

I This chapter provides an overview of the historical roles and contemporary educational challenges and opportunities for African American women.

African American Women in Higher Education

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As the twenty-first century opened, the landscape of higher education appeared dissimilar from that of the past. One particularly visible change is in the composition of the college-going population: postsecondary institutions enroll increasing numbers of individuals from groups historically excluded from higher education because of their racial or ethnic background, socioeconomic class, or sex. For example, the National Center for Education Statistics reported in 2002 that minority students were roughly one-quarter of all undergraduates in 1989–90; in 1999–2000, that figure climbed approximately 8 percent, to over one-third, and is expected to continue to rise (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). In fact, demographers project that by the year 2050, because an estimated 60 percent of the U.S. population will be people of color, members of so-called racial and ethnic minorities will make up the majority of students in college (Hobbs and Stoops, 2000).

African American students were 10.2 percent of undergraduates in 1989–90; this proportion increased slightly to 12.7 percent in 1999–2000. Student population trends also illustrate growth in the participation of women in higher education. In fact, attendance patterns indicate that for roughly thirty years, women's enrollment in higher education has been increasing at a faster rate than men's; women now account for 56.3 percent of undergraduates (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). It is

In this volume, the term *African American* is used interchangeably with *black*, and in this chapter *two-year institution* is used interchangeably with *community college*.

very likely that undergraduate enrollment of women will continue to outpace that of men (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). This trend has particularly serious implications for African Americans. The *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* ("Ominous Gender Gap," 1999) projects that, if present attendance patterns continue, African American women will receive all baccalaureate degrees awarded to African Americans by the year 2097.

Despite the increasing proportion of African American students enrolling in postsecondary education, debates about the extent to which all college students have equal access to opportunities for success continue. For example, African American students are less likely to persist to degree completion than white students (Cross and Slater, 2001).

African American women hold a unique position as members of two groups that have been treated in a peripheral manner by postsecondary education (Moses, 1989). Membership in both marginalized groups often makes African American women invisible in colleges and universities. Given the complex intersection of race and gender, more attention should be paid to the educational, social, and political positions of African American women in postsecondary education.

This chapter examines the historical legacy of exclusion and the struggle for inclusion by African Americans in higher education and addresses the impact of race and sex on educational participation. Furthermore, the central aim of this chapter is to consider which types of postsecondary institutions appear to afford African American women a sense of agency in meeting their educational needs.

The Intersection of Race and Gender

Across all levels, education has been gendered (Julia, 2000). The learning experiences of girls and women have been different from those of boys and men in terms of access to formal education, exclusion from various types of scholastic participation, bias in the curriculum, and instruction (Hayes, 2000b). All of these elements have contributed to overrepresentation of women in low-status, low-income-producing fields (Hayes, 2000b). At the same time, women's experiences have been very diverse, partly because they have been shaped by race (Julia, 2000).

For example, the women's movement of the 1970s, which sought to emancipate women, spoke primarily to the needs and concerns of middle-class white women, not to those of most African American women. The increased participation of African American women in the public workplace was opposed by white women in part because during and after slavery, African American women raised white children and kept white homes intact while dealing with their own family responsibilities (Lerner, 1992). It is not surprising, then, that African American women's welfare, concerns, or lack of participation in society were not a consideration in the evolution of early

feminist thought. Therefore, “as far as many Blacks were concerned, the emergence of the women’s movement couldn’t have been more untimely or irrelevant” (Giddings, 1984, p. 299).

Although gender is salient in shaping identity and defining various facets of women’s educational experiences, race also has an influence that often differentiates experiences and opportunities. Being female and African American places African American women at the confluence of two forms of oppression. This is the topic to which I turn next.

“Ain’t I a Woman?” Historical Educational Disadvantages of African American Women

The history of African Americans is paradoxical because it is marked by movement from the antiquity of Africa, a rich ancestral heritage of kings and queens long before the Mayflower, through slavery, to Jim Crow and the present-day effects of previous discrimination and current racial prejudice (Bennett, 1998; Chafe, Gavins, and Korstad, 2001). The inequities faced by African Americans as a group have been particularly oppressive for black women. Lerner (1992) noted: “Black women have always been more conscious of and more handicapped by race oppression than by sex oppression. They have been subject to all the restrictions against Blacks and those against women. In no area of life have they ever been permitted to attain higher levels of status than white women” (p. xxii). This statement illustrates the place of African American women in U.S. society. Put more bluntly, African American women traditionally have been preceded by white men, white women, and African American men in importance and standing (Lerner, 1992).

