
AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN ADMINISTRATORS

Annette W. Rusher



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Preface

The number of African American women administrators in higher education is not impressive. Although several institutions have implemented aggressive recruitment programs to attract and retain minorities, their efforts have not resulted in significant increases in the number of African American women administrators.

Although the actual account of African American Women Administrators is low, however, the number of qualified African American women in higher education is more than sufficient. African American women are in the pipeline but are not present throughout the ranks of higher education administration. Thus, the question must be raised about the recruitment, retention, and promotion patterns of African American women in higher education.

This exploratory study examines the recruitment, retention, and promotion patterns of 154 African American women administrators in the position of dean and above (with and without tenure). The women participating in the study were over 40 years of age, married with children, and felt good about working at their institutions. They do not engage in networking or belong to support groups, but do have mentors.

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Chapter I

Nature and Purpose of the Study

Introduction

History reveals that the black female has pioneered and forged new frontiers in education as leaders and as participants. This was most evident in the 1800s after the right to learn to read and write was permissible for slaves and ex-slaves. Many of the early primary schools and colleges were established by and for black females. However, given the approximate 100-150-year existence of the 117 historically black colleges and universities in existence today, less than 10 percent have African American female chief academic officers or presidents. Therein lies the dilemma facing African American in higher education (Gill & Showell, 1991, p. 2)

The above observations are still relevant today. There is a paucity of black females in higher education, specifically in positions of academic leadership and responsibility. The opportunity to study such women administrators, in numbers and content similar to men is still not available (Harvard, 1986). Professional organizations in higher education do not maintain statistical data on women of ethnic groups.

A well established myth in American higher education administration is that black women simply do not exist. Williams (1986) found that there is a small but growing body of literature about black women in administration at predominantly white colleges. The increasing number of black women college administrators at these two institutions is a new phenomenon. Before the 1970s there was nothing to write concerning

the existence of African American women in administration due to the fact that there were none; college administrators were white males.

Myrtis Mosley (1980) did one of the first studies of black women college administrators at predominantly white institutions. Mosley discovered in her study that the majority of women were in staff positions, without mentors, and were doubtful about their career progression. Davis (1980; 1981) and Giddings (1985) revealed through their study the need for further research on the accomplishments and present status of black women in a variety of fields.

This study is an exploratory and descriptive examination of African American women administrators at various historically black institutions (HBIs) and traditionally white institutions (TWIs). The primary purpose and focus of this study is to acquire a better understanding of the recruitment, retention, and promotion patterns from the perspective of African American women administrators in the position of dean and or higher ranking position (with or without tenure).

Background

Title VII of the 1964 U.S. Civil Rights Act outlawed employment discrimination based on race, gender, and other defined attributes (Fosu, 1992). In 1965 "affirmative action" was established by Executive Order 11246 to oversee the hiring and promotion practices of federal contracts with specific regard to blacks. Employers were mandated to adopt written formal goals and a specific timetable for accomplishment of these goals, and the Executive Order was eventually extended to women as a group in 1972. In view of the legislative procedures that have been put in place to ensure that women and minorities are considered for all employment opportunities, the black female is still not visible in administration at most institutions of higher education.

The Invisible National Problem

The presence of African American women in higher education has been called the "invisible problem." The shortage of these women is not new. It is but a portion of a longstanding problem- -African American educator shortages in general (Darling-Hammond, 1987). According to the American Council on Education/Office of Minority Concern (ACE/OMC [1987]), there has never been an adequate supply of African

American educators of either gender, especially in the rural south (Anderson, 1988).

African American women, like their white sisters, are often “tokens” in the system of higher education. In such positions African American women may constantly fight stereotypes that force them into playing limited and caricatured roles (Kanter 1977, 1992; Carroll, 1982; & Powell, 1987). Dumas (1980) concludes that even when black women exhibit a certain level of occupational sophistication and leadership potential, they often play symbolic roles while being denied the exercise of significant power. African American women often have difficulty balancing expectations and demands attached to their symbolic roles and those that come with their professional status and responsibilities. Epstein (1973, 1987) suggests that the black woman administrator should have a place in the organizational structure and be guaranteed a secure position in the normal exchange system of that pattern of power.

