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## Intersectionality in Leadership: Spotlighting the Experiences of Black Women DEI Leaders in Historically White Academic Institutions

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# The Experiences of Black Women Diversity Practitioners in Historically White Institutions

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# Chapter 11

## Intersectionality in Leadership: Spotlighting the Experiences of Black Women DEI Leaders in Historically White Academic Institutions

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### ABSTRACT

*Due to their multiple identities, Black women navigate gendered and racialized pathways to leadership in the US education industry. The journey for Black women in and en route to positions of academic leadership is even more nuanced and multiplicative. Little, though, is known about the effects of their intersecting identities and the structural barriers they encounter in this sphere. To deepen our communal understanding of this phenomenon, this chapter highlights the existing theories and research on the race-gender dyad in the context of academic leadership. Examining the individual and layered effects of race and gender on the professional realities of Black women leaders in higher education, the author spotlights the unique experiences of Black women DEI practitioners and leaders in historically White academic institutions. Given the numerous components at play when Black women lead in predominantly White institutions and settings, this chapter concludes by discussing opportunities to advance relevant research and practice in this arena.*

### INTRODUCTION

In 2010, Andrew Sherrill, Director of Education, Workforce, and Income Security, United States Government Accountability Office (GAO), provided testimony before the Joint Economic Committee, US Congress, on women's representation, pay, and characteristics in management positions. In his statement, he discussed "issues related to women in management. Although women's representation in the workforce is growing, there remains a need for information about the challenges women face in advancing their careers" (Sherrill, 2010, p. 1). In their more comprehensive report, the Honorable Carolyn B. Maloney,

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Chair of the Joint Economic Committee, United States Congress, and the Honorable John D. Dingell, House of Representatives, echoed similar sentiments. Based on their estimations,

*Female managers earned 81 cents for every dollar earned by male managers in 2007, compared to 79 cents in 2000. The estimated adjusted pay difference varied by industry sector, with female managers' earnings ranging from 78 cents to 87 cents for every dollar earned by male managers in 2007, depending on the industry sector. (US Government Accountability Office, 2010, p. 3).*

According to the Center for American Progress, women constitute a majority, at 50.8 percent, of the US population, earning roughly 57 percent of all undergraduate and 59 percent of all graduate degrees (Warner et al., 2018). Yet, although American women hold about 52 percent of all management- and professional-level jobs, they lag considerably behind men in leadership positions across every sector (Dezső et al., 2016; Goethals & Hoyt, 2017; Warner et al., 2018).

What is absent from this body of literature is the consideration of context. Contextual factors, or in this case, the intersection of race, gender, and leadership in traditionally patriarchal spaces, speak to the multiple identities of Black women in varying US educational settings (Evans, 2008; Johnson, 2021, 2022). Without accounting for context, a proper understanding of gender and racial inequities in education leadership remains elusive. An example of this is the consideration of the 'leadership divide.' Burke and Collins (2001) found that despite the notions of political correctness prevalent in North American corporations, the old boy network continues to thrive. The authors also discovered that male employees purposefully generate institutional impediments to freeze women's advancement. At a cultural level, the dominant male network fosters solidarity between males and sexualizes, threatens, marginalizes, controls, and divides females through organizational power structures (Burke & Collins, 2021). Specifically, Burke and Collins (2001) found that male managers tend to perceive the characteristics needed for managerial success as being associated with those generally attributed to men.

This leadership divide is particularly apparent in the field of education large-scale, a sphere in which women comprise a majority of the workforce (Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Hymowitz & Schellhardt, 1986). For Black women in the United States of America, another layer of incongruity lies in the fact that despite their relatively heightened levels of educational attainment (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2010; Helm, 2016), they generally find themselves at the lower tiers of the organizational pecking order (Betters-Reed & Moore, 1995; Davidson & Burke, 2000; Eagly et al., 2007). This incongruence, coupled with Burke and Collins' finding that male managers may not consider female characteristics essential for managerial success, can negatively influence institutional cultures, climates, and promotional decisions.

Historically, White institutions have worked on actively advancing their focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion practices in their respective organizations (El-Amin, 2022; Showunmi, 2021). Numerous organizations support and even feature diversity practitioners within their workforce. Despite this growing trend, still many traditionally White organizations and institutions still grapple with longstanding, systemic inequities stemming primarily from within. In the aftermath of the dual pandemics of COVID-19 and systemic racism (Johnson, 2023), it is vital for academic institutions to better understand Black women's experiences in and en route to leadership so that they may implement the needed changes to promote more diverse, inclusive, and equitable environments (Johnson, 2023). In light of this, it is increasingly essential to center Black women's paths large-scale – before, during, and after the noted pandemics – across all institutional sectors, public and private (e.g., academia, corporate America, healthcare, public service, etcetera). It is necessary to consider how these spaces converge and continue to impact their

## ***Intersectionality in Leadership***

ability to perform in institutional settings. Additional research in this capacity offers a prime opportunity for institutional leaders to look inward at organizational cultures, policies, and practices that directly impact the unique journeys and experiences of Black women leaders.

With this piece, I highlight the paths of Black women leaders in historically White academic institutions writ large, and more specifically, the experiences of Black women DEI practitioners in traditionally White institutions. In the sections below, I review the literature regarding the notions of identity and intersectionality manifested within the US higher educational leadership sphere. I argue that by considering the noted contextual dynamics (Hofstede, 2011), we can build upon what we know regarding the race-gender dyad and how it shapes and impacts the unique experiences of Black women in academic leadership (Johnson, 2021, 2022; Ryan et al., 2016; Sabharwal, 2013). Further, as underrepresented leaders, this piece advances the current knowledge base on intersectionality in academic leadership by spotlighting the journeys of Black women who lead in historically White institutional contexts (Breedon, 2021; Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007; Patton, 2010; Patton & Catching, 2009; West, 2019; Yakaboski & Donahoo, 2011).