The American system of education is a microcosm of the larger society, reflecting and reinforcing its strengths and flaws. Throughout the first two hundred years of the United States, the formal education of females was not universal. By the time of the Civil War, the literacy gap between men and women was bridged only in the increasingly urban Northeast, where middle- and upper-class white girls were taught to read and write (Lerner, 1993; Ogbu, 1990). African American men and women, as well as rural and immigrant white women, were not afforded the same opportunities (Lerner, 1993; Ogbu, 1990).

Over time, schools for special populations emerged (for example, historically black colleges and universities [HBCUs], single-sex institutions). Preeminent scholars and activists, such as Mary McLeod Bethune and W.E.B. DuBois, argued the advantages of voluntary segregation as an effective means of educational and economic attainment for African Americans, particularly African American women (Giddings, 1984).

Today, African Americans are enrolled in K–16 education in record numbers, yet the increase in higher education attendance has been slow, and the status of African American students remains relatively unchanged (Zamani and Brown, 2003). Although higher education demonstrates

Table 1.1. African American College Enrollment by Gender, 1980 and 1999

	1980		1999	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
Total	463,700	643,000	603,000	1,037,700
Percentage	42%	58%	36.8%	63.2%

Source: U.S. Department of Education, 1999.

considerable student diversity compared to the past, institutions of higher education have yet to mirror societal pluralism (Zamani and Brown, 2003). For example, African Americans account for 12.5 percent of the general population, but an estimated 11 percent of the total college student population is composed of African Americans. In addition, many African American college students attend lower-prestige institutions, such as community colleges and regional state universities (Altbach, Lomotey, and Rivers, 2002; U.S. Department of Education, 1999). And although African American student enrollment has increased, an examination of college attendance patterns by sex (Table 1.1) yields interesting within-group trends.

Literature on student participation in postsecondary education by race or ethnicity consistently reveals higher rates of college participation and completion among African American women than African American men (Gregory, 1999; "Ominous Gender Gap," 1999; "Troublesome Decline," 2001). Nearly two-thirds of African American undergraduates are women (*Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, 1999). According to Trent (1991), a feminization of African American education is occurring, which has serious implications for distribution of jobs as well as selection of mates.

Between 1976 and 1999, African American students increased from 6 to 9 percent of total enrollment in graduate programs and from 5 to 8 percent in first professional programs (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). Modest enrollment increases for African Americans at the graduate level as a group can be attributed to the enrollment of African American women in larger numbers (Ruffins, 1997). From these statistics, it is evident that a gender gap in educational attainment occurs among African Americans that does not appear to the same degree in other racial or ethnic groups (Malveaux, 2002).

In addition, despite increases in African American participation in higher education, formal and informal barriers to persistence, including a postsecondary education system stratified by socioeconomic status, persist (Altbach, Lomotey, and Rivers, 2002). These barriers are particularly salient for African American women, who continue to suffer the effects of gender and racial bias (Bowman, 1995; Hayes, 2000a, 2000b).

In addition, as the percentage of African American males in higher education decreased, the actual number of African American males remained stable while larger numbers of African American women attended higher learning institutions. African American women often are put in the position of representing their race to a predominantly white system (Turner, 2001). In further elucidating African American women's status, Malveaux (1998) reveals that, on average, a college education afforded white women a 4.4 percent increase in wages; African American female college graduates' earnings were 3.2 percent lower than white female counterparts. Frequently, African American women are disproportionately affected by wage differentials or gaps (Malveaux, 1998). For this reason and others, it is essential to assess the divergent educational contexts that African American women occupy, to determine which environments foster and which inhibit success for collegiate African American women.

