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## **African American Women in Student Affairs: Best Practices for Winning the Game**

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### **Abstract**

Current research regarding the experiences of African American women in higher education clusters staff, faculty, and students together, overlooking the unique contributions and challenges of each cohort. The purpose of this article is to explore the opinions and experiences of African American women in student affairs administration, in order to add to the body of knowledge regarding women in student affairs. Implications for best practices for African American women in student affairs administration are discussed, and recommendations for further research are provided.

*Keywords:* African American women, student affairs, higher education administration, workplace experiences, Black feminist thought

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## Introduction

African American women in higher education contend with a common set of multiple marginalizations due to their membership in at least two groups – African American and female – both of which have been historically oppressed (Collins, 2004; Gregory, 2001; Simien, 2006). Though the historical subjugation of African American women is often acknowledged, the perspectives of these women are repeatedly undermined within society, and they are often left unconsidered or misunderstood. The result of this reality places African American women at a disadvantage, especially in the professional world where their societal status can overshadow their achievements and successes. Nichols and Tanksley (2004) charged African American women in the academy “to be smarter, work harder, and be more articulate in their efforts to combat racism and sexism” (p.178).

Regarding the plight of African American women in higher education, it was noted that most research regarding these women tended to aggregate the somewhat similar experiences and opinions of African American female students, faculty, and staff (Howard-Hamilton, 2003a). Similarly, in the classic work by Moses (1989), she noted that “most research conducted on racial/ethnic minorities [in higher education] continues to treat minority groups as sexually monolithic; it assumes that what is true for minority men is also true for minority women” (p.2). Since Moses’ foundational work, the literature still seems to focus on African Americans and African American women in higher education as collective groups (Guillory, 2001; Jackson, 2001), rather than to answer Moses’ call to decouple, examine and honor the distinctive contributions of these unique subgroups and subcultures within academia. While African American women and African Americans in the academy do share many commonalities (i.e. marginalization, oppression, cultural beliefs and values, etc.), they also make inimitable contributions and provide distinctive insights that are shaped by their individual experiences serving in diverse professional roles. Thus, detangling the experiences of African American female administrators, faculty, staff and students may provide valuable insights for the specific groups of similarly situated women who may be following in their footsteps.

One cohort in the academy warranting specific attention for their contributions is African American women in student affairs administration. A recent report of current articles published in 2009, by approximately 14 higher education and student affairs refereed journals, revealed only 13 articles related to women in general, two articles related to women in student affairs administration, one article related to African American women in higher education, and no articles related to African American women in student affairs (Women in Student Affairs Current Research Sub-Committee, 2009). This report is indicative of the lack of research that exists regarding women in student affairs in general and the even more scant studies of African American women in postsecondary student affairs administration in particular. Among the scarce literature that exists regarding African American women in student affairs, some researchers have acknowledged the significant roles that these women play in facilitating the learning and development of not only students of color, but all students (Jackson, 2003). Similarly, African American women also contribute to the professional lives of their colleagues of color, as well as their colleagues “of less color” (C. Brightharp, personal communication, March 8, 2009) in a variety of supportive and collegial roles (Patitu & Hinton, 2003).

An important forum where African American women in student affairs engage in supportive dialogue is the African American Women's Summit, which is typically held at the national conferences of the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) and the American College Personnel Association (ACPA). During this professional development program, African American women often tell stories about their victories, share success strategies and present data about the successful student outcomes they facilitate in their pivotal roles as student affairs professionals (C. Brightharp, personal communication, March 8, 2009). Unfortunately, many of these success strategies are not empirically studied nor documented in scholarly literature.

The purpose of this study is to add to the body of knowledge regarding African American women in student affairs by exploring the experiences and opinions of these women, who comprise a unique professional cohort in the academy. This research also attempts to identify specific individual and institutional practices that have facilitated these women's success as student affairs practitioners in order to assist future generations of African American women who aspire to embark upon similar careers. Black Feminist Thought is used to provide a conceptual framework to facilitate a deeper understanding of the experiences of African American women in student affairs.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Black Feminist Thought illuminates the distinctive standpoint of Black women's social and developmental identities (Collins, 2002; Howard-Hamilton, 2003b; Stephens & Phillips, 2005). In addition, this theory suggests that Black women share experiences and thoughts about themselves, their community, and society based on their gender, race, and class. The results of encounters stemming from the interrelationship of racism, sexism, and classism in the daily lives of Black women are often internalized and play a huge role in shaping their worldview (Smedley, 2007; Zamani, 2003). Within the context of Black Feminist Thought, it is detrimental for a Black woman's identity to be defined by the highly charged sociopolitical environment, which exists in contemporary society. Instead, Black feminists assert the need for Black women to define their own sense of self-identity based on their personal experiences, beliefs and values.

