University Policies that Increase and/or Decrease Access for African-American Women Seeking Advanced Degrees

Vannetta Bailey-Iddrisu
Florida International University, USA

Abstract: The policies of most universities show a lack of dedication in addressing the needs of their non-traditional graduate students, particularly African-American women seeking advanced degrees. As African-American women return to the academy to pursue doctoral degrees, universities must address the issues facing women in general and African-American women in particular.

Black women's lives are neither fixed nor absolute but, rather, are dependent on the socio-historical context and the social phenomenon under consideration (King, 1995). African-American scholars as well as some Euro-American scholars have suggested that White women have benefited greatly from their position. McIntosh suggested that even though White women have been oppressed, they have also had privileges that come with being White in America (McIntosh, 1995). Conversely, because of their positionality, African-American women have not had the same opportunities as their White female counterparts. Moreover, while African-American men have suffered greatly, the unit analysis around race, generally speaking, includes their voice, while often silencing or omitting the voices of African-American women. Hence, some Euro-American feminists and many African-American scholars have suggested that African-American women live with the double jeopardy of racial and gender oppression. The double-jeopardy that African-American women encounter in terms of race and sex is viewed by some Black feminists as a reason for conducting research specifically on Black women and their role contributions to American society (Brown, 2001).

From primary school through higher education, the lives of Black women are touched either overtly or covertly by racism and sexism. The history of Black women's education documents their path as one of constant struggle, confrontation, resistance, negotiation, and marginality (hooks, 1984; Johnson-Bailey, 2001). The notion that African-American women are an invisible group on the sidelines and that they can be easily combined with other groups is a convenient fiction that conceals their power and importance (Etter-Lewis, 1993). Moreover, the limited research on African-American women in higher education has suffered from scholarly disinterest and been filtered through perspectives that are androcentric and/or ethnocentric (Brown, 2001; Howard-Vital, 1989).

The policies of local universities, both private and public, show a lack of dedication in addressing the needs of their nontraditional graduate students who are classified as nontraditional because they are usually female, over 30 years in age and a member of an ethnic minority group. These policies address the needs of traditional students who are just out of high school, single, childless and for whom the university is their full-time commitment. There is a need to reform the university policies to meet the needs of the growing non-traditional student seeking an advanced degree. My research has lead me to classify students in three distinct categories: (a) the traditional student (male or female) who matriculates to undergraduate studies immediately following high school; (b) the traditional graduate student who is often a male student returning to college after spending some years working after his undergraduate studies; and (c) the non-traditional student who is usually an older female, single parent, and a member of a minority

9

group. Many African-American women have become a part of the growing trend of non-traditional students returning to the academy for an advanced degree. This paper seeks to examine how university policies serve to increase or decrease African-American women's access to higher education.

Confronting the Issues

There are many issues facing the academy in regards to African-American non-traditional female students. The issues of disenfranchisement of working women in pursuit of an advanced degree include such matters as race and gender issues, a hidden curriculum, and the power dynamics of academia and American corporate culture. Support systems become the major way of coping with these issues.

Racism and Gender

Racism and sexism, which structure American society, affect the educational experiences of Black women in many ways. Black women are thought to be intellectually and morally inferior because they are Black (Johnson-Bailey, 2001). Many of these women face a double sword of being female and African-American while trying to maneuver in the academy. Those who choose to engage in education do so with the understanding that it is not fair. These students follow two simple rules: first, they resist believing in the equity of the system; and second, they resist giving up their home cultures in order to participate fully in this new academic world (Johnson-Bailey, 2001). These African-American female students are part of the growing trend of what has been deemed the *non-traditional student*. The non-traditional student challenges the status quo that has typically been for those who are white, moneyed, male, heterosexual, and able-bodied (Tisdell, 1993). Most of these African-American female students face many obstacles that impede their entry and/ or success at the graduate level. Those obstacles include "age...despite the current trend ... childcare and conflicting work schedules" (St. Thomas Univ., 2000).