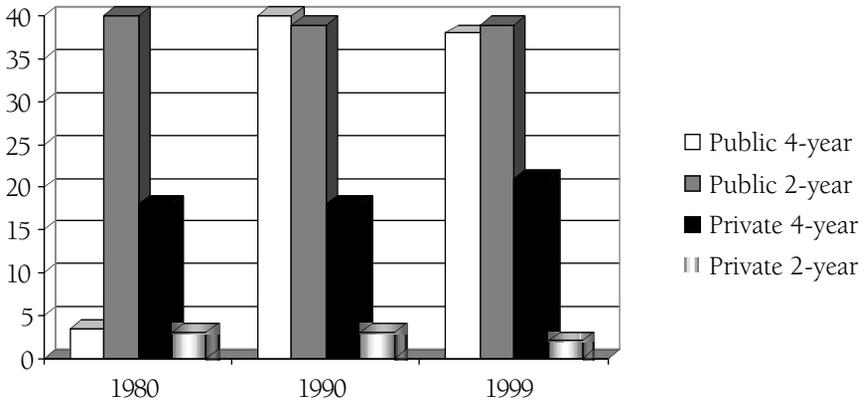
Institutional Type: Addressing Variation in Higher Education Environments

"The value African Americans place on education has always been extraordinarily high. There is a deep historical and cultural belief in the efficacy of education. Blacks have sought education in every conceivable manner at every level" (Billingsley, 1992, p. 181). Given the diversity in student populations across colleges and universities, issues of race and gender vary by institutional context. Therefore, it is very important to examine not only *if* African American students enter college but *where* they enter (see Figure 1.1).

Segregation in higher education continues; most African American students enroll in institutions considered to be of low status, including two-year colleges (Renner, 2003; Zamani and Brown, 2003). The large number of African Americans at community colleges is especially problematic if their educational goals include more than an associate degree; students who enter a two-year college intending eventually to obtain a bachelor's degree are less likely to attain that goal than those who enter a four-year college (Brint and Karabel, 1989; Dougherty, 1994; Pascarella and others, 1998; Pincus and Archer, 1989). Renner contends, "numerically, minority students are less equal now than they were thirty years ago on the criterion that really matters, college graduation" (2003, p. 40). Given the demographic shifts in the general population, however, it is in the country's best interest to increase the college participation of African Americans, women, and other persons of color across all institutional types, particularly selective colleges and universities as fewer whites (white men in particular) will comprise the workforce in the next couple of decades.

Because it is likely that self-concepts and experiences of African American women are influenced by the composition—by sex and by race—of the colleges they attend (Aragon and Zamani, 2002; Jackson, 1998), the

Figure 1.1. Percentage Distribution of African American Student Enrollment at Two-Year and Four-Year Institutions



Source: U.S. Department of Education, 1999.

missions, characteristics, and climates of postsecondary institutions require attention with regard to their capacity to foster postsecondary educational attainment for African American women. The institutional mission reflects a stated purpose and enduring vision that directs and distinguishes a college or university (Peeke, 1994). Moreover, the mission shapes the institutional context and the campus ecology (the person-environment fit within the college setting), which directly influence goodness of fit or match between the student and the institution (Sinton, 1996).

African American college students do not attend higher-status institutions, such as research universities and Ivy League colleges, to the same degree as their white peers, and it is arguable whether institutions of that kind are the most successful in fostering the advancement of African American students in general and African American women in particular. Research by Wolf-Wendel (1998) asserts that although predominantly white, elite institutions receive the most acclaim for student outcomes, colleges for special populations (for example, HBCUs and women's colleges) should be given more credit, because they account for a greater proportion of African American and women achievers.

Other researchers have argued that institutional cultures and campus climates at HBCUs and other minority-serving institutions are perceived as more welcoming to students of color than are predominantly white institutions (Brown and Davis, 2001; Hurtado, Milem, and Clayton-Pedersen, 1999). For the most part, institutions that have a mission dedicated to underserved or marginalized groups might be thought to have a better appreciation for students' backgrounds and needs and, therefore, to provide the student with a level of cultural capital that he or she might not obtain at a majority-serving college or university.

Historically Black Colleges and Universities and Predominantly White Institutions. Although it was illegal to educate persons of African descent in many parts of this country until after the Civil War, foundations were established for the education of African Americans (Bowman, 1992). In the late 1800s, only a relatively small number of white institutions admitted African Americans, and those that did were located primarily in the North; however, the majority of African Americans resided in the South (Guyden, 1999). Legal racial separation of colleges and universities was launched (particularly in the South) with the second Morrill Act of 1890, which established public land-grant institutions of higher education for African Americans. Most of these new colleges were four-year institutions (Cohen, 1998).