The notion of standpoint is central to Black Feminist Thought, and represents the shared experiences and ideas of Black women (Collins, 2002). Collins (2002) asserted that Black women's standpoint can be understood within the context of several common threads, which link Black women together. One theme that is common among Black women is the struggle against racism, sexism and classism, which affects their independence and self-reliance. This is not to suggest that all Black women experience and respond to these oppressions in the same way, rather Black Feminist Thought asserts that these women are linked by the common strife of being denigrated in society. Standpoint acknowledges that the occupational and familial experiences of Black women, as well as experiences grounded in Black culture, lead to a Black feminist *group consciousness*. While not all Black women will identify with the group consciousness, most women will consider the group's standpoint when attempting to develop their own standpoint. Ultimately, "the struggle for an Afrocentric feminist consciousness requires embracing both an Afrocentric worldview and a feminist sensibility and using both to forge a self-defined standpoint" (Collins, 2006, pp. 10-11).

## Literature Review

Despite the significance of African American women's distinct worldview, there is little research that accurately expresses the unique, yet common experiences of African American women in the student affairs (Jackson, 2003). A review of the literature revealed that most research regarding African American women in the academy clusters African American women at all levels together (i.e. administrators, faculty, staff, and students) and fails to acknowledge differences between the groups of African American women in higher education (Guillory, 2001; Jackson, 2001). Early research about African American women in the academy focused on issues affecting recruitment, retention, promotion and tenure, and job performance and satisfaction of mid- to senior-level African American women administrators and faculty (Benjamin, 1997; James & Farmer, 1993; Ladd, 1979; Marshall, 1997; Mintz & Rothblum, 1997; Rusher, 1996; Smith & Stewart, 1983). Current research continues the discussion of the aforementioned factors and focuses on presenting the successes and challenges of African American women in the academy, while offering guidance for those entering the professional field (Guillory, 2001; Jackson, 2001).

The limited literature that exists about African American women in student affairs has focused on similar topics (i.e. recruitment, retention, promotion, and job performance and satisfaction). To date, there is some research that has examined African American student affairs professionals in general (Scales & Brown, 2003; Turrentine & Conley, 2001), while other research has focused on the aggregated experiences of all women in student affairs (Blackhurst, 2000; Walker, Reason & Robinson, 2003). However, little research has investigated the interplay of race and gender in the experiences of African American women in student affairs. Hence, this literature review summarizes research regarding African American women in higher education, African Americans in student affairs, women in student affairs, and African American women in student affairs in an effort to sift through and arrive at literature regarding contributions and challenges of African American women in student affairs.

### **African American Women in Higher Education**

Research regarding African American women in higher education continues to indicate that African American female students, faculty and staff face barriers due to their race and gender (Gordon, 2004; Gregory, 2001; Hughes & Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Nichols & Tanksley, 2004; Simpson, 2001; Thomas & Hollenshead, 2001). Specifically, several researchers have identified co-occurring racial and gender discrimination (Zamani (2003) and a lack of support systems and networks (Patton & Harper, 2003). Watt (2003) found African American women to be situated in unwelcoming, insensitive, and isolative environments. Despite the challenges that African American women continue to face in higher education due to their race, gender, and class, Gregory (2001) noted that this group of women has demonstrated tremendous personal and professional resiliency.

### **African Americans in Student Affairs**

The importance of research that focuses on African Americans in student affairs has been noted (Jackson, 2003; Turrentine & Conley, 2001). In particular, Jackson (2003) indicated that

African Americans play a very significant role in the development and education of students. Additionally, Turrentine & Conley (2001) suggested that although diversity in student affairs is heavily valued, minorities are underrepresented altogether, and women in general are especially underrepresented in senior-level positions. Jackson (2003) cited the need to focus on the recruitment, retention and advancement of African American student affairs professionals. “Decisions to include African Americans into student affairs administration, particularly in some senior-level positions, appear to have far-reaching effects on the experiences of African American students at intuitions of higher and postsecondary education” (Jackson, 2003, p. 9) . In his review of the available literature concerning African Americans in student affairs, Jackson found themes in support of the notion that student affairs administration must continue to diversify at the same rate that student bodies are diversifying. These types of issues, according to Jackson, are grounds for further exploring the careers of African American student affairs administrators.