## **BACKGROUND: INTERSECTIONALITY, BLACK WOMEN, AND ACADEMIC LEADERSHIP IN CONTEXT**

### **Intersectionality and Academic Leadership**

At the root of intersectionality is the premise that people live layered identities derived from social relations, history, and the operation of structured power (Crenshaw, 2013). Anthias (2013) notes that intersectionality approaches:

*Provide an important corrective to essentializing identity constructs that homogenize social categories. Although social divisions such as gender, ethnicity and class have been understood through the lens of intersectionality for at least two decades and have had a profound effect on feminist theories in particular, this approach has only recently acquired a more central place in academic and political life. Moreover, intersectionality has now become part of policy initiatives, which have begun to recognize multiple intersecting inequalities. (p. 3)*

In other words, “people are members of more than one category or social group and can simultaneously experience advantages and disadvantages related to those different social groups” (Richardson & Loubier, 2008, p. 143).

Despite the growing interest in the standing of Black women as higher educational leaders, there is a sparsity of literature focusing on their representation, notably at top leadership levels (e.g., academic professorships, faculty appointments, college deanships, and presidencies, to name a few). Instead, the research on Black women as administrators is primarily limited to the principalship (Peters, 2012; Reed, 2012) or cloaked in studies on “women and minorities” (see Agosto & Roland, 2018). Since the experiences of women or minority leaders are not homogeneous, we must consider all leaders’ distinctive, layered, and intersectional experiences. Various perspectives, including critical race theory (Capper, 2015; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, 2017), feminist theory (Blackmore, 2013), critical spirituality (Dantley, 2010), and multiculturalism (Santamaría & Santamaría, 2013), have been offered to expose the chal-

lenges faced by non-White leaders in higher education. Nonetheless, the theory and research focusing explicitly on Black women's atypical paths to leadership are still emergent. Unless scholars carefully examine the joint impacts of Black women's intersecting identities and structural barriers, implementing "good" policies for equitable leadership opportunities will remain underdeveloped.

Although gains are currently being made in diversifying the demographic profile of academic leaders in the United States of America, males, especially White males, continue to dominate this space (Kellerman et al., 2007; Kulik & Metz, 2015). Indeed, while inroads have been made in capturing and centering the experiences of women and minority leaders in education (Johnson, 2021, 2022), research on Black women in these positions remains grossly underrepresented in the literature. Attesting to the noted limits of extant research, Brown (2018) notes that the voices of many African American women academic leaders have been assigned to the voices of White women and African American men. Rarely are the voices of African American women leaders revealed to solely address the issues and challenges of recruitment and retention faced by African American women to higher-level academic ranks. Neither has credence nor validation been given to the impact of race, gender, and social politics on the recruitment and retention process of African American women in and en route to academic leadership roles.

As such, the significance of identity and intersectionality in leadership should not be underappreciated. As such, and with an emphasis on studies specific to Black women in senior academic leadership roles, this paper adds to the critical conversations around race, gender, and intersectionality, coalesced within the leadership sphere. Examining the individual and compounding effects of gender and race on Black women leaders in academia will undoubtedly lead to meaningful implications and recommendations for improving research, theory, law, policy, and practice in this arena.

## **Intersectionality, Black Women, and Academic Leadership**

Gipson et al. (2017), in their study of women in leadership and leadership styles, asserted that more work must be done to guarantee that those in and promoted to positions of academic leadership are aptly reflective of the generally purported commitment to pluralism and diversity. Yet, the growth and progression of Black women into what has characteristically been a male-dominated realm (Kellerman et al., 2007; Kulik & Metz, 2015) are chief components of the work to increase diversity in leadership. Implications, in this context, include examining the impact of perceptions and evaluations of persons, in leadership roles, with multiple stigmatized identities (Richardson & Loubier, 2008; Rosette et al., 2016; Sawyer et al., 2013).

Cho et al. (2009) conducted a study in which they utilized a critical democratic framework to analyze the perspectives of leaders from various academic institutions across North America. Three primary themes arose from participants' views on the new leader induction program: (1) the role of the leader in streamlining collaborations and partnerships among stakeholders (including faculty, school boards, schools, and communities), (2) the role of the leader in being an effective communicator and imparter of knowledge, and (3) the role of the leader in establishing and maintaining the importance of equity, diversity, and understanding within the community (pp. 125-126). Overwhelmingly, according to Cho et al. (2009), in the ongoing work to improve program philosophy, policy, and practice, there is a need to critically examine the process and outcome of mentorship and induction programs for incoming higher educational leaders (i.e., role models).

Leadership for social justice, according to Whang (2018), "emphasizes that leaders can make efforts to pursue equitable relationships of gender, class, race, culture, etcetera. Therefore, it stresses understanding

## ***Intersectionality in Leadership***

the “‘intersectionality’ of multiple biases” (p. 1). Balancing intersectionality (i.e., race and gender) with leadership politics requires advocates for justice to be responsive and not merely reactive. As a result, strengthening social equity in the pursuit and development of leaders remains a deliberate and enduring effort on the part of the justice-based leader. Using control groups, Hogg et al. (2001) and Hogg and van Knippenberg (2003) conducted several experiments examining the interconnection between social identity, group dynamics, and leadership. The authors investigated the relationships between group membership and leader endorsement to connect demographic differences with the notion of the glass ceiling. Further, they concluded that demographic minorities, Black women included, tend to find leading difficult in groups whose prototypes represent the demographic majority.

Using intersectionality theory, Moorosi et al. (2018) presented an analysis of Black women leaders’ constructions of success, “shaped by overcoming barriers of their own racialized and gendered histories to being in a position where they can lead in providing an education for their Black communities” (p. 152). Investigating successful leadership practices by three Black women, school principals in the United Kingdom, the United States, and South Africa, their work spotlighted “the overall shortage of literature on Black women in educational leadership, which leaves Black women’s experiences on the periphery even in contexts where they are in the majority” (p. 1). As such, the analyses suggested that:

*Black women leaders’ constructions of success are shaped by overcoming barriers of their own racialized and gendered histories to being in a position where they can lead in providing an education for their Black communities, where they are able to inspire a younger generation of women and to practice leadership that is inclusive, fair, and socially just. (Moorosi et al., 2018, p. 152)*

Reinforced here is the stance that in academia, closing the equity gap begins by acknowledging the increased qualifications of women, specifically women of color, to successfully serve in senior-level leadership roles and capacities (Gupton, 2009; Hill et al., 2016; Prime et al., 2009).

