

Relieving the Burden of Self-Reliance: Centering the Experiences of Black Women Graduate Students in Predominantly White Institutions

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Research to explore the experiences and needs of Black women graduate students in higher education is limited despite the increased focus and prioritization of diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts, particularly in Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). This is problematic as Black women have the highest increase of graduate degree attainment rates of all gender and racial groups in the United States, yet, these institutions are not equipped to fully support them. Black women continue to make gains in degree attainment, yet these gains do not outpace the losses experienced through oppressive systems because of Black women's interlocking identities. Grounded in intersectionality (Carbado et al., 2013; Cho et al., 2013; Crenshaw, 2017) and womanism (Ayyildiz & Kocsoy, 2020; Walker, 1983; Walker, 2008), this study explores the educational experiences of 19 Black women who recently attained graduate degrees from PWIs. Findings reveal that few spaces have been created to nurture them as graduate students with interlocking minoritized race-gender identities. In response, students began to depend less on their institutions and more on self-led efforts to generate academic achievement and positive mentorship. We offer concrete and practical strategies for academic institutions to support Black women graduate students and relieve them of the burden of self-reliance.

Keywords: Black women, graduate students, mentoring, Intersectionality, Womanism

Introduction

Over the past 30 years, Black women have made great strides in educational attainment and have the highest increase in degrees earned compared to all other races and gender groups in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2015, 2019; U.S. Census, 2019). Furthermore, at the graduate level, they are outpacing Black men in regards to attainment

of master's degrees (14.7% vs. 11%) and doctoral degrees (10.9% vs. 7.1%; NCES, 2019). Despite these noted gains, academic environments, particularly Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs), continue to be unwelcoming, non-affirming, and non-inclusive spaces for Black women as students (Baldwin & Johnson, 2017). Furthermore, being Black and a woman in PWIs as a student requires existence in dual systems of oppression, positioning them for more acute stress and experiences with complex constructed inequalities (Donovan & Guillory, 2017; Walkington, 2017). As such, scholars continue to push for an intersectional analysis in the academy to validate and support the lived experiences of Black women scholars as they navigate these spaces (Bailey-Fakhoury & Frierson, 2014; Crump et al., 2020; Drew-Branch et al., 2019).

Centering the experiences of Black women is purposeful, necessary, and critical for three primary reasons. First, even as universities take action to prioritize diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts on college campuses through strategies such as hiring chief diversity officers, engaging in cluster hires of diverse scholars, and forming community and college-wide diversity committees (Kwak et al., 2019), the unique experiences and needs of Black women continue to be overlooked. Consequently, universities remain gendered and racialized organizations where work, status, and rewards are allocated unequally between cisgender men and all other genders and between White people and all other racial groups (Acker, 1990; Ray, 2019). As a result, Black women are challenged with navigating both sexism and racism (Howard-Hamilton, 2003).

Second, current approaches often overlook Black women's embodiment of intersecting identities (e.g., race, class, gender, sexuality, age, etc.) that shape and structure their lives (Collins, 2000; Collins & Bilge, 2020; Crenshaw, 1991). As Black women are increasingly accepted into college and pursuing advanced degrees, it becomes necessary to strategically develop approaches that affirm their intersecting identities. Research demonstrates that a closer examination of their experiences is warranted as discrimination and macroaggressions are common in PWIs, which may, in turn, directly influence degree completion (Crump et al., 2020). Last, while in school, Black women experience varying levels of academic strain, racial oppression, and gender dynamics, which can hinder their academic success (Lewis et al., 2016). Unfortunately, the onus of building a support network of stakeholders who are willing to share their academic and personal experiences is often relegated to the individual (Stanley, 2006). Accordingly, Black women frequently feel unwanted in their educational institutions because these spaces do not adequately accommodate their needs, which can compromise their academic success (Griffith et al., 2017). Thus, Black women students' experiences in academia are far different from other racialized and gendered groups and require further investigation.