### **Women in Student Affairs**

In one of the earliest studies regarding women in student affairs, Bender (1980) found that women were not very satisfied with the student affairs profession. Results indicated that up to 90% of the women left the profession within seven years of obtaining their master’s degree. Blackhurst (2000) reexamined women’s career satisfaction in the field of student affairs. From a random sample of 290 female student affairs administrators, results indicated that career satisfaction among these women had increased since the 1980’s, with 70% of the participants reporting feeling satisfied in their career, and 45% planning to remain in student affairs throughout their careers. In addition, findings in this study revealed that almost one-third of the 500 female student affairs participants selected from the 1996-1997 NASPA Member Handbook indicated “low salary or limited opportunity for advancement” as reasons for leaving student affairs (p. 410). Similarly, Walker, Reason and Robinson (2003) found age and gender as the most stable predictors of salary inequity in upper-level student affairs positions at both private and public universities. Though this research does not specifically examine African American women’s experiences, it helps to provide information and an understanding about the climate of student affairs relative to women in this professional field.

### **African American Women in Student Affairs**

Some research on African American women in student affairs found that women and minorities are promoted and receive salary increases less than White men (Benjamin, 1997; Walker, Reason & Robinson, 2003). Conversely, Engstrom, McIntosh, Ridzi and Kruger (2006) found that educational attainment, enrollment, region of the country, and degree impacted the salary level of senior-level administrators more than race and gender.

In a study that examined African American female student affairs administrators’, perceptions of career advancement, findings revealed that this group is exposed to unique barriers to career advancement, including lack of a supportive professional environment, lack of professional networking support, and gender discrimination (Belk, 2006). This author also found that African American female student affairs administrators were more likely to hold positions at 4-year, small, public universities with a high minority and female population that were situated

in urban communities. In essence, while there are many women entering the student affairs profession, African American women continue to be underrepresented and will continue to be disproportionately represented in relationship to the number of African American female students on campus (Turrentine & Conley, 2001).

### **Method**

In an effort to add to the body of knowledge regarding African American women in student affairs positions, the current study aims to answer the following research questions: (a) What are some of the positive work-place factors for African American women in student affairs? (b) What are some of the work-place challenges faced by African American women in student affairs? (c) Do African American women in student affairs experience or perceive racism in the workplace? (d) What advice do African American women in student affairs offer to new African American women entering the profession? (e) What services and resources can colleges and universities offer to assist African American women in student affairs?

In the present study, the experiences of African American women in student affairs administration were explored using a qualitative approach to data collection and analysis. According to Bogdan and Biklen (2003), qualitative researchers "set up strategies and procedures to enable them to consider experiences from the informants' perspectives" (p. 7). This approach has been cited as an appropriate research strategy when researchers are interested in understanding how people make meaning of the world around them at a particular time and place (Merriam & Associates, 2002; Rossman, 1998).

### **Procedure**

Data were collected via individual interviews in an attempt to gain a comprehensive understanding of each participant's experiences, thoughts and feelings as African American female student affairs professionals. Maxwell (2005) noted that "[research] methods depend not only on your research questions, but on the actual research situation and what will work most effectively in a situation to give you the data that you need" (p. 74). Within the context of this study, it was imperative that the participants had the opportunity to speak freely about their experiences. The interviews were conducted using a combination of six closed- and open-ended questions.

### **Participants**

The participants in this study were three African American women employed in entry-, mid-, and senior-level student affairs positions. The three women were full-time employees at a large, predominantly White, Research I university in the Southeast. The names of the participants were concealed in order to ensure confidentiality. Due to the sensitive nature of the data being collected and in an attempt to ensure the anonymity of the participants, additional demographic information regarding the participants has been purposefully omitted.