As a group, the “1890 universities” and their private college counterparts often are referred to as historically black colleges and universities. Most of these institutions were located in small towns and rural areas of the South and were affiliated with a religious denomination (Clayton, 1979). Because the initial mission of HBCUs was to improve the economic and social conditions of newly freed slaves, their curricula originally had a vocational emphasis. Over time, that emphasis evolved to include and promote general education and liberal arts (Drewry and Doermann, 2001; Gray, 2001; Guyden, 1999).

Today, there are an estimated 103 HBCUs in the United States, which enroll 16 percent of African American college students. Thus, HBCUs constitute 3 percent of all American postsecondary institutions and 9 percent of baccalaureate degree-granting colleges and universities (Bowman, 1992; Gray, 2001; Hope, 1996; Wagener and Nettles, 1998). Although well over 80 percent of African American students attend predominantly white institutions (PWIs), HBCUs have consistently produced slightly over one-third of African American degree recipients, more than other institutional types (Hope, 1996; Wolf-Wendel, 1998).

There are significant differences in the educational outcomes of African American students (especially African American women) at HBCUs than those at PWIs. Chief among these differences is the extent to which HBCUs foster degree aspirations and encourage careers in engineering, the natural sciences, or mathematics (Carter, 2001; Chenoweth, 1997; Grandy, 1998; Joiner, 2001). In addition, studies have found that HBCUs are more efficient and productive than PWIs in terms of expenditures per student; operating with fewer fiscal resources than majority schools, they produce the majority of black college graduates that go on to receive Ph.D.s (Wolf-Wendel, 1998; Wolf-Wendel, Blacker, and Morphey, 2000). In fact, of the twenty institutions of higher education that graduate the highest number of African American students who later earn doctorates, nine are HBCUs (Gray, 2001). African American women outnumber African American men at both PWIs and HBCUs (Drewry and Doermann, 2001). However, for African American women, attending an HBCU can greatly benefit their

development and positively affect academic performance and subsequent mobility (Jackson and Swan, 1991; Wolf-Wendel, 1998).

Similar to historically black four-year institutions, historically black two-year colleges (HBCs) carried the charge to provide ex-slaves with educational opportunities. Unlike historically black four-year colleges and universities, however, the development of black two-year institutions was largely an outgrowth of the twentieth century (Guyden, 1999). Also, black two-year institutions largely promoted a liberal arts curriculum with the purpose of encouraging transfer in pursuit of baccalaureate degrees. At one time, more than one hundred black colleges were two-year institutions or provided two-year curricula; only fourteen historically black two-year institutions remained by 1997, most located in the Southeast (*Historically Black Colleges and Universities Fact Book*, 1983).

As noted earlier, HBCUs were originated solely for the purpose of educating African Americans. However, over time predominantly black institutions (PBIs) have emerged from predominantly white institutions that experienced significant growth in enrollments of African American students (Guyden, 1999; Townsend, 1999). Both two-year and four-year PBIs are typically located in major cities in which at least 50 percent of the population is African American (Townsend, 1999).

Community Colleges and Proprietary Postsecondary Institutions.

Community college students are among the most diverse collegiate populations in the United States. The vast majority of educational opportunities for students of color have been at two-year institutions, despite the fact that students of color typically have higher educational aspirations than their white counterparts (Carter, 1999, 2001; Cohen and Brawer, 2003).

Community colleges play a significant role in providing educational access and opportunity to minority students. Every fall, about half of all undergraduate students of color enroll in community colleges. Roughly two-fifths of African Americans are in two-year institutions, and the majority of these students are women (Phillippe and Patton, 2000). In addition, 58 percent of all community college students are women, three-fourths of whom attend on a part-time basis (Phillippe and Patton, 2000; White, 2001).

Of students at community colleges, women receive the largest number of associate degrees and certificates. Nonetheless, it is debatable whether community colleges are the most practical educational option for African American women students who might not otherwise have postsecondary opportunities. For example, white students are more likely than African American students to obtain two-year degrees and certificates.

As with community colleges, important contributions to educational access have been made by private, for-profit postsecondary institutions. Conveniently located in urban areas close to where many students of color work or live, proprietary institutions are becoming key providers of postsecondary degree programs, drawing increasing numbers of African

American women and other students previously underserved by higher education (Collison, 1998; Ruch, 2001; Sperling and Tucker, 1997).

