

**Black and Ivy: How Black female student leaders
create community and inclusion at an Ivy League institution**

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Abstract

Combining Black feminist thought and Black women as possibility models, this study will examine the creation of community by Black female student leaders at a highly selective, Ivy League institution — Ashegdom University (pseudonym). The study aims to explore this phenomenon because research indicates that Black female students often have to grapple with the challenges of misogyny, social and academic isolation, and racial hostility. The results of this qualitative case study will draw upon the experiences of the participants to explore (1) being a Black female on campus, (2) being a Black female student leader on campus, (3) lessons learned and strategies to build communities for and by Black women and (4) Black women as possibility models for institutional change. This study, the first of its kind, will aim to shift the narrative of Black female student leadership and places the onus on highly selective institutions, institutions with a wide variety of resources, to better position themselves within the landscape of higher education to create an inclusive community that will enhance retention and persistence of Black female students.

Introduction

"Some of the most important ideas in Black women's intellectual history come from the sense of writing across time, of having dialogues with women who grapple with questions of injustice in unfamiliar settings. Without listening to those who came before, how can Black women prepare an intellectual & political space for Black women who will confront future, reconfigured injustices?" Patricia Hill Collins

According to a Brookings 2017 study, Black student completion rates have risen in recent years, this increase has been found primarily among Black women. The Brookings study, and studies like it (Espinosa et. al., 2019; National Center for Education Statistics, 2019), have provided the foundation that has propelled this demographic to be regarded as strong, perseverant, and independent; qualities that Black women possess that encompass what many regard as 'Black Girl Magic'. Researchers have even claimed that Black women are the new model minority (Kaba, 2008). Despite the recent praise Black women have received as a result of their recent upward mobility, Black women are still victimized by the inequitable and exclusive milieu on college campuses. In higher education, Black women often deal with challenges that are distinct to their intersecting identities, being both women and Black, and expected to navigate college effectively despite having limited access to resources (Zamani, 2003). These challenges may vary dependent on the institutions that Black women enroll in, and it is imperative that there is further exploration into the challenges these women face while at institutions that historically excluded Black women. There is a lack of literature that exists on Black women college students, and very limited research that examine these experiences of Black women on elite campuses. This study aims to give prominence to these challenges, and the opportunities, that Black women encounter while on predominantly White elite campuses, in an effort to better understand the

often unspoken practices and procedures that influence how Black women find comfort and establish community.

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this case study is to examine the complicated realities of Black female student leaders at a highly selective, Ivy League institution and how these women navigate academic spaces and create community on campus while holding positions of leadership. The study aims to explore this phenomenon because research indicates that Black female students have to grapple with the challenges of misogyny, social and academic isolation, and racial hostility. According to Patton (2018), minoritized groups — Black students at predominantly White institutions — experience overlapping forms of oppression; Black women, particularly, have to learn to navigate their intersecting social identities, both Black and woman at predominantly White institutions (Winkle-Wagner et. al, 2019). Winkle-Wagner, Kelly, Luedke, and Reavis (2019) found that Black women spend significant time in college resisting negative stereotypes related to their intellect and are often faced with the pressure of high expectations bestowed upon them by peers and colleagues due to the Black superwoman myth; these exorbitant expectations can lead to depression, lack of self-care, and negative coping methods. Similarly, a study of Black women student leaders at a predominantly White institution (Domingue, 2015) found that this demographic of student leaders often experienced interpersonal interactions with oppression as well as microaggressions and silencing from White and/or male peers; these oppressive encounters can produce feelings of internal inferiority, powerlessness, and further marginalization.

As Black women continue to populate highly selective, predominantly White institutions, there is a need for additional exploration into how Black women are building community and

enriching these institutions while navigating their intersectional identities. Current research has not explored this topic in depth. Therefore this study will draw upon the experiences of the participants to explore (1) being a Black female on campus, (2) being a Black female student leader on campus, (3) lessons learned and strategies to build communities for and by Black women and (4) Black women as possibility models for institutional change.

Purpose of the Study

This study's purpose is to examine the unique experiences of Black women student leaders on predominantly White institutions and explore how these women are creating community. This study will serve to address a gap in the literature and to also provide qualitative insight into the experiences of student leaders and the challenges these students face with regard to their identity. This study also hopes to lend research to better conceptualize and spotlight the experiences of Black women on predominantly White highly-selective institutions where they may face marginalization and exclusion.