## **Instrument**

Data were collected via face-to-face interviews, which were conducted by the researcher. The researcher is an African American woman with more than 25 years of professional experience as a student affairs administrator and faculty member whose research agenda focuses on the experiences of Black women in higher education. The interview protocol contained six questions, was developed by the researcher, and was based upon an extensive review of scholarly literature regarding women in student affairs. The first two questions were used to gather participants' demographic information. The last four questions were designed to elicit information regarding the participants' experiences as African American female student affairs administrators. The four prompts that were used to guided the individual interviews were: (a) discuss three factors related to work-place climate that have positively influenced your professional career, (b) what have been the three greatest work-place challenges you have faced as a African American woman in student affairs, (c) based on your personal experience, discuss three pieces of advice you would offer to African American women who are entering the student affairs profession, and (d) based on your personal experience, what services/resources could colleges/universities offer that would be beneficial to African American women in student affairs? Each interview lasted approximately 1 ½ hours and was conducted in each of the participants' respective offices.

## **Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed using Glasser & Strauss' (1967) constant-comparative method. This method contends that data be examined by: (a) organizing the data (i.e. qualitative coding); (b) using the data to generate categories, themes, and patterns; (c) testing the emergent propositions against the data; and (d) searching for contrary evidence or alternative explanations of the data (Marshall & Rossman, 1989).

Accordingly, the researcher examined the transcribed interviews to organize and code the responses into themes, and to identify patterns that emerged relative to the data. Finally, the researcher identified contradictions in the data and attempted to recognize alternative explanations for inconsistencies. The researcher's interpretations of the participants' responses were derived from personal experience, familiarity with related scholarly literature, and assertions contained within Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2002).

## **Limitations**

Although this study helps to fill a void in the literature and further the discourse regarding challenges and successes of African American women in student affairs, it has limitations that should be noted when interpreting its findings. First, the study was limited to participants at only one large, predominantly White, Research I university in the Southeast. As a result, the generalizability of the findings of this study to other types of colleges and universities is tenuous. Second, only one participant at each professional level was interviewed, which produced a total of only three participants. Interviews with a larger sample size at each of the professional levels of student affairs administration might have produced more reliable results. In addition, the researcher's positionality as an African American woman with extensive experience

in higher education administration should be considered as a source, which may have influenced the interpretation of the participants' responses.

## Findings

Among the three women that participated in the study, one was an entry-level professional (coordinator) that had been in her position only one year, one was a mid-level professional (director) who had been at the University for approximately 5 years but had only been in the director's position for approximately 8 months, and one was employed in a senior-level administrative position (vice president) and had begun the second year of her appointment. The results of the participants' responses were organized in 5 categories: *Positive Work-Place Factors*, *Work-Place Challenges*, *Experiences of Racism*, *Advice to New African American Females Entering the Profession*, and *Services and Resources Colleges and Universities Can Offer*. Organizing the data into these categories allowed for the recognition of differences among the participants' patterns of responses and to present the emerging themes.

### Positive Work-Place Factors

The factors related to work-place climate that positively influenced the professional success of the women seemed to have been related to their relationships and interactions with mentors, supervisors and colleagues. The major theme that emerged related to support from their supervisors and staff.

**Support from supervisors and staff.** All of the women seemed to be very pleased about being in their current positions and believed the work-place climate to be positive. In addition, they mentioned that their supervisors had been very helpful in assisting them to settle in their positions and had shown interest and care as they attempted to acclimate to the work environment and their specific roles. Assistance from staff was also pointed out by these administrators as being an important work-place climate factor that had positively affected their level of success in their roles. It is interesting to note that the mid-level student affairs administrator in particular indicated that she had strong interpersonal relationships with some colleagues in her previous position at the University that had assisted her in having a successful 5 years. She further indicated that "so far, the staff and supervisor in my new position seem supportive of me but you never know around here—I'll have to wait and see." An additional noteworthy comment came from the senior-level administrator who indicated that she was respected by the larger university community regarding her abilities, opinions, and decisions, which she believed to be beneficial to the work-place climate.

### Work-Place Challenges

Contrary to the perceived positive support these women received from their supervisors and staff, they also believed that many people in their work environment did not understand the worldview of African American women, which often presents climate challenges.

**Lack of understanding the world view of African American women.** The participants seemed to believe that the question or possibility of racism was constant in their work-place,

which has stemmed from the historical effects of discrimination. It was not surprising that the senior-level participant in particular noted the pressure to always “prove herself more than anyone else” as a work-place challenge as well as “being the lone voice.” Interestingly, this participant also noted the challenge of working with other African American women who were “not good colleagues” and asked for promotional favors or who remained distant and aloof.

### **Experiences of Racism**

Although none of the participants reported direct incidences of racism in their work-place environment, concerns regarding discrimination or stereotypes were evident in their responses.