## **Intersectionality and Black Women Leaders in Historically White Academic Institutions**

Interestingly and overwhelmingly, the following recurrent terms and themes emerged when making the direct connection between Black women, education, leadership, theory, and research: identity, intersectionality, minorities in leadership, and women in leadership (Falagas et al., 2008, 2008; García-Peñalvo et al., 2010). A large portion of the journal articles accessed through the second search – with Black women leading in academia as the primary area of focus – included terms such as ‘labyrinth,’ ‘complexity,’ ‘identity,’ ‘intersectionality,’ ‘diversity,’ ‘advantage,’ ‘contextual’ moderators,’ ‘disadvantage,’ ‘contradictions,’ and ‘underrepresented’ (Falagas et al., 2008, 2008; García-Peñalvo et al., 2010). As noted at the outset of this piece, numerous scholars agree that research findings on women in leadership, while growing, have been slow-moving (Bruckmüller & Branscombe, 2010; DeWitt, 2016; Reagle & Rhue, 2011; Slaughter, 2015). Moreover, research on Black women in academic leadership has been considerably less progressive (Harper, 2018; O’Meara et al., 2011; Reeves & Guyot, 2017; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010).

Relevant to Black women leaders in historically White academic institutions is this: identity, equity, and intersectionality in leadership are all interconnected, identity directly impacts one’s social reality, which Wing (1997) refers to as the “multiplicative definition of self” (p. 31), and race, ethnicity, and



gender manifest as concurrent realities (Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Ngwainmbi, 2004). These factors – and their ensuing ramifications – are further exacerbated in academic leadership, a sphere in which the tenets of equity, diversity, and inclusion are purported. Ospina and Foldy (2009, 2010), in their studies examining the multiple dimensions of leadership, contended that advocacy, bridge-building, and leading for social change are all critical factors in reconstructing the scope of the leadership sphere. According to Day and Antonakis (2012), “issues regarding diversity and leadership have been highlighted as receiving relatively scarce attention in the literature... In particular, the diversity of leaders and followers in terms of culture, gender, race and ethnicity, or sexual orientation has been infrequently addressed” (p. 13). For Black women academic leaders, navigating these boundaries includes exploring the historical cultures, antecedents, and contexts of leadership from a social change perspective (Ospina & Foldy, 2009, 2010).

Wing (1997) and Wing (2003) posit that intersectionality is critical for thinking about how policies, practices, and discourses can be enhanced and transformed. The entrenched policy, legal, and social ramifications justify the need for the advancement of this and other relevant literature. This work begins with acknowledging the current disparities that subsist within the academic sphere. Identifying that this need exists at all (Dhamoon, 2011) is necessary to create new policies promoting equity, inclusion, and belonging in academic leadership. Current studies on the experiences of Black women leaders in higher education, in general, lack conceptual foci that would ultimately clarify matters informing academic policies, programs, practices, and procedures (Brock et al., 2019; Dreachslin & Hobby, 2008; Pratt-Clarke, 2010). The ensuing discourse includes, but is not limited to, the journeys of Black women as they ascend the ladder and assume executive-level positions in academia, especially in primarily White institutions and contexts.

Expanded emphasis on the social aspects of education and the development of academic leaders has meant more attention devoted to investigating the relationships between the school and the community (Ayers et al., 1998). Similarly, more attention is also being paid to the role of academia as a fundamental characteristic of the larger society (i.e., a microcosm). Consequently, increasing emphasis is now being placed on preparing apt leaders capable of understanding and operating from a justice-based perspective. To better understand the path, progression, successes, and barriers of Black women who lead in academic settings, stakeholders must begin by exploring the intersection of race, gender, and equity in leadership. In line with this, Dr. Crenshaw (2013) reminds stakeholders and allies alike that:

*Race, gender, and other identity categories are most often treated in mainstream liberal discourse as vestiges of bias or domination—that is, as intrinsically negative frameworks in which social power works to exclude or marginalize those who are different. According to this understanding, our liberatory objective should be to empty such categories of any social significance. Yet implicit in certain strands of feminist and racial liberation movements, for example, is the view that the social power in delineating difference need not be the power of domination; it can instead be the source of political empowerment and social reconstruction. (p. 1)*

Given the importance of contextual factors in the leadership sphere (Liden & Antonakis, 2009), the findings of studies of this nature can help increase the number and diversity of leaders in general, Black women leaders in particular.

Recognizing multiple identities and intersecting inequalities is a critical step toward improving equity- and equality-based policy initiatives relevant to Black women who lead in primarily White institutions (Belden, 2017). As such, leaders must establish and uphold cultures that are inclusive of all members of

## ***Intersectionality in Leadership***

the larger constituency. This charge is significant for those who do not reflect the single-track leadership standard. Infusing intersectionality methods provides stakeholders with the necessary tools to continue disentangling these categories (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2010). To extend this conversation, I spotlight the experiences of Black women leaders in historically White academic institutions across the four overarching themes below.

### **Highlighting the Experiences of Black Women Leaders in Historically White Academic Institutions**

#### **Theme #1: Negotiating Identity**

Scholars are paying more attention to how identities are best conceived and studied, the discursive resources drawn from identity construction processes, and how identities are embedded into power relations. Yet, little is known about how notions of “leadership” and “identity” are connected conceptually, in policy, or in practice. This is, undoubtedly, a significant gap in the study of leadership and leadership identity. According to Eubanks et al. (2012), closing this gap allows us to gain a better understanding of the actors involved in “leading” and “following” and how identity impacts the style that a leader adopts, influences the strategies used, and ultimately, how it shapes the leader’s use of power. To this end, Lord and Hall (2003) speak to the dynamics of leadership and issues connected to power imbalances. According to the authors, understanding leadership and power from a psychological perspective can better inform identity-based research and group dynamics in various contexts. In recent years, leader-specific frames have been re-examined through social categorization approaches that focus on people’s social identity and roles and the processes that impact perceptions of and expectations about people and groups. For underrepresented leaders, Black women academic leaders, for example, “identity” and “leadership identity” are interconnected and inseparable, making their journeys all the more unique.