Consequences Associated With Being an African American Woman Administrator

The experiences described here and elsewhere reveal a genuine insensitivity to African American women’s needs for support and reassurance, which can challenge their own identity and threaten their inner security. Many African Americans in higher education have commented that a person is only a black women administrator in a white institution (Williams, 1982). African American women at HBIs are not identified primarily by their ethnic group but by their position title and accomplishments.

If they are to achieve full partnership, African American women must be astute and learn all they can about the institution’s culture and become active participants in this environment. The ultimate challenge for the black woman administrator is to be the administrator who happens to be a black woman. If this kind of thinking takes precedence, black women will not be “tokens,” but will be viewed as part of the institutional landscape.

Advances for African American Women Educators

In spite of how the black woman administrator was depicted by earlier researchers, recent statistics reveal an increase in women and minorities in higher education positions of leadership. The turbulence

and unrest of the 1960s brought about many changes in higher education. In the 1960s, the Johnson Administration was directly responsible for the upsurge of participation of minorities in higher education. Many minority administrators were appointed as directors of programs specifically established for minority and disadvantaged students, i.e., Upward Bound, Trio, and Affirmative Action (Wilson, 1987). In the 1970s, black (male and female) administrators comprised 7.4 percent of positions in higher education.

However, the fundamental truth is that, while minorities continue to grow both in numbers and as a proportion of the U.S. population, they remain underrepresented in higher education. Thus, there is a relative absence of black female leadership at both predominantly white and predominantly black institutions. Current data suggest that black females are earning degrees at increasing rates. At the bachelor's degree level, black women comprise 62 percent, while black men comprise 38 percent. Master's degrees earned by black women comprise 64 percent compared to 36 percent for black men. As at these levels, for example, the number of black females has begun to surpasses the number of black males on the doctoral level. These statistics indicate that the numbers of qualified black females do not coincide with the numbers of black females in leadership positions.

Statement of the Problem

Findings such as these motivated the researcher's decision to conduct this study. A comprehensive search of the literature revealed that a few studies have been conducted which focused exclusively on African American women administrators (Jones, 1991). Due to a lack of research on African American women in higher education, Gill and Showell (1991) concluded that career goals, promotion, success formula, and motivation for African American women needs to be explored. Recent increases in African American women administrators at historically black institutions and traditionally white institutions compared to other groups may be the result of increased recruitment, mentoring programs or a general commitment by these institutions to increase the numbers of black females in leadership positions. Research that has been done on recruitment, retention, and promotion of African American women administrators has raised more questions than it has answered as to why more of these

women are not found at both black and white institutions of higher education as administrators. This study emerged from that research milieu.

Theoretical Framework

The low number of African American women administrators in higher education raises concerns about the issues of equity. Therefore, this study draws upon research in business and industry that addresses such issues and analyzes the underlying reasons, or theoretical causes, for inequality and inequity in employment and earning power (Simmons, 1994). These theories and resultant explanations of social phenomena in industrial organizations were used to guide the analysis of data in this study. Specifically, human capital theory is used as a theoretical model for categorizing, analyzing and reporting the data.

Human Capital Theory

Darity (1982, 1989) looks at the problem of black/white earning inequality through a framework of human resources capital theory where he made three central assumptions: (1) labor markets are competitive and employers are animated by profit-maximizing motives; (2) black and white workers are equally productive; and (3) whites have an “externally” acquired “taste for discrimination”—a preference for hiring and working with other whites.

In his use of the human capital approach, Darity (1982) defined “human capital” as whatever characteristics an individual possesses that produces earned income. According to the human capital theorists, blacks tend to acquire or accumulate less of these earned-income producing characteristics than whites. Thus, blacks are paid less and are unemployed more frequently.

In higher education, human capital would equate to education, experience, networking, professional development, tenure, scholarly activities and prestige (Becker, 1993). Even within higher education, blacks with an enormous amount of human capital are viewed as generally less productive, which reduces the demand for blacks at the faculty and administrative levels. Blacks are also viewed as having acquired less of the traits conducive to administrative job performance (Darity, 1982).