Significance of the Study

This study, the first of its kind, will aim to shift the narrative of Black female student leadership and places the onus on highly selective institutions, institutions with a wide variety of resources, to better position themselves within the landscape of higher education to create an inclusive community that will enhance retention and persistence of Black female students. To have a greater understanding of the unique vantage of Black women, studies such as this one are necessary. The study will also bring the experiences of Black female students to light and will empower Black female leaders to offer their voice to advocate for a milieu that embraces their perspective, validates their experiences, and regards them as vital members of the academic community. This study will add to the body of literature on college student leadership

development and college student personnel management and inform practitioners on how to best support these student leaders. The study will also provide knowledge on how Black female student leaders are crafting community while also maneuvering both gendered and racialized experiences on predominantly White campuses.

Rationale for the Study

The findings of this study are intended to start the conversation and add to the understanding of how and why Black female students find and or create community in spaces where they are marginalized or may feel invisible. This is a needed contribution to help student affairs administrators and personnel, faculty advisors, student organization advisors and staff members become intentional about being inclusive to marginalized groups, specifically Black females.

Concluding Summary

Gone are the days where Black women are excluded from attending Ivy League institutions based on the color of their skin. In fact, the second Black woman in the United States to earn a Ph.D., Dr. Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander holds a bachelors, a masters, and law degree from an Ivy League Institution- University of Pennsylvania. Also, as a graduate student, Dr. Alexander, helped to charter the Gamma chapter of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. — an African American Greek-lettered sorority on Penn’s campus. Dr. Alexander is an example of a Black student who not only enrolled and earned fours degrees from the university, but was an active student leader on campus who created community for other Black women. Her story, while impressive, may not be the contemporary experience of current students. By interviewing present-day Black female student leaders, we are able to see a more complete portrait of their current experiences.

It is the hope of the authors that the findings from this study could be used to create and sustain development trainings that are inclusive for all student leaders, help predominantly White campuses fosters an understanding of the unique experiences of Black female student leaders, and explore nuanced concepts such as identity, intersectionality, marginalization and privilege. Further this study will provide real time lessons and advice for parents and prospective students who are considering applying and enrolling into a predominantly White, Ivy League institution directly from the participants.

Review of the Literature

Black women make up 11.7% of all degrees conferred by Black students in the United States, a number that has increased over the past 10 years (NCES, 2019). Despite the growing number of Black women collegians, there is limited research on the experiences of Black women in college and how these women acclimate and create community on campuses where they may be the minority. To completely comprehend the lived experiences of Black college students, we must begin by unpacking much of the literature that does exist about this demographic. This literature review will provide an outline of pertinent research on Black women and their college experiences. We will also explore Black feminist thought as well as college student leadership models

Oftentimes the experiences of Black women in college are lost in discussions of Black students and/or women of color (Patton & Croom, 2017; Howard & Hamilton, 2003). Collins (1989) asserts that Black women experience a different world than those who are not Black or female, thus creating a consciousness that is directly associated with the way they view their reality. Embodying the intersection of two social identities—race and gender, Black women college students often are required to navigate “dual oppression” in higher education (Moses,

1989; Bartman, 2015; Patton & Croom, 2017; Commodore, Baker, & Arroyo, 2018). Although Black women tend to encounter gendered and racialized forms of oppression on college campuses, the experiences of Black women are often underexplored and on the periphery of discussions in higher education making these students and their experiences invisible (Patton & Croom, 2017). Identifying with two marginalized social identities on a predominantly White campus can cause Black collegians to encounter distinct challenges related to their identity (Moses, 1989). These challenges can be described as the “outsider within” which explains the status of otherness or marginality that Black women often encounter when in predominantly White spaces (Collins, 1986). Issues of racism, sexism, isolation, and a lack of sense of belonging can often aggravate this status and disrupt the academic success of Black women at colleges and universities (Howard & Hamilton, 2003; Commodore, Baker, & Arroyo, 2018). Feelings of isolation can also be exacerbated at predominantly White highly-selective institutions where Black students are often categorized as “affirmative action admits” (Lewis, Chesler & Forman, 2000) and where Black women, in particular, claim to experience isolation as a result of conflict caused by the high levels of competitiveness amongst other Black women (Littleton, 2003; Porter & Dean, 2015).