The experiences of Black women academic leaders are idiosyncratic, to say the least. Highlighted in *Our presence is resistance: Stories of Black women in senior-level student affairs positions at predominantly White institutions* (Breedon, 2021), Black women continue to make tremendous progress in higher education. Yet, despite current gains, research regarding Black women in senior-level academic positions remains limited. Amplified in this manner are the unique standpoints of Black women in leadership positions at primarily White institutions (PWIs). Breedon (2021) furthers this work by revealing the many nuances of navigating sexism and racism for Black women in senior-level academic positions. Brock et al. (2019), in *Journeys of social justice: Women of color presidents in the academy*, bring the paths of underrepresented women college presidents to the forefront. The authors point to the fact that women of color remain under-represented in senior administrative positions within US academic institutions. They noted that roughly “30% of US college and university presidents are women, and about 4% are women of color. This exclusion and symbolic annihilation represent broader entrenched issues of systemic racism and of institutional inequities” (Brock et al., 2019, p. 1). Study participants responded to this by discussing their experiences, offering guidance and insights, and “reflecting on what it means to create and hold space for self and others in the complex insular world of upper administration in postsecondary education” (Brock et al., 2019, p. 1).

In *Leadership as identity construction: The act of leading people in organisations*, Karp and Helgø (2009) challenge the concept of leadership by emphasizing leadership as identity construction. The reason for this, state the authors, “is because leadership emerges in the interaction between people as the

act of recognising and being recognised” (Karp & Helgø, 2009, p. 880). Therefore, leaders’ images of themselves are social constructions, and the development of a leadership self (and, thereby, leadership itself) coalesces with the interaction between leaders and followers. Again, the totality of this experience for Black women leaders is neither separable nor mutually exclusive.

## Theme #2: Rearticulating Black Women’s Academic Leadership Experiences

In *Leading While Black*, Horsford et al. (2021) explored leadership and urban education from a Black epistemological perspective, focusing on the paradox and prospects of Black education leadership in urban contexts. According to the authors, “researchers have written about other Black women education leaders of this era in largely biographical terms, portraying the complexity of their lives and how education intersected with their personal missions” (p. 166). In this way, scholars continue to examine Black academic leadership independently, as race and racism are ubiquitous features of Western, White-dominated societies, and academic institutions are not exempt. Leaders steer the ship and are responsible for implementing policies and mandates. They are also tasked with setting the desired direction, ethos, and culture of their respective universities. Connectedly, Clayborne and Hamrick’s (2007) qualitative study of Black women in student affairs administration uncovered “respondents’ experiences in light of controlling images of Black women, resistance strategies, and empowerment for activism” (p. 123). The authors’ recommendations for practice and future research include “further explorations of culturally informed meanings of leadership and leading, as well as coming to broader understandings of professionals’ myriad definitions and fulfillment of leadership” (p. 123).

In *Counter-stories as representations of the racialized experiences of study participants*, Hubain et al. (2016) employed counter-storytelling to construct narratives that “disrupt the master narrative...which often boast an espoused commitment to diversity and social justice” (p. 946). Participants’ rearticulated (aka, counter) stories, rooted in the endemic nature of racism in the academy, highlighted their responses to “tokenization, disappointment, feelings of frustration, anger, and racial battle fatigue” (p. 946). Given the little that is known about the experiences of Black women leading in the academy, Patton and Catching (2009) constructed narratives of African American student affairs faculty to focus on their stories through examination and utilization of their personal counter-narratives. Noting the historical underrepresentation of Black leaders within predominantly White institutions (PWIs), the authors spotlighted “the racial profiling that often shapes their experiences” (p. 713), including, but not limited to, dealing with “academic isolation, marginalization of their scholarship, and racial hostility” (p. 713). In response to extant frames that continue controlling the narrative regarding these lived experiences, there is a need to rearticulate Black women’s academic leadership journeys (Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007) through counter-stories that serve to broaden collective understanding of this distinct and nuanced phenomenon.

## Theme #3: Safe Spaces for Black Women and the Necessity of Community

Underscoring the need for community and safe spaces for Black women leaders in academia, Han and Leonard’s (2017) work sought to “challenge Whiteness and institutional racism to promote social justice, dismantle racism to promote better wellbeing for women faculty of color, and move educational communities at large closer toward equitable education, which is a fundamental civil right” (p. 112). As such, they recommend stakeholders – university leaders included – to focus on safe spaces while working to “establish policies and practices to support (recruit, retain, and promote) faculty/leaders of color, not

## ***Intersectionality in Leadership***

just mainstream academics” (p. 112). Working toward equity, justice, and community implores Patton (2010), involves examining the existence of safe spaces on campus and exploring the impacts of campus culture and climate on faculty and leader retention.

West’s (2019) work, spotlighting the need for more knowledge around “the composition of professional counterspaces for Black women employed in higher education” (p. 543), interviewed Black women student affairs administrators who engaged in an annual professional counterspace. Participants described the space and the overall experience as culturally homogeneous, infused with various culturally responsive resources, and using culturally intentional curricula (West, 2019). In this way, these administrators found alignment and unity in the company of their “sister-colleagues.” Connectedly, Clayborne and Hamrick’s (2007) study shed light on the “intensely relational qualities associated with leadership and leading, mentoring and supervising, and the off-campus nature of most sources for professional support and validation” (p. 123). Reinforced here is the need for community and safe spaces for underrepresented leaders within their institutions so they do not need to turn to external sources for professional support, community, and validation.

### **Theme #4: Empowering Black Women Leaders in Historically White Academic Institutions and the Role of the Academy as Ally**

Despite women’s impressive gains in higher education and the workplace over the past 50 years, men vastly outnumber women in leadership, especially in the highest positions. From the halls of Congress to corporate boardrooms, universities to the courts, and religious institutions to philanthropic organizations, men are far more likely than women to be leaders (Hill et al., 2016). What can we do about it now? In academia, at least, empowering Black women leaders in historically White academic institutions begins with allyship. The role of the academy as an ally starts with acknowledging that gender parity does exist and that all shareholders have a role to play in identifying key issues and creating lasting change in this capacity.