**Discrimination and stereotypes.** In discussing their notions regarding racism that existed in their work-place, the participants were reluctant and or unwilling to provide examples of direct incidents, but rather spoke in general terms. The mid-level administrator reported questioning whether some behaviors she observed were racist or rather the result of ignorance. Although, she indicated that she has experienced racism and believes that racism is at the core of academia and the American conscience. Interestingly, the senior-level administrator recalled a racist encounter she faced in another position at a different university and never answered the question of whether she had faced racism in her current work-place. Additionally, the entry-level participant indicated that she had not experienced any direct work-place racism but has experienced a great deal of curiosity about her appearance such as her hair, which suggested that she may have been stereotyped.

### **Advice to New African American Females Entering the Profession**

The participants gave several recommendations for African American female novices entering the professional field of student affairs. The major themes that emerged included the importance of understanding the work environment, having familial support and knowing one’s self.

**Understanding the work-place environment.** Participants at each of the administrative levels indicated the need for new student affairs administrators to understand the culture and expectations of the work-place. This theme appeared especially important to the entry-level professional who commented “you cannot be successful unless you learn something about your environment.”

**Importance of support.** All of the participants indicated the need for new professionals to remain close to their family members and close friends—those individuals who provide nurturance and support. One of the administrators indicated that student affairs employees “should not isolate themselves from friends and family when they get into new positions.”

**Knowing one’s self.** The participants believed that it is important for African American females to know who they are. “African American women need to be grounded in their self-concept” was a part of the advice given by the senior-level administrator. Similarly, the mid-level administrator suggested that one should “have a vision and know where you want to go in life.” This participant also emphatically stated that it was crucial that new African American

women student affairs professionals be sure to develop and maintain a life outside of their work in order to try to prevent burnout. She specifically mentioned how her involvement in and connection to the local community (i.e. Church) had helped her balance the demands of her job. The entry-level administrator suggested that “do not think you have to be a representative for all African American women; do not be afraid to do things because you are the only African American person.”

**Mentors.** Lastly, two participants report the importance of mentorships, and advised that new-comers should seek multiple mentors and role models from a variety of cultural backgrounds (i.e. African American or White and male or female) as the diverse perspectives of these individuals can help develop a well-rounded sense of professionalism.

### **Services and Resources Colleges and Universities Can Offer**

The services and resources institutions can offer to assist African American women were key to the participants. They believed that the types and amount of support the university provides is indicative of the institution's commitment to the success, failure, and positive acclimation of African American women employed in their student affairs divisions.

**Increase the critical mass.** The participants strongly believed that more African American women in administrative leadership and faculty positions should be hired. This finding suggests that the participants feel isolated in their current departments, thus perpetuating feelings of discomfort. The senior-level professional indicated that she saw herself as “the lone voice,” possibly insinuating that she is the spokesperson for her race and carrying the responsibility to act as such. This finding parallels the participants’ suggestions to seek mentors and supportive networks within their own race.

**Establish supportive networks.** A formal mentoring program seemed to be a priority for these women in terms of a supportive network to assist African American women in student affairs. “The University should have some type of mentoring program so the more seasoned African American administrators can work with the new staff; it’s hard to get to know the few African American administrators who might want to serve as a mentor on a large campus like this” was the sentiment expressed by the entry-level participant. Similarly, the senior level administrator mentioned the “need to connect with other African American women” at the University. Additionally, these women seemed to believe that greater support and recognition of the African American faculty and staff association should be given by the University. “The University should do more to assist and disseminate information about support such as the African American faculty and staff association” was expressed by one of the participants.

### **Discussion**

The women in this study represented African American women who are typically employed in professional roles in student affairs at institutions of higher education. In terms of their professional roles, these women were classified at the entry-, mid-, and senior-levels as suggested by Burkard, Cole, Ott and Stoflet (2005).

Results seem to suggest that central to the beliefs these women held about their work-place climate is the fact that their supervisors and staff had been supportive and assisted them in acclimating to the environment. This finding is not surprising since most of the women were new to the University and/or their professional role. Thus, it could be that they were still experiencing the “honey moon” period of their relatively new roles, which is typically a period of agreement, harmony and positive relationships in the work-place. Nevertheless, this finding may be especially refreshing and empowering for other African American female student affairs professionals who need to be made aware of the potential for positive work-place environments even at predominantly White institutions (PWIs). As suggested in *Black Feminist Thought* (Collins, 2006), Black women’s identity is tremendously influenced by their occupational experiences. Therefore, these findings are significant in that they contradict the majority of existing research, which underscores the oppressive experiences of African American women in higher education. Albeit, the negative experiences of African American women in higher education are important factors that should not be overlooked.