Johnson (1991) reported the collective professional experience of women administrators coupled with previous research suggested that there is concern about the impact of certain internal and external factors (explained in detail in chapter five) on the workplace performance and career advancement of black women in community colleges. These internal and external factors can also be identified as human capital. In an effort to provide an explanation for the low numbers of black women administrators and how numbers impact the recruitment, retention, and promotion of African American women, the underlying structures of two schools of thought within the human capital framework are used in this study: (1) The Chicago School and (2) The Moynihan-Elkins School. The Chicago school places heavy emphasis on educational differences between blacks and whites. The assumption was that the quality and quantity of black education was lower than white education. Therefore, blacks were less qualified for positions of administration and, as a result, were not endowed for administrative positions. The Moynihan-Elkins School contended that black families less efficiently socialize black children for the labor market. Thus, the malfunctioning black home environment was responsible for the low human capital accumulation among African American females which could lead, consequently to the low numbers of black women administrators was a result of this flaw.

Purpose

This research was undertaken primarily to study the socialization of black females as it relates to their recruitment, retention, and promotion patterns within higher education. The study specifically focused on the equity and professional development opportunity issues surrounding the black female in higher education. Further this study increases the amount of literature in the field on black women in higher education and specifically in administrative positions.

Therefore, the two fold focus of this study was to (1) identify internal human capital factors which impact the recruitment, retention, and promotion of African American women administrators and (2) identify external human capital factors which impact recruitment, retention, and promotion patterns of African American women administrators.

Significance

This study gains its significance from the fact that few studies have focused on recruitment, retention, and promotion of black women administrators in higher education. Also this study attempts to fill theoretical gaps related to these concerns by describing the factors associated with recruitment, retention, and promotion through the framework of the Chicago School and the Moynihan-Elkins School of the human capital theory which has not been reported previously. This study describes the relationship between education and job offers; education and current employment, retention; and promotion, education and current employment, and retention promotion. The intent is that the findings reported in this exploratory study will be used to guide future researchers in studying the employment, retention and promotion of African American women administrators. This research, which has the working title, *A Descriptive Study of African American Women Administrators in Higher Education: Recruitment, Retention, and Promotion Patterns* will examine various factors (internal and external) associated with recruitment patterns, retention and promotion trends among African American women administrators within HBIs and TWIs. A consequence and personal motivation of the study is to determine whether being educated and/or employed at an HBI or TWI has an impact on recruitment, retention and promotion in higher education of black females in higher education.

The impact of recruitment, retention, and promotion of African American women administrators can be viewed as a cost or benefit to higher education. Typical cost categories include the inability of HBIs to maintain their historical significance to African American culture and the larger society. Frequent turnover in administration decreases potential for institution growth. With so few black women in higher education, HBIs are not able to compete with TWIs for potential black women administrators. HBIs cannot offer the salaries, locations, fringe benefits or accommodations for administrator's spouses. The lack of minority representation at TWIs decreases the opportunity for black students to be exposed to minority leadership. Research has shown that black students on TWI campuses without black leaders do poorly in school and some even drop out.

Potential benefits from the present research include an increase in minority representation at some institutions which appear to serve the overall black community. Turnover in administrators can bring new ideas and the opportunity for career advancement. The cost and benefits of increasing the number of African American administrators should be noted by higher education. Alexander and Scott (1983) identified the need to research "career progression of black female administrators in predominantly white institutions," many years prior to this researcher's decision to do this type of study. Alexander and Scott (1983) believe that, "Black women who will make it in academe will have to use specific strategies for coping and advancing career goals in an environment that is not quite like any other environment" (p. 6). Alexander and Scott (1983) expressed these thoughts more than 10 years ago, and they remain relevant today. Higher education is not a friendly environment to African American women. These women must create their own support networks in order to advance in such antagonistic settings. What does this mean for the future of higher education and HBIs and TWIs? Also what does it mean for the recruitment, retention, and promotion of African American women administrators? Studies such as this may provide answers to a phenomenon that is at the forefront of higher education.

Assumptions and Initial Expectations

The researcher entered this exploration with several assumptions about African American women's recruitment, retention, and promotion patterns derived from current literature in the field, focus groups, and personal interviews. From the previous existing literature, the researcher assumed the majority of highly educated African American women are employed in black colleges and universities with education being the leading field of concentration (Tobin, 1981). Since the focus of the study was on HBIs and TWIs, the researcher expected the task of finding and identifying African American female administrators at white colleges and universities to be difficult at best (Hoskins, 1978). Also, Harvard's (1986) statement that little is known about African American females and their career development, successful leadership strategies, and locations within white academic colleges and universities, caused the researcher to be doubtful about the amount of feedback that would be received from administrators.