Nicol and Yee (2017), authors of *Reclaiming Our Time”: Women of Color Faculty and Radical Self-Care in the Academy*, spoke of time as the “currency of love” (p. 154). That is, how one spends one’s time indicates who and what that person loves. In academia, one is expected to spend considerable time being of service to others and learning and working so that all can benefit, progress, support themselves and others, and so on. For the underrepresented leader, Black women included, there is often an expectation that one is to allocate one’s time “to show commitment and productivity in the service of the university, often at the expense of [one’s] health and well-being” (p. 154). Allyship, then, includes being responsive to the need to “establish nonnegotiable habits of radical self-care to cherish [one’s] bodies, challenge [one’s] minds, and nourish [one’s] souls” (p. 154).

Empowering women in academia and student affairs administration (Pasque & Nicholson, 2011; Sax, 2012; Yakaboski & Donahoo, 2011) means advancing extant research on women in academic leadership to ensure social justice and equity are upheld for all constituency members. Pasque and Nicholson (2011), Sax (2012), and Yakaboski and Donahoo (2011) all contend that research on women in student affairs administration increases collective understanding of their experiences and improves college and university retention rates. The authors suggest that the available research on broader conceptualizations of gender has moved the field away from focusing on the experiences and needs of women across race and ethnicity. Thus, more research on Black women in this sphere and greater emphasis on empower-

ment can aid the greater higher education community by lessening the marginalization of student affairs within and across college and university campuses.

## **NARRATIVES: FROM THE SOURCE: SPOTLIGHTING THE UNIQUE EXPERIENCES OF BLACK WOMEN DEI LEADERS IN HISTORICALLY WHITE ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS**

What remains absent from the emergent body of research and literature in this sphere are the voices of Black women leaders, generally, and more specifically, Black women DEI practitioners operating in historically White academic institutions. What are the experiences of Black women who lead in historically White Institutions? What are the intersectional leadership experiences of Black women DEI practitioners and leaders in these spaces? How does being a DEI practitioner impact the way these women perceive and manifest their leadership roles? Finally, how does DEI leadership look differently for Black women large-scale? To operationalize the uniqueness of Black women's DEI work in historically White spaces, I unpack these questions, spotlighting the voices and experiences of five Black women DEI practitioners in HWIs below.

### **What Are the Experiences of Black Women Leaders in HWIs?**

**Negotiating Identity:** Racial equity has taken center stage within the last three years (2020-present). Although roughly \$66 billion was pledged to promote racial equity initiatives in the wake of George Floyd's murder, momentum is waning. One question corporate leaders continue to ask is how to tangibly promote a more equitable workplace. A reason why equity continues to evade workplaces is a lack of prioritization on and for the most marginalized employees. Workplaces seeking to foster equitable environments might want to think about adopting new and innovative methods, as explained by Amira Barger in *No, you are not 'over-indexing on Black': Advancing equity is the active process of looking at the systems we have today through the lens of those most disadvantaged by those systems*. Executive VP on the Global Health Sector Team, DEI at Daniel J. Edelman, Amira is a consultant of diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB). In response to the notion of "over-indexing Black," in the context of being employed while Black and what it means to be represented in DEIB spaces while Black, she shares (Barger, 2022):

- A June 2020 survey found that younger Americans were more likely to want an increase in racial representation in advertising, with 55 percent of respondents aged 18-34 in favor of more racial diversity in ads.
- According to 2020 data from SHRM's *The Journey to Equity and Inclusion*, only 13% of White HR professionals agree that discrimination based on race or ethnicity exists in their workplace compared to 49% of Black HR professionals.
- US employment data reported by Statista notes that the Advertising and Promotion industry is 78.7% White, 12.1% Black or African American, 5.2% Asian, and 6.2% Hispanic or Latino.
- McKinsey reports that almost half of Black workers are in three industries with a large frontline presence, with significant underrepresentation, especially in high-growth, high-wage sectors.

## ***Intersectionality in Leadership***

- A December 2021 jobs report from the Bureau of Labor Statistics noted that the unemployment rate for Black people increased from 6.5% to 7.1% from November to December. (pp. 2-3)

In a nutshell, asserts Barger, the idea of “over-indexing Black” is a relic and direct consequence of the systemic racism and exclusion at the core of US culture, one built on the backs of Black Americans, yet continues to disenfranchise us in every way possible.

The triage method, for example, is a system adopted in healthcare and medicine. When resources are limited, i.e., during a natural disaster or warzone area, those providing medical care prioritize those with the most severe injuries. This method can also be applied to DEI efforts by concentrating interventions and implementations on employees who serve to benefit the most. Black women experience some of the most serious forms of marginalization; as such, workplaces looking to foster equity must center their needs. Jessica Pharm, MBA, PHR, is an HR Professional; in 2020, she founded *Blackness and the Workplace* with a mission “to empower Black professionals by providing resources, guidance, and support within a safe place to speak truth to power about the uniqueness of our shared experiences and identities” (Pharm, 2022, p. 1). Pharm’s background in employee relations, recruitment, training, and employment law and policies speaks to her belief in advocating for and assisting Black professionals as they struggle to negotiate identity while navigating a complex and nuanced American workforce. Seeing the importance of elevating conversations around Black professionals by centering and valuing our experiences in a safe and protected space, Pharm states, “It’s very important to me to work for a company who respects me both as an employee and as a person.” Going further, she continues:

*I am also not dealing with the day-to-day toxicity and microaggressions one experiences as a Black woman in corporate America. I can focus on my job and do it well while protecting my energy and peace. Any company that refuses to acknowledge this truth is not one I wish to work for. (Asare, 2022, p. 2)*

Negotiating identity, in this context, means understanding the importance of elevating conversations around the journeys of Black professionals. DEI practitioners and leaders understand the importance of centering and valuing our experiences. This provides all the more reason for institutions to provide safe and protected spaces for them to navigate accordingly.