In expressing their perceptions of work-place challenges, women in this study believed that they are not appreciated by members of the dominant society. As noted by Collins (2006) in *Black Feminist Thought*, when the history of African American women’s oppression is acknowledged, the depth of the impact of that oppression on their professional lives is better understood. For example, of particular concern to the senior-level administrator was the notion of having to “prove herself more than anyone else.” Conversely, this senior-level administrator also indicated that she felt that she was respected from the larger university community “regarding her abilities, opinions, and decisions.” Clearly, the dissonance between the two responses communicated by the Vice President for Student affairs in this study is a result of the historical oppression faced by Black women and the workplace expectations of a senior-level administrator. Perhaps this senior-level administrator is experiencing the “imposter phenomenon” (Trotman, 2009), which in this case may result from the feeling that she must publicly project what she actually believes about herself even though she also believes that her colleagues might not feel the same way that she does about her competency. In other words, “the perceptions that African American women [must prove themselves due to the pervasive stereotype that they] are incompetent pervades much of their career forcing upon them the undeserved stress of providing a defense they should not need to give and fighting to prove merit when merit is unquestionably apparent” (Myers, 2002, pp.21-22).

Also noteworthy was the aloneness expressed by the African American senior-level administrator in this study, suggesting that in some instances her African American sisters appeared unfriendly and distant and some seemed only to be interested in receiving promotional favors from her. Unfortunately, at many colleges and universities, the only senior-level position occupied by a African American administrator is in the division of student affairs (Jackson, 2003) and only in recent years has this position been filled by African American women. Consequently the few African Americans in lower levels of the administrative hierarchy may respond to the African American senior-level individual reluctantly due to the mistrust that some African American individuals may attribute to people in power especially, in predominantly White settings. Additionally, in recognizing the power that a senior-level administrator holds to hire and promote personnel, some African American lower level employees may expect that an African American female senior student affairs administrator from the same racial background

should favor them regardless of what the employees have to offer professionally. In other words, the unfortunate and historical effects of oppression due to race and gender may have left many African Americans suspicious and/or with unrealistic expectations of other African Americans and females in power particularly at PWIs.

While most of the African American female student affairs administrators in this study seemed to question whether some of their negative experiences were due to blatant racism on the part of their White colleagues, they did comment on acts of discrimination and disparaging stereotypes that were present in their work-place environments. Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2006) can be used to better understand this seemingly paradoxical phenomenon and defines these types of experiences as the presence of *microaggressions*, which are “conscious, unconscious, verbal, nonverbal, and visual forms of insults [that] are directed toward people of color” (Howard-Hamilton, 2003b, p. 23). Hughes and Howard-Hamilton (2003) determined that in order to survive these microaggressive indignities, African American women need to share their experiences and receive support from other African American women who can accurately empathize with one another.

Interestingly, building and maintaining a strong foundation of support was a theme of advice from all of the participants in this study. The women appeared eager to share advice with new African American women entering the professional field of student affairs. The advice they offered included: the need to understand the culture of the work-place, remain close to family and friends, know one’s self, and engage in mentorships. Although these are the same types of factors that have been recommended by other researchers who have studied the experiences of African American women in the academy (Gregory, 2001; Howard-Hamilton, 2003b; Thompson & Louque, 2005), it is especially important for African American women in student affairs to model these behaviors due to the extremely visible role they occupy in the lives of impressionable undergraduate students.

Similarly, the women were fervent to express recommendations for services and resources that colleges and universities could offer to assist African American women student affairs administrators to be successful in the academy. The major themes included increasing the critical mass of student affairs administrators at various levels and providing supportive networks—formal and informal mentoring programs and support of African American faculty and staff associations. Again, while these recommendations are not new to the literature regarding African American women in the academy, they are very important to the success of African American female administrators in student affairs (Gordon, 2004; Hughes & Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Patitu & Hinton, 2003; Watson, 2001) because one of the central theoretical frameworks that undergirds the work of student affairs professionals is providing the appropriate balance of challenge and support to students.