A Hidden Curriculum

Many African-American women feel that there is a hidden curriculum based on racist philosophies at most institutions of higher learning that serve to decrease their access. Often the feeling is that the academy does not understand or care to acknowledge that this hidden agenda does exist. Often this hidden agenda includes methods that affect Black women students by denying them access to opportunities that shape their academic careers (Johnson-Bailey, 2001). Aspects of the stated curriculum, textbooks, and institutional policies are unmistakable in their consistent message to minorities: (a) minorities are not included in the core subject areas; (b) minorities, if represented, are peripheral to the subject matter; and (c) minorities are not considered in nor do they benefit from institutional rules and policies. In addition, Black women are locked out of research and publishing opportunities, study groups, assistantships, and other funding opportunities. Black women students reported that they were discouraged and stifled in the higher education environment in specific ways: (a) they were ignored when they raised their hands; (b) they were interrupted when speaking; (c) their comments were disregarded; (d) they voluntarily remained silent out of fear, habit, or necessity; and (e) they were misadvised by professors; and (f) they were intentionally excluded from the student network (Johnson-Bailey, 1994). Discouragement often sets in when these women encounter other aspects of the hidden

10

curriculum. The strategies that these women use to cope with these types of hostility are silence, negotiation, and resistance (Johnson-Bailey, 1994).

Power Dynamics

Many of the African-American graduate students view these issues in academia as replications of the power dynamics of American corporate culture. Academia is often thought to be the one system that practices fairness, yet many of these women have found this not to be necessarily true. Adult education, as a field that claims to hold democratization as a core value, must examine the hidden curriculum that thwarts efforts to be inclusive and democratic. The power dynamics that are the manifestations of the politics of the academy convey a powerful message that is unheard or unacknowledged by most enfranchised students but seems obvious to minority students: (a) you do not belong, and you are not wanted; (b) if admitted, you will be treated unfairly, and different standards and different rules will be used; (c) you must find your own means of survival; and (d) your degree, if achieved, will be considered inferior or unearned. (Johnson-Bailey, 1994). These are some of the same messages that many of these women face at their respective places of employment. Many of them set out to pursue an advanced degree in hopes of finding advancement in their jobs or by making a desired career change. To have to face the same overt or covert mannerisms of sexism and racism can serve to deter or motivate them toward success in the academy.

Support Systems

In spite of these obstacles and messages reinforcing their disenfranchisement, many of these women find support within their own communities. In this regard, they have much in common with Black men and White women, as all were historically locked out of most arenas of higher education by custom or law (Johnson-Bailey, 1994). They develop coping mechanisms such as sharing notes and stresses, and serving as an outlet of emotional support for one another. Also, many of them are taking advantage of employer incentives in the form of tuition vouchers. Most of these female students are married with children and have tended to put others' needs ahead of their own. Now they are back in school and attempting to place this one need, school, center stage (Johnson-Bailey, 2001).

Implications

Increasingly, as African-American women return to the academy to pursue advanced degrees, the universities will have to address the issues facing women as a whole and African-American women in particular. The majority of African-American women returning for an advanced degree do so in hopes of gaining access to a better life and certainly a better job, but they realize that school advancement is not a guarantee of career advancement. They merely hope an advanced degree would help them with their careers, but are pessimistic because they do not perceive the world as being fair to Black women (Johnson-Bailey, 2001).

Education has longed been a tool used to gain access to power. It has been successfully used by the power holders (usually white, privileged males) in this counting to maintain their status quo. According to Tisdell (1993), higher education has a responsibility to society, not only to fulfill the traditional role of creating and disseminating knowledge but also to contribute to creating a more equitable and just society. Educating nontraditional students is one way to expand this democratic ideal, including adhering to the objectives of (a) responding to social change; (b) constructing problem centered educational programs; (c) educating for the social and

11

cultural consciousness of its clientele; (d) training and further educating the educationally disadvantaged; (e) developing the understanding of adult educators to include the needs of disfranchised and culturally diverse adult learners; and (f) clarifying methodologies to support educational programs at the community level. The modern university has the responsibility to make education available to the adult minority population. In order to function effectively in their domain, adult educators must determine where the individual fits into the system, where biography meets structure, what the role of the university is in clarifying this relationship, and how to develop methods of delivery which benefit the adult learner's needs outside of, as well as within, the mainstream population (Daniel & Daniel, 1990).