## **What Are the Intersectional Leadership Experiences of Black Women DEI Practitioners and Leaders in HWIs?**

### **Reararticulating the Leadership Experiences of Black Women DEI leaders**

For Black women DEI practitioners in academia, many of us are in advanced leadership roles, yet we are still unable to fully lead and establish the changes we seek to make. My own experiences as a member of the academy are no different. Pay parity, for example, continues to be a persistent issue for Black women across all occupational spectra. No workplace can ever truly achieve equity or equality without addressing the widening pay gaps that exist. Netta Jenkins, MBA, a leading voice in DEI, was recently named one of the top seven anti-racism consultants in the world by Forbes. She was featured in “CIO Views publication as one of the Top 10 Most Influential Black Women in Business to Follow in 2021” (Jenkins, 2022, p. 1). Speaking to the importance of equity and reararticulating the experiences of Black women leading DEI efforts, she says:

*Workplace equity for me means that at the moment I join an organization, my employer has assessed competitive industry data and advises on whether my salary is lower than it should be. It means not asking me to volunteer my precious time without compensation and an explanation of how additional tasks will impact my career. (Asare, 2022, pp. 2-3)*

Black women today, says Jenkins, must still demand equal pay for equal work because “unfortunately, we are getting way more work and way less pay” (Asare, 2022, p. 3).

DEI executive Yolanda Collins shares this same sentiment. Collins, a leader with *Employee Resource Groups* with over 20 years of experience, is an advocate for Black employees. Lending her voice to the conversation around parity and representation in the workforce, her stance is that “companies just ‘saying’ they pay and treat employees equitably is no longer enough” (Collins, 2022, p. 1). Pertinent to the rearticulation of the experiences of Black women DEI leaders, Jenkins and Collins both contend that 60 years later, Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) policies are still just as essential and as needed today as they were in the 1960s.

## **How Does Being a DEI Practitioner and Leader Impact How These Women Perceive and Manifest Their Leadership Roles?**

### **Safe Spaces and the Necessity of Community**

Workplace affronts and slights continue to plague Black women’s workplace experiences. For example, a Black woman DEI leader in the academy who requested anonymity shared,

*Black women experience micro and macro aggressions that are unfamiliar to their male and non-Black peers. Rather than attempt to sweep the transgressions under the rug, colleagues and supervisors should proactively speak out when they witness these events and offer support if a Black female employee confides in them. (Anonymous, 2022, p. 3)*

Thus, she concludes, ensuring that institutional policies and practices prioritize the safety and well-being of Black women is vital. Mandy Bynum McLaughlin, creator of the Race Equ(al)ity Index with a focus on data insights, storytelling, strategy design, and venture capital, adds:

*There is a felt responsibility to be the voice for everyone because they are a minority representation, which, when added to the emotions felt from simply being in a majority male and/or White room and holding our own, is a lot to take on. The pressure internally and externally to be high performing while navigating microaggressions, the perceptions of Black women’s ability to lead constantly being in question, along with the inability to emote anything – let alone anger or frustration – without being labeled aggressive or threatening, are huge factors in what any Black woman might be facing in a leadership role. (Corbett, 2022, p. 2)*

Evidencing the importance of safe spaces and the necessity of community via my own research, participants expressed the same feelings across the board. One study participant, in her transition from a K-12 leader to an academic leader in this capacity, revealed:

## **Intersectionality in Leadership**

*Being in this position, being an African American female [connecting with] African American females, I think that has served me well because I relate to them, and I share my personal stories with them. And especially when they get to the point where they say, 'I'm not meeting with them unless somebody from the board office comes.' And if I show up to the meeting and they see an African American, oh, it's a done deal. It's resolved. The issue is going to be resolved. (Johnson & Fournillier, 2022, p. 182)*

Essential to building community, she talked about the importance of visibility in the effort to create a spirit of collaboration within and beyond one's constituency. DEI leaders must be able to connect with their communities because they need to know that their work is being supported in an inclusive environment – as opposed to “us versus them” cultures and climates.

### **Empowering Black Women DEI Leaders in HWIs: How Does DEI Leadership Look Differently for Black Women and What Is the Role of the Academy as an Ally?**

#### **Empowering Black Women Leaders in Historically White Academic Institutions and the Role of the Academy as Ally**

“Diversity, equity, and inclusion are not just a checkmark for good business, it's a way to transform the world (Forbes Media LLC, 2022, p. 1),” says Dr. Nika White, award-winning management and leadership consultant and executive practitioner for DEI efforts across government, business, non-profit, and education, is an advocate for diversity, equity, and inclusion. She helps organizations break barriers and integrate diversity into their business frameworks, and her work has led to her designation by Forbes as a Top10 D&I Trailblazer and a Forbes Books Author. In response to the question regarding empowering Black women DEI leaders and the role of the academy as an ally, she had this to say:

When it comes to building a more inclusive workplace and world, the way forward can feel uncertain and overwhelmingly complex. In the DEI space...we need to know and understand and lay out concrete actions each of us can take to make our contribution, regardless of our place in the change equation. [It is important to be] welcoming and nonjudgmental...and provide a ton of encouragement and support for all of us on our journeys. (Forbes Media LLC, 2022, p. 2)

Activist and TV host Lisa Hurley, MA, asserts, “a rising tide lifts all boats. I firmly believe that if one ‘solves for Blackness’...if issues that affect Black people, and especially Black women, are prioritized and addressed, then everyone benefits” (Asare, 2022, p. 3). Hurley, an Anthem Award-winning activist whose work focuses on racism, texturism, and destigmatizing introversion, is an advocate for equality, belonging, and neurodiversity. Speaking to the importance of empowering Black women DEI leaders and the role of allies, she adds:

*Organizations need to proactively and appropriately sponsor, promote, protect, advocate for and compensate Black women. The focus needs to move beyond mere inclusion. Inclusion is the minimum. As a Black woman, I feel supported and valued when all my abilities, degrees, idiosyncrasies, and intersectionalities are seen and celebrated. (Asare, 2022, p. 3)*



Taking stock of this information, recommendations for practice and future research directions are outlined below.