To support the centering of Black women, we first use an intersectional analysis to show how this unique race-gender group experiences graduate school, while acknowledging how race, gender, and the intersection of race and gender can shape outcomes (Harley, 2008). Next, we draw on the theory of womanism, which embodies feminism while addressing sexism, anti-Black racism, and their intersection (Ayyildiz & Kocsoy, 2020; Walker, 1983; Walker, 2008). Using a qualitative research design, we investigate the following question: *How do Black women*

describe their experiences in graduate school at Predominantly White Institutions; and how do they make sense of their experiences? By focusing on Black women's experiences as graduate students, we gain insights into how, why, and when racial and gendered processes emerged. After conducting in-depth interviews with 19 Black women in the academy, we analyzed the way barriers and opportunities to success follow racial-gendered patterns. As more Black women are integrated into institutions of higher education, the findings of this research have the potential to inform the way researchers theorize about the organizational dynamics in PWIs during graduate educational experiences and to contribute to what we know about race-gender inequalities. Furthermore, this work can help dismantle systemic barriers experienced by Black women in academia by exposing the complexities of this duality.

Background

The gains Black women have made in degree attainment have not been outpaced by the losses incurred through oppressive experiences because of their interlocking identities. Perry et al. (2013) found that Black women who experienced both racial and gender discrimination were, in general, more likely to have increased vulnerability to individual stressors, influencing their overall health and well-being. The accumulation of these stressors impacted their overall psychological well-being and ultimately influenced their academic experiences (Donovan & Guillory, 2017). These experiences were further amplified when Black women chose to attend PWIs, which were often not welcoming or affirming towards them (Collins, 1986; Thomas & Hollenshead, 2001).

Researchers have captured some of the unique experiences of Black women as faculty and students. Collins (1986) described Black women as “outsiders within” not only in regards to their positions in White homes as domestic workers, but also to situate their positionality outside of whiteness and maleness. Howard-Hamilton (2003) recognized that, although Black women are often invited into academic spaces, they are still treated as outsiders. In these spaces, the labor of Black women faculty members is reportedly the most undervalued in the academy and is exploited to educate and mentor other Black women graduate students who will become undervalued and unappreciated faculty members (Thomas & Hollenshead, 2001). Furthermore, researchers acknowledge the plight of Black women faculty members in these environments and their assignment to underpaid, overworked, race-specific positions with additional service burdens (Wilson, 2012). This includes the assumption that they will willingly provide peer mentoring to other Black women faculty members and students on campus, even though this work will be underappreciated by the university (Wilson, 2012). At the same time, this mentoring is necessary to help Black women students and faculty members “psychologically resist the raced and gendered minefield of academia via validation, emotional support, friendship, and mutuality” (Walkington, 2017, p. 58).

Lewis et al. (2016) explored the gendered racial experiences of 17 Black women students (undergraduate, graduate, and professional) attending a PWI and identified three themes: expectations of projected stereotypes, instances of being silenced and marginalized, and

assumptions about communication styles and aesthetics. The authors recommended further research on gendered racial experiences of Black women in academic settings and within group differences, such as age, social class, and geographic region. Black women initially experienced racialized and gendered spaces as graduate students and potentially as faculty and required ongoing support and mentorship to navigate these toxic environments. Exploring their experiences as graduate students is necessary to discover further insights and strategies to support them.

Some researchers attribute the limited research on Black women graduate students to the negative but accepted perception of Black women as collectively inferior, despite their positions as researchers and scholars (Collins & Bilge, 2020). Margolis and Romero (1998) found that Black women graduate sociology students reported feeling that others viewed their admission to the program as a result of affirmative action or lowered standards. Due to this positionality and these stereotypes, they were often not respected as researchers and scholars (Collins, 1998). Researchers have also found that Black women graduate students deal with tokenism (Pena & Wilder, 2011), poor socialization (Margolis & Romero, 1998), and a lack of support in leadership positions (Apugo, 2020).

