quality of leaders they produce for the good of society.

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