### **Implications**

Since major findings in this research seem consistent with results in other studies and commentaries regarding African American women in the academy, an important question that might be raised is what has been learned from this study that can assist African American women student affairs administrators? A critical notion illuminated in the findings suggested the need for

African American female student affairs professionals to become more aware of the emotional dissonance they may experience in their attempt to confront the daily racist and sexist indignities they face in the work-place, and simultaneously fulfill their expected roles and responsibilities as educational leaders. Steps in this direction could include regular mental health check-ups with a culturally sensitive counselor or psychologist in order to assist the African American female student affairs professional to “get in touch with her challenges and particular needs [and]... express sadness, disappointment, pain, and rage” in a safe and supportive environment (Trotman, 2009, pp. 80-81).

According to Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2006), chief among culturally relevant strategies that may assist African American women cope with the realities of their professional lives as student affairs administrators, is a need for women-centered networks of emotional support (Williams, 2005), which provide Black women with “a place to describe their experiences among persons like themselves” (Howard-Hamilton, 2003b, p. 25). As such, African American women student affairs administrators should be encouraged to “form sister circles and share counterstories in settings which help [them develop stand points] and form healthy identities not based on gender or racial stereotypes” (Hughes & Howard-Hamilton, 2003, p. 101). Peer support (Patitu & Hinton, 2003), mentorship (Nichols & Tanksley, 2004; Patton & Harper, 2003), networking (Gregory, 2001; Watson, 2001), and group counseling (Howard-Hamilton, 2003b; Hughes & Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Jones, 2004; Williams, 2005) with other African American women can also be extremely helpful. It is in the company of other trusted African American women that the African American female student affairs administrator may experience a safe environment in which she can speak expressively and directly about issues and experiences that have the potential to impact her emotional, psychological, and physical health (Howard-Hamilton, 2003b; Hughes & Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Jones, 2004; Williams, 2005).

In the safety of these sister circles, the African American female student affairs administrator can not only explore her options in terms of acquiescence versus assertiveness, but can also get feedback as to how she might be coming across in reacting to racial and gender oppression. As these African American women engage in honest and supportive communication, they also subtly and simultaneously identify the details and mechanisms of their achievements, “thereby demystifying success and making it accessible to the [other] African American female group members (Trotman, 1984, p. 105). However, it is important to note that African American women’s underrepresentation in higher education and in student affairs administration make it difficult to connect with other African American women, especially in face-to-face encounters (Henry & West, 2008). Though the literature acknowledges that group experiences validate African American women’s perceptions, help to decrease stress, and prevent illness (Hughes & Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Collins, 2000), this recommendation may be difficult to achieve in traditional ways, especially among African American women student affairs administrators at PWIs.

Additionally, results from this study seem to suggest the need for African American women in student affairs to become greater advocates in speaking out against negative messages regarding African American women by promoting their strengths and contributions. For example, the myth of the “angry Black woman” must be demystified, debunked and replaced with the image of an assertive and socially savvy African American female activist who exudes a

strong, balanced self-identity and advocates on her on behalf and for other African American women. As discussed in *Black Feminist Thought* (Collins, 2006), in order to facilitate a more confident *group consciousness* among African American women who are student affairs professionals, the successes and contributions of these women should be recognized and celebrated throughout the academic community and society as a whole. African American female student affairs administrators must continue to research and document their experiences, while specifically focusing on their contributions and successes in an effort to chisel away at the boulder of victimization that often obstructs the accomplishments of African American female student affairs administrators. By adhering to this recommendation, African American women employed as student affairs administrators are better positioned to demand both the individual and institutional support necessary for dismantling the racist and sexist practices that pervade the academy (Smith 2000).

Research regarding African American women in student affairs is virtually nonexistent and is warranted. Qualitative and quantitative studies regarding the strategies that African American student affairs administrators use to assist students in the achievement of their academic goals would provide valuable information about the contributions these women are providing to students and the professional field overall. Similarly, research conducted by African American female student affairs professionals regarding the degree to which their creative programs, services, activities and policies have impacted the lives of college students, their work-place environment and the University overall would also assist in showcasing their importance as a highly valued, contributing cohort within the academy. Additionally, studies regarding the professional development initiatives in which African American women in student affairs are engaged (i.e., local, regional and national association involvement) are also important in promoting and maintaining a diverse perspective, while simultaneously recognizing the contributions of these women in enhancing the professionalization of the field of student affairs.

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### **Biography**

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