In order for there to be a change in how universities meet the needs of their growing African American female graduate student population, many of them will have to begin to review their current policies and reform them by including women in the committees that set the policies. As students and practitioners, we must negotiate for a new educational structure that does not reproduce the existing system. This commitment requires active involvement in all aspects of our academic settings. Instructors must be aware of students' networks and must analyze how their actions as teachers influence those interactions. We can reach beyond the established barriers, whether physical, psychological, or social, by realizing why and by whom they were established (Johnson-Bailey, 1994).

Summary

Many university policies serve to increase or decrease access for African-American women pursuing an advanced degree. Many of these universities are beginning to address those issues of access as their student populations increase based on the growing number of African-American women who are enrolling in the graduate and post-graduate programs they offer. The literature shows that there are many changes taking place at universities across the country. Viewing Black women as a separate research group, apart from the category of women and Blacks, widens the agenda simultaneously. Viewing Black women as a separate entity or including issues of race, gender, class, and color, does not crowd or dilute the research agenda nor does it skew the focus from Blacks, women, or Whites. It merely enriches the research picture.

References

Brown, A H.. (2001). African-American Women of Inspiration. In *Making space: Merging theory and practice in adult education* (pp. 213-226). Westport, Connecticut: Bergin & Garvey.

Collison, M. (1999, May 27) Race women stepping forward. *Blacks in Higher Education,* 24-9.

Daniel, P. T., & Daniel, V. A. (1990). Education as a Social Agent: One University's Answer to a Multiethnic Graduate Adult Population. In *Adult education in a multicultural society* (pp. 147-162). London/New York: Routledge.

Etter-Lewis, G. (1993). *My soul is my own: Oral narratives of African-American women in the professions.* New York: Routledge.

Etter-Lewis, G. (1991Spr./Sum.) Breaking the ice: African-American women in higher Education. *Women's Studies Quarterly,* 154-64.

Gordon, D.J. (1999). African-American women in higher education: Barriers African-American women overcome in achieving the ultimate degree (Doctoral Degrees). (Doctoral Dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 1999) Dissertation Abstracts

12

International, 60,1038.

Hamilton, A.H. (1995). Perceptions and experiences of African-American professional Women holding doctoral degrees: A participatory study (Women professionals) Dissertation Abstracts International, 58,1198.

hooks, b. (1984). *From margin to center*. Boston: South End Press.

Howard-Vital, M.R. (1989). African American women in higher education: Struggling to gain identity. *Journal of Black Studies 20(2), 180-191.*

Johnson-Bailey, J. (1994). Making a way out of no way: An analysis of the educational narratives of entry black women with emphasis on issues of race, gender, class, and color. *University of Georgia: Dissertation Abstracts International, 55*(2681).

Johnson-Bailey, J. (2001). *Sistahs in college: Making a way out of no way.* Florida: Krieger Publishing.

Johnson, C. (1998). The effects of socialization on African-American women's decision to pursue a doctoral degree. (Doctoral Dissertation, University of Cincinnati, 1998) Dissertation Abstracts International, 59,1484.

King, D. K. (1995). Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of a Black Feminist Ideology. In B. Guy-Sheftall (Ed.), *Words of fire: An anthology of African American feminist thought,* 294-318. New York: The New Press

Kolodny, A. (2000,July 31) Women and higher education in the twenty-first century: Some Feminist and Global Perspectives. *NWSA Journal,* 12,130.

McIntosh, P. (1995). White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences through Work in Women's Studies. In M.L. Anderson & P.H. Collins (eds.), *Race, Class, and Gender: An Anthology,* 76-86. Boston: Wadsworth Publishing Co.

St.Thomas University. (2001) Student Handbook.

Thomas, M. (1999). Race, class, and gender: A study of the lived experiences of African-American, middle class female, single parents as they pursue academic degrees while residing in an urban community (single mothers, race, gender). (Doctoral Dissertation, State University of New York at Buffalo 1999). Dissertation Abstracts International, 60,0568.

Tisdell, E. (1993). Feminism and Adult Learning: Power, Pedagogy, and Praxis. In S. Merriam (Ed.), *An Update on Adult Learning,* 91-103. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.