At predominantly White institutions, Black women have to learn to navigate their intersecting social identities, both Black and woman (Winkle-Wagner et. al, 2019). In addition to issues related to racism and sexism, Winkle-Wagner, Kelly, Luedke, and Reavis (2019) found that Black women spend significant time in college resisting negative stereotypes related to their intellect and are often faced with the pressure of high expectations bestowed upon them by peers and colleagues due to the Black “superwoman” myth; these exorbitant expectations can lead to depression, lack of self-care, and negative coping methods. Similar to the superwoman myth,

Black women have also been regarded as the “new model minority” (Kaba, 2008). According to Kaba (2008), Black women, similar to Asian Americans, should be considered a model minority because they have made significant progress and have been upwardly mobile. This newly minted stereotype, although well-intentioned, has painted Black women in a light that some argue further exploits the strength of Black women while relinquishing the responsibility of the institution to meet those needs specific to these students (Patton & Croom, 2017). Patton and Croom (2017) also assert that the model minority myth often creates a monolithic identity for Black women and erases the diverse experiences of Black women on college experiences. A monolithic perspective of Black women further strengthens the negative stereotypes about the group, especially negative beliefs about Black women’s behavior and appearance, beliefs that can carry negative implications both in the classroom and outside of the classroom (Commodore, Baker, & Arroyo, 2018). These implications may dissuade Black women from joining student organizations and taking on leadership positions (Commodore, Baker, & Arroyo, 2018).

Although there is a plethora of research on college student leadership, research on Black students in leadership positions is scarce, and there is even fewer literature on Black women in student leadership (Domingue, 2014). McCurtis (2012) conducted a study on Black student leadership at a Predominantly White Institution anchored in the social change model of leadership and found that black students leaders engage in and exhibit social change values. The study found that Black students with heightened positive racial esteem or heightened feelings about their racial identity were engaged in socially responsible leadership or leadership steeped in community service and may facilitate change. Domingue (2014) found that Black women student leaders often dealt with heightened racial awareness and isolation on predominantly White campuses, in an effort to combat these feelings, many had a desire to lead to create or

sustain a Black community on campus. In the same study, Domingue found that Black women often experienced challenges entering and/or pursuing a leadership role, and were met with oppressive interpersonal interactions while holding those positions at their institution. These experiences for many of the Black women were traumatic and became a burden to carry as a student leader on campus (Domingue, 2014). A similar study of Black women student leaders at a predominantly White institution (Domingue, 2015) found that this demographic of student leaders often experienced oppression in the form of microaggressions and silencing from White and/or male peers; these oppressive encounters can produce feelings of internal inferiority, powerlessness, and further marginalization.

Considering the distinct obstacles Black women college students face and the intersection of two marginalized identities, “more attention should be paid to the educational, social, and political positions of African American women in postsecondary education” (Zamani, 2003 p. 6). As Black women continue to populate highly selective, predominantly White campuses, there is a need for additional exploration into how Black women are building community and enriching these institutions while navigating their intersectional identities.

Research Methods

Theoretical Framework

In 1989, Patricia Hill Collins defined Black Feminist Thought (BFT) as “formulating and rearticulating the distinctive, self-defined standpoint of African American women by African American women” (Hill-Collins, 1989, p. 750). Hill later added that “Black feminist thought both arises within and aims to articulate a Black women’s group standpoint regarding experiences associated with intersecting oppressions, stressing this group standpoint’s

heterogeneous composition as significant” (Collins, 2000, p. 32). In 2018, Lori Patton urged readers and researchers to “imagine Black women as possibility models for institutional change that transforms higher education and advances racial equity” (p.1), allowing Black women to use their stories and experiences as change agents. Using Black women as possibility models, in addition to the framework of Black Feminist Thought, we will ask the participants open-ended questions to understand the individual and shared experiences as Black female student leaders and how they have created community on campus.

Research Questions

The study will be framed by three research questions:

1. How do you first identify, as Black, as a woman or a leader? Why?
2. How would you describe your community at your Ivy League institution?
3. How did you become a part of your community?

Research Design

This case study is based in qualitative research because we are seeking to pursue a deeper understanding of community building and how Black female students leaders contribute to this process. In addition, a qualitative approach allows for the voice of the participants to be explored and explained. The study will use a semi-structured, open-ended qualitative protocol as the foundation of the methodological design (Creswell, 2014; Patton, 1990). Interviews will be conducted in person and on campus individually or in groups of no more than two students.

Data Collection

To examine the experiences of Black female student leaders, we interviewed ten current undergraduate/graduate students from a single Ivy League institution-Ashegdom University (pseudonym). Using purposeful sampling and social media platforms including Twitter,

Facebook and Instagram participants were recruited who fit the criteria of the study. Participants were also asked to refer their peers. The selection criteria included the participant identifying as a current student, Black or African American, as a female- gender as assigned by birth, holding a leadership position on campus. All interviews took place through a single in person interview for each participant on campus. Interviews lasted between X and X minutes and were digitally recorded for later transcription. The interview protocol addressed participants' experiences as Black women, student leaders, and developing community.

Data Analysis

A demographic survey was used to explore and draw out the connections between the experiences of the participants. The demographic survey also served as an interview pre-screen. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed through a professional service and coded after each interview. A code book was created with the start of the first interview.

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