Proprietary schools have created a niche for themselves through purposeful targeting and aggressive recruitment of women and students of color (Ruch, 2001). Close to half of those attending proprietary schools, such as DeVry Institute and the University of Phoenix, are students of color or first-generation students (Ruch, 2001; Sperling and Tucker, 1997). According to Collison (1998), several proprietary institutions are among the top one hundred institutions graduating African American and women students in business, computer science, and engineering. Proprietary institutions often are considered more flexible, cost-effective, and less selective than not-for-profit colleges and universities, and are also desirable because of their reputation for first-rate job placement for graduates.

Single-Sex Education: Women's Colleges. All women, regardless of race, were educationally disadvantaged prior to the Civil War, because of societal norms which dictated that only white men should receive formal postsecondary education. Colleges for women were founded to remedy this situation. The founding of these institutions was largely to benefit white women, since African American women were neither sufficiently wealthy to attend college nor considered intellectually capable in general (Lerner, 1992, 1993). One exception was Spellman College, which was established to serve black women.

Today, there are eighty-two women's colleges in twenty-five states. They include both private and public, two-year and four-year, and predominantly white and historically black institutions (Sebrechts, 2001). Many women's colleges have religious affiliations. Despite the historic context in which they were established, women's colleges are considered by many to be relevant today because gender bias still is evident in American educational institutions (Aragon and Zamani, 2002; Hagg, 2001; Lomotey, 1997).

Although single-sex institutions are thought by some to produce higher achievement levels among women than do coeducational colleges and universities, socioeconomic class benefits also have been attached to those attending private women's colleges, particularly those that are most selective (Hagg, 2001). It was not until the 1960s that the most elite women's colleges (for example, the "Seven Sisters," including Wellesley, Vassar, Bryn Mawr, and Barnard) actively recruited African American women (Perkins, 1997). Once recruited, they found success similar to that of their white counterparts. For example, Perkins (1997) stated that African American graduates of women's colleges in the mid-1960s are among the "who's who" of black American elites. According to *Black Enterprise* magazine in 1991 (cited in Sebrechts, 2001), four of the twenty most powerful African American women in corporate America were alumnae of women's colleges. Like coeducational HBCUs, women's colleges do a better job of encouraging African American women to major in math or science and are associated with a greater likelihood of producing graduates

that eventually receive doctoral degrees (Hagg, 2001; Sebrechts, 2001; Wolf-Wendel, 1998).

Although there are eighty-two women's colleges, only 2.5 percent of women have attended these institutions over the last three decades (Sebrechts, 2001). There were 252 women's colleges in 1960, but by 1993, well over 60 percent of them had closed. In 1997, five of the eighty-two remaining women's colleges were two-year institutions (Wolf-Wendel and Pedigo, 1999).

At the core of colleges designed for special populations are opportunities for African American women to achieve self-actualization in ways that are often not available in other educational contexts. Many institutions of higher education have successfully met the needs of African American women, but research distinguishes special populations colleges—such as coeducational HBCUs, historically black women's colleges, and women's colleges—as having the most positive and profound impact on the lives of African American women (Bowman, 1992; Drewry and Doermann, 2001; Gray, 2001; Wolf-Wendel, 1998; Wolf-Wendel, Blacker, and Morphey, 2000).

Among the many strengths of HBCUs and single-sex institutions are their culturally based educational efforts that promote their missions to provide opportunities for academic and social growth, leadership development, and matriculation to degree completion. African American women attending HBCUs report greater cultural congruity (fit between their educational needs and resources in the environment) and life satisfaction than do those enrolled at PWIs (Constantine and Watt, 2002). Although African American women students perceive less racial bias at HBCUs than at PWIs, they also find gender discrimination in existence at HBCUs (Bonner, 2001; Bowman, 1995; Fleming, 1996).

Fostering the Growth of African American Women: Implications for Practice

Programs and approaches to meeting the needs of African American women are addressed in the chapters that follow, but research at HBCUs and women's colleges provides several suggestions appropriate for coeducational or predominantly white institutions:

- Create a substantive African American presence at majority institutions through a firm commitment to attracting African American students, faculty, and staff irrespective of the retrenchment on affirmative action in higher education, in order to reduce feelings of marginalization among African American women.
- Develop and maintain programs and policies that attend to the special concerns and needs of African American women on campus.
- Allocate financial and human resources to support institutional efforts that seek to address racial and gender bias.

- Augment curriculum and classroom experiences in order to be more inclusive of African American women and to foster their academic development, particularly in white male-dominated disciplines.

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