

African American Women Faculty in the Historically White University: Learning to Negotiate the Academy

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Abstract: African American women faculty continue to encounter obstacles and challenges to developing successful careers at historically White, research intensive universities. This research project addresses how successful African American women faculty learn to negotiate the academic responsibilities of research, teaching and service. Study participants report that learning from previous experiences in the family, community and other work environments, mentoring and other communal relationships are significant in negotiating their academic duties.

Women professors in the academic workplace have made significant achievements within colleges and universities in the United States and abroad. Their presence in the “ivory tower” has incited a hope and commitment to scholarship and teaching that has had a tremendous impact on the lives of women and minority students and policies and initiatives developed to foster diversity among other achievements. For the past forty years, academia has witnessed a rise in the number of tenured and non-tenured female faculty, in addition to witnessing the demand for increased representation in disciplines that have been exclusionary, such as the hard sciences and business. However, in spite of their rise in numbers over time and the accomplishments that have been made, academic women continue to face obstacles and barriers to professional success on both individual and structural levels.

The purpose of this roundtable discussion is to share and discuss a research study on the career development experiences of successful African American women faculty at a historically, White university in the Southeastern U.S. Through in-depth, qualitative interviews with eleven, tenured African American women faculty across the disciplines at a major research university, this project sought to contribute to the small, but expanding body of literature on African American women faculty in the academy through exploring their career development across the lifespan, the impact of race and gender on the career, and how the women learned to negotiate their academic career demands. For the purpose of the discussion, roundtable participants and I will engage the third research area of learning to negotiate academic career responsibilities.

For the women in this study, learning to negotiate primary academic responsibilities involves mentoring, which also includes creating and building Black faculty communities, and using knowledge gained from previous work and non-work related experiences. The field of adult education is replete with literature on mentoring (Daloz, 1986; Darwin, 2000; Hansman, 2000; Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2004) and the significance of mentoring to facilitate learning in variety of contexts. This is consistent with the finding in the current study in that faculty mentoring was a significant contributor for the participants in terms of learning what it takes to be successful. From learning the academic landscape to awareness of the different journals to submit specific work to, mentors serve in a number of capacities for the participants. All of the women in

this study spoke to faculty support and mentoring as absolutely critical to academic career success and that it was in these relationships that they learned the intricacies of negotiating the academic career.

This study also found that the women's previous work experiences were additional factors in terms of learning to successfully negotiate their academic responsibilities. In turn, the women in this study were able to use those previous experiences as contributors to learning the ropes and thrive in the academy. For example, a majority of the women had some type of teaching or pre-professional experiences that were significant aspects of their successful career development. In addition to workplace learning, Inman (1998) reminds us that the knowledge gained outside of women's formal workplace settings is often a key factor in their success. With regards to my study, it is important to note, for example, that lessons learned in the home and community about who or what they could be professionally, transferred into adulthood and is consistent with the significance of examining learning within a sociocultural context (Alfred, 2003). In sum, it is the factors highlighted above that were significant to understanding how African American women faculty "learn the ropes" so as to help facilitate successful careers.

As such, the questions guiding this roundtable discussion include: 1.) What types of learning do academics engage in as they seek to negotiate their work responsibilities? 2.) What are the various tools and strategies do academics use to aid in facilitating successful academic careers? 3.) How do the realities of race/ethnicity, gender, class, and the like impact learning across the academic career? It is my hope that this roundtable discussion will provide a space for attendees to reflect on the strategies and tools they use to assist them in facilitating successful careers as educators and/or researchers. I anticipate this session will generate a lively discussion and that African American and other underrepresented adult educators in the academy will have the opportunity to discuss critical issues that have impacted and shaped their academic careers over time.

References

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