To support Black women students cope in academic environments, Lewis et al. (2016) identified three strategies used to resist racism and sexism. These strategies included protecting themselves verbally to express their opinions amongst a dominant White culture, selecting their battles and subtly solving the issue, and proving themselves as worthy and self-reliant in their academic lives, occupations, or relationships. Using these strategies, Black women were found to cope better with the racism and sexism prevalent in institutional settings (Lewis et al., 2016). This research affirms the need for targeted support for Black women students to help deal with the dual oppressive symptoms and provides critical insights into Black students' lived experiences with gendered racism (Lewis et al., 2016) and "chilly" campus climates (Hall & Sandler, 1982). Interestingly, these strategies were student driven and did not require institutional changes. We propose implementing strategies that address systemic structures and support the retention and well-being of Black women graduate students.

Conceptual Framework

Anna Julia Cooper's (1892) *A Voice from the South* and W.E.B. Du Bois' (1903) *The Souls of Black Folk* are seminal works that address interlocking identities centering the experiences and social conditions of Black Americans. Despite these early works, Eurocentric ideological framing has dominated our understanding of minoritized identities, inequities, and injustices. This study uses intersectionality and womanism as complementary conceptual frameworks to center and more authentically examine the lived experiences of Black women graduate students. Intersectionality is a Black feminist theory that highlights the importance of recognizing the interlocking identities and experiences of Black women (Carbado et al., 2013; Cho et al., 2013; Crenshaw, 2017). Womanism is a feminist theory that is used in this study to complement intersectionality by emphasizing Black women's understanding of their identity

through the lenses of Blackness and womanness (Ayyildiz & Kocsoy, 2020; Walker, 1983; Walker, 2008). We use the analytic tools of these frameworks to develop realistic approaches to policy and practice changes in academia.

Intersectionality

Numerous scholars have contributed to intersectionality studies as a process of critical inquiry into multidimensional identities and intersecting power relations (Carbado et al., 2013; Cho et al., 2013; Collins, 1986; Collins, 2015; Collins & Bilge, 2016; Crenshaw, 1991; Crenshaw, 2017; Lorde, 1984). Collins (2015) suggests that “intersectionality references the critical insight that race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but as reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequalities” (p. 2). Specifically, intersectionality acknowledges the interrelatedness of various categories (i.e., race, class, sex, ability, age) and the way they mutually shape each other and are inexplicably linked (Collins & Bilge, 2016). Oppressive systems are known to be mutually dependent when reinforcing inequality, indicating a need to critique and challenge structural and systemic oppression and resulting social inequities (Cole, 2015; Collins, 2015; Collins & Bilge, 2016). This includes critiquing and investigating the interrelated identities of Black women graduate students in higher education settings.

Historically, awareness of the unique experiences of Black women was documented as early as 1851 when Sojourner Truth presented, “Ain’t I a woman?” Amid the women’s suffrage movement, she was aware of the failure of society and implored people, including White women, to acknowledge her as a woman despite her racial background. According to Brah and Phoenix (2004), “Sojourner Truth powerfully challenges essentialist thinking that a particular category of woman is essentially this or essentially that” (p. 77). This thinking supported Black feminist thought and recognized that considering gender while excluding other social identities fails to account for the way these identities helped define each other (Collins, 2000). It was argued that gender must be considered in context with other social identities, particularly when investigating power dynamics in these identities (Collins, 2000). This led to the development of intersectionality to defy the essentialist perspective and to connect gendered experiences with other social identities (e.g., race, class, etc.). Consequently, it is impossible to debate gender without discussing other social identities that help define and give meaning to it, resulting in the creation of new knowledge (Collins, 2000).

Decades after intersectionality was coined, Else-Quest and Hyde (2016) operationalized the intersectionality perspective and identified the following primary tenets: (a) social identities intersect, (b) the intersection produces consequences such as power, discrimination, and oppression, and (c) the intersection impacts micro and macro factors. Examining the experiences of Black women graduate students at PWIs requires people to recognize how being gendered and racialized in these settings creates a unique intersectional experience (Else-Quest & Hyde, 2016). This study reveals the consequences of this intersection of identities and explores their relation to issues of power, oppression, and discrimination. Understanding these consequences is necessary to inform changes to policies and practices. Applying this intersectional lens with a womanist

perspective allows for further investigation of the interplay between sexism and anti-Black racism (Ayyildiz & Kocsoy, 2020; Walker, 1983; Walker, 2008).

Womanism

While Black feminism is prominent within intersectionality, womanism pushes the needle further. Founded by Alice Walker (1983), womanism seeks to investigate the lived experiences of Black women and to validate and affirm their positionalities as Black and women. It allows for historical and contemporary analysis of positioning and intersectionality to inform experiences and identify barriers, obstacles, and opportunities. It argues that anti-Blackness creates the unique experiences of Black women. Thus, non-Black women can become part of the problem by supporting anti-Black policies, practices, and environments (Collins, 1998). Furthermore, it seeks to dismantle the view of Black women as producers of work by systems that profit from their labor rather than focusing on their specific needs and liberation.

Applying a womanist perspective to academia, Drew Branch et al. (2019) suggested that there are “gaps in contemporary academic writings that address the duality with identifying as one of the most privileged minorities on the planet – being an academic – and belonging to a sexual/ethnic minority – being female and Black” (p. 106). Womanism helps explain how Black women’s experiences are situated within larger systems of oppression (e.g., patriarchy, racism, ageism, heterosexism) by allowing for historical and contemporary analysis to be conducted with an intersectional lens. Ultimately, it provides insight into potential supports, barriers, and obstacles. Drew-Branch et al. (2019) posited, “Womanism, [an extension of] feminism, views the experiences of women within patriarchal constructed systems as a central theme” (p. 105), but differ in their focus on the complexities endured by Black women. The womanist perspective challenges the perspective of Black women as a laboring class of production workers situated primarily for the benefit of other populations and systems (Drew Branch et al., 2019; Rousseau, 2013). Unfortunately, the concept of being a laborer does not dissipate because Black women earn advanced degrees. Womanism affirms and empowers Black female identity by acknowledging and validating these unique experiences.

Our research is uniquely positioned to buttress an intersectional and womanism analysis by promoting the need to support Black women in affirming their identities on college campuses and rejecting hegemony. We contribute a more authentic depiction of how diversity is genuinely experienced by previously excluded groups in academia to the literature and allow Black women’s experiences to be presented to support them fully in managing these multiple intersecting identities (Museus & Griffin, 2011). Furthermore, we investigate how Black women are impacted by systems of oppression and provide strategies for level change.

The Current Study

This research is a part of a larger study on Black women junior faculty. Dennis and Jason’s (2018) *Black Women Academics: Artistic Expression through Teaching, Research, and Activism* explored how Black women junior faculty “create artistry and artistic expression, handle perceived obstacles, and use their voices to enact change” (p. 86). The broader study

asked participants about their current jobs, perceptions of their progress at work, mentorship experiences, and pre-faculty and graduate experiences. The authors were inspired by the rich content to reanalyze the data and answer the following question: *How do Black women describe and make sense of their experiences in graduate PWIs?* Although these women went to different PWI graduate programs, they shared many of the same experiences, such as little to no feelings of belonging and frequent academic uncertainty. They also shared the importance of receiving social support through family and friends, and having strong mentors who provide professional development through grant writing, collaborative research teams, and publications.

Research Design

Sample

In this study, we interviewed a sample of 19 Black women who recently completed a graduate degree program at a PWI in the United States. Jason and Dennis conducted the interviews in the Spring of 2012 in public places, such as coffee shops or libraries, either in person or over the phone. To be eligible for the study, a participant must have self-identified as a Black woman and been currently employed in a faculty role (e.g., lecturer, adjunct, tenure-track assistant professor). The participants were recruited through purposeful sampling via word-of-mouth across social networks and professional conferences. Key informants were strategically acquired through in-person recruitment at collegial events. We were able to secure 19 participants before we began to reach saturation. Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics. Pseudonyms are used to maintain anonymity. Nine participants had doctoral degrees, and 10 participants held master's degrees. Twelve disciplines at 13 educational institutions are represented, with the most represented discipline being the field of education. Participants' ages ranged from 30 to 40 years, with an average age of 34. We received IRB approval and followed proper consent protocols.

Table 1. *Demographic Table*

Respondent Name	Age	Degree	Discipline
Veronica	33	Master	Public Health
Sharrise	38	Doctorate	Education
Janet	36	Master	English
Margaret	31	Master	Education
Selena	34	Doctorate	Education
Pamela	31	Doctorate	Education
Uma	31	Doctorate	Medicine
Lisa	34	Master	Foreign Language
Kimberly	31	Master	Criminology
Karen	36	Master	Modern Languages
Zandra	31	Doctorate	Nursing
Qadira	33	Master	Social Work
Marcelle	38	Doctorate	Communication
Tina	32	Master	Social Work
Melanie	32	Master	Psychology
Abigail	34	Master	Foreign Language
Whitney	37	Doctorate	Business
Ronda	34	Doctorate	English
Trudy	40	Doctorate	Health

Data Collection and Analysis

We gathered the data generated for this study by conducting semi-structured interviews with participants, either over the phone or in person, which lasted approximately 1 to 1.5 hours. Questions regarding the graduate student's experience focused on mentorship, including inquiries on how their relationship with their mentor(s) started and how they would describe their mentorship experience, communication with mentor(s), institutional support, power of the mentor, and the academic and professional outcomes of the mentoring relationship. The

interviews were recorded, transcribed, and managed through NVivo software. The analysis followed interpretive grounded theory methods (GTM) Charmaz, 2014). The interview transcripts were subjected to line-by-line (open) coding to conceptually tag the data (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). These included codes such as “gender,” “being Black/Blackness,” “expectations,” “mentor,” and “contradictions.” Then, using axial coding, we created categories that linked data to general processes, conditions, and contexts. These included codes such as “being a Black woman mattered,” “building a supportive environment,” and “on my own.” In GTM, data collection and analysis are a reiterative process, and the trustworthiness of the data is maintained by comparing open and axial coding among the research team members for the duration of the project. As a team, we identified similarities and differences in how the women described their experiences and connections between themes, and noted any variations that arose. Furthermore, we identified core concepts and categories by comparing independent analyses, followed by group consensus, and mapped our final analytic scheme.

Positionality, Trustworthiness, and Reflexivity

The research team consists of three Black women faculty, two of whom are tenured and one with a tenure-track appointment. All three graduated with PhDs from PWIs and have experienced the challenges and successes of navigating graduate school. This research was inspired by their desire to highlight the experiences of other Black women in similar positions. All of the members are skilled and experienced qualitative researchers with subject matter expertise. Although the authors related to the experiences described above, they very intentionally bracketed their subjectivities during the data collection, analysis, and reporting processes. They accomplished this by engaging in several methods of trustworthiness and reflexivity.

During the data collection process, we designed an interview instrument to generate thick descriptions of the data (Geertz, 1973) by asking a few very specific questions, applying a series of probes, asking clarifying questions, and reiterating back to the respondent to ensure the accuracy of what was said. We engaged in personal triangulation (Kimchi et al., 1991) by collecting data from women at several different levels within the inclusion category (i.e., former graduate students, representatives of varied areas of discipline, and masters and doctoral level degrees). Two of the authors reviewed, coded, and analyzed all of the data together. When applicable, the team discussed discrepancies in the coding until reaching a consensus. Finally, we engaged in member checking (Candela, 2019) during transcription or analysis when we were unsure whether we properly represented the ideas of the respondent. Due to this in-depth and collaborative process, we are confident in the credibility and confirmability of this study.

Findings

We found the following themes significant to how respondents described and made sense of their experiences as graduate students:

- 1) They realized no, or very few, institutional and interpersonal supports were created to nurture them, leading to self-reliance;

- 2) They responded to the lack of support by building distance between themselves and the institution;
- 3) They felt institutional diversity initiatives were contrived and misrepresented the real diversity of the programs, increasing feelings of mistrust;
- 4) They built community with each other and found that collective effort led to academic achievement; and
- 5) They found that the support of a good mentor was one of the best ways to succeed in graduate school.

Analysis of these themes revealed that how Black women students understood their graduate experiences was a large contributor