## **RECOMMENDATION FOR PRACTICE AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS**

In *How To Be An Ally For Black Women In The Workplace*, author Holly Corbett offers the following six recommendations:

- **Help Black women feel seen and safe.** From the position of allyship, says Dr. LaNail R. Plummer, founder and CEO of Onyx Therapy Group, this can be achieved by:

*Acknowledging what I state and how I state it while not wanting me to mince my words or use semantics that another person is more comfortable with, by not skipping over me during team meetings or allowing another person to repeat my words and giving them credit as if it's the first time the statements have been said, by allowing my lived experience to be held with the same reverence as textbook research, and by respecting my chronological time and work boundaries. (Corbett, 2022, p.3)*

Through these simple behaviors, Black women DEI practitioners and leaders can feel valued in their workplace roles. In other words, many necessary changes can be rooted in character and behavioral shifts, not just in response to systemic changes and mandates. Allyship, says Dr. Plummer, “allows me to be me – not a version you want me to or wish I would be” (Corbett, 2022, p. 4).

- **Center Black women.** “Racism is a system that incentivizes and rewards,” says McLaughlin (Corbett, 2022, p. 4). “This system is so ingrained into our culture that we don’t even realize how often we are perpetuating the harm that we think we are actively trying to undo. It is unintentional” (Corbett, 2022, p. 4), which is why White people working to be allies must constantly learn, listen, and decenter their Whiteness.

Suppose White people are the ones deciding what the most critical allyship steps are to take instead of listening to and acting on the feedback provided by Black women in the academy. In that case, DEI efforts will remain thwarted, and the system will continue to fail those most in need.

- **Be transparent about pay and benefit structures.** “There was a social media post recently where a woman in HR flippantly shared that she gave a Black woman candidate the salary requested, despite it being far less than what the company budgeted,” says Dr. Tsoi-A-Fatt Bryant. “Black women have lower salaries than their White counterparts because of issues like this; there aren’t allies in place who say, ‘No, that’s not right.’ Give that candidate what was budgeted for the role” (Corbett, 2022, pp. 4-5).
- **Ask these two questions.** “First, I think that every person should ask themselves this question, ‘How would I feel if I were the only one in the room?’” (Corbett, 2022, p. 5) says Melva LaJoy Legrand, founder and CEO of LaJoy Plans. The point of this exercise “is that colleagues should actively strive not to engage in behavior that tokenizes the Black women or anyone else that ap-

## **Intersectionality in Leadership**

pears different from the majority because it minimizes what they can truly bring to the table.” Next, “it’s important to do a temperature check and ask the question [to Black women], ‘How are things going?’ and be prepared to a) hear the answer and b) thoughtfully follow up if there are areas that need to change.”

- **Offer authentic mentorship.** “I think one of the biggest obstacles is finding authentic mentors. Many people say they are willing to mentor but only share the basics,” says Dr. Tsoi-A-Fatt Bryant. “They won’t give a true peek behind the curtain to lay out what is needed to go higher professionally or what are the potential pitfalls to avoid. I have been in professional relationships as a mentee where I was treated like a charity case—not as a valued staff person with true growth potential” (Corbett, 2022, p. 5).
- **Give DEI leaders the support and resources to create real change.** “Our history has been a cycle of self-fulfilling prophecies. When slavery was outlawed in the US, enslaved people were given zero support to start their lives as free citizens, including even legitimate citizenship,” says Bynum McLaughlin. Despite the deeply ingrained and damaging impacts of the lack of support and infrastructure to support formerly enslaved people, Black people in the US still comprise a large percentage of low-income earners. Nevertheless, “our country prefers the narrative depicting Black people as lazy and the reason for their own demise instead of taking responsibility for the marginalizing impacts that resulted from generations of neglect and refusal to recognize African Americans as equal” (Corbett, 2022, pp. 5-6).

We remain hopeful that if allies continue to put in the work, coupled with what we know to be fair and just in the world, we can become the society we believe ourselves to be. Instead of having conversations about providing access or breaking barriers, it will simply be our natural way of conducting ourselves. That is the dream, and while we know it may not be actualized during our lifetimes, we can be heartened by the knowledge that these seeds have been planted. These seeds of equity exist in current and future generations, and we must continue to believe that these next generations can – and will – finally be able to get it right.

## **Bringing It All Together: Moving the Needle Forward**

Connecting the four overarching themes: (1) Negotiating Identity, (2) Rearticulating Black Women’s Academic Leadership Experiences, (3) Safe Spaces for Black Women and the Necessity of Community, and (4) Empowering Black Women Leaders in Historically White Academic Institutions and the Role of the Academy as Ally, Iverson (2007), in *Camouflaging Power and Privilege: A Critical Race Analysis of University Diversity Policies*, reminds researchers and stakeholders alike of “four predominant discourses shaping images of people of color: access, disadvantage, marketplace, and democracy. These discourses construct images of people of color as outsiders, at-risk victims, commodities, and change agents” (p. 586). In academia, discourses of this nature converge and “produce realities that situate people of color as outsiders to the institution, at risk before and during participation in education, and dependent on the university for success in higher education” (p. 586). In addition, Parker and Villalpando’s (2007) race(cialized) perspective on education leadership offers insight into the “color-blind interpretation of the law and legal policy has had a major ideological and substantive impact on the administrative organization of schools and postsecondary education” (p. 519). It is noteworthy that even in the best of

circumstances, well-intentioned attempts to create more inclusive campus environments often reinforce practices that support exclusion and inequity.

From a moral standpoint, academic researchers have been granted a prime opportunity to conduct and execute research that can improve leaders' cultures, climates, performance, and ethics. On a more pragmatic note, "leadership scholars have always been involved in research that aims to contribute to effective leadership. Because ethical leadership and effective leadership are related, the topic of ethical leadership should appeal to scholars with diverse motivations and interests" (Brown & Treviño, 2006, p. 613). Particularly relevant to and for Black women in America, again, is the incongruence, large-scale, that exists between their advanced levels of educational attainment as compared to their relatively low status within organizational leadership spheres (Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Davidson & Burke, 2000; Eagly et al., 2007; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). This matter remains a prevalent and pervasive issue across all sectors, institutions, and organizational settings (Helm, 2016).

It is essential to recognize that while no unified theory of leadership currently exists, leadership theory generally emphasizes many outcomes, from how leaders are perceived to how leaders directly impact performance to the specific actions of group members (Day, 2000). For those in and aspiring towards formal positions of headship, "leadership theory has been applied to levels that include events, individuals, dyads, groups, organizations, and political systems; it has focused on immediate and delayed effects; and it often incorporates contextual differences" (Dinh et al., 2014, pp. 55-56). Thus, it is not surprising that leadership encompasses over 60 unique theoretical domains and a wide array of methodological approaches (Dinh et al., 2014). In higher education, a space in which the tenets of equity, inclusion, and diversity are actively purported, the need to study the dynamics of power and privilege, social and critical theory, and how they connect to university policies and practices persists (Iverson, 2007). Moreover, more research on the race-gender dyad, coupled with navigation in academic leadership spaces – particularly those that are 'majority-White' – will lead to essential conversations around representation and inclusion in academic settings (Parker & Villalpando, 2007).

For Black women leaders in higher education, this matter includes addressing, at minimum, their racialized and gendered pathways to leadership. Rhode (2017) reminds relevant stakeholders that factors such as generational inequality, unconscious bias, in-group favoritism, and inhospitable cultures remain obstacles within many leadership spheres. Given Rhode's (2014, 2017) position that confronting these factors is key to addressing the race-gender leadership gap, this piece emphasizes the tenets embedded within equitable, social justice leadership (i.e., identity, equity, and intersectionality) to better appreciate the representation, journeys, and experiences of Black women leaders across all sectors, historically White academic institutions included.

## **CONCLUSION**

This chapter has revealed that the tangible manifestations of justice-based leadership perspectives remain understudied (Berkovich, 2014; Lambert, 2002, 2003; Marshall & Oliva, 2006). Taken together, scholarship in this area illustrates the importance of considering all perspectives regarding matters of equity in leadership. Bogotch (2000) states, "social justice requires an ongoing struggle [i.e., to share power, knowledge, and resources equitably] and cannot be separated from how educational theories and practices are being [re]defined and practiced by professionals within schools, academic disciplines, and governmental circles" (p. 140). This connection between theory and practice, as they relate to the moral

## ***Intersectionality in Leadership***

use of power, reveals why equity and social justice, as educational frameworks, are relevant in every era (Banai et al., 2011; Dean et al., 2009; Hodges & Welch, 2018).

A testament to such considerations, Day and Antonakis (2012) assert that “there is a need for additional theory building and empirical research directed at the numerous facets involved with diversity and leadership” (p. 13). Within the leadership sphere, there remains a need to provide fresh insights into the roles of race and gender in the experiences of academic leaders (Hodges & Welch, 2018). Scholars must examine Black academics in leadership more thoroughly, as race and racism are pervasive features of Western, White-dominated societies (Horsford et al., 2021). Again, educational institutions are no exception. Moving forward, leaders are responsible for establishing future directions by providing articulable guidelines that are mindful of current issues within the community. This mission includes, but is not limited to, incorporating multicultural centers, strengthening relations with the outside community, and actively supporting inclusivity.

Following the lead of Crenshaw (2013) and others, I contend that advancing social justice leadership theory and research requires scholars and relevant stakeholders to, at minimum, critically examine the numerous foundational assumptions that have defined academic leadership and higher education research over the last 2000 years. The experiences of Black women leading in predominantly White institutions matter. With Black women serving as the primary focus of this piece, I attempt to extend the literature on the links between race, gender, equity, and inclusion within the realm of higher education leadership. Indeed, researchers have made strides in amassing an initial and veritable accounting of the ramifications and implications of being a Black woman leader in academia. In this context, the need for more research spotlighting intersectionality, inclusion, equitability, belonging, and justice is underscored (McCall, 2005; Pignatelli, 1993; Rawls, 2009). To reduce the equity gap in academic leadership, the work to advance research, theory, law, policy, and practice in this arena must continue.

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## KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

**Belonging:** the sense of fitting in or feeling like one is an important member of a group. When one belongs, one is an official part of a group; there is a sense of compatibility and suiting with specific people and places. A feeling of belonging describes the sense of genuinely fitting or meshing (i.e., with friends, family members, or other sympathetic people).

**Diversity:** the presence of differences, including race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, ethnicity, nationality, socioeconomic status, language, (dis)ability, age, religious commitment, or political perspective. Populations that have been – and remain – underrepresented and marginalized in the broader society benefit from increased diversity.

**Equality:** about ensuring all people have the same opportunity to make the most of their lives, abilities, and talents. Equality is also the belief that no one should be viewed as inferior because of intrinsic factors, where they are from, their religious beliefs, or if they have a disability.

**Equity:** about promoting justice, impartiality, and fairness within institutions or systems' procedures, processes, and distribution of resources. Tackling equity issues requires understanding the root causes of outcome disparities within our society.

**Inclusion:** an outcome to ensure that those who are diverse are and feel welcomed. Inclusion outcomes are met when people, institutions, and programs are truly inviting to and for all. Inclusion exists when diverse individuals are able to participate fully in development opportunities and decision-making processes within an organization or group.

**Inclusivity:** the policy or practice of providing all people with equal access to opportunities and resources, especially those who might otherwise be marginalized or excluded, such as people with physical or mental disabilities or those belonging to other minoritized groups.

**Lived Experience:** refers to personal knowledge about the world gained through direct, first-hand involvement in everyday events rather than through representations constructed by other people. Lived Experience also refers to knowledge of people gained from direct face-to-face interaction rather than through a technological medium.

**Navigational Capital:** refers to a person's skills and abilities to navigate "social institutions," including, but not limited to, educational spaces large-scale, academic institutions in particular. Navigational capital empowers people – underrepresented people, in particular – to maneuver within unsupportive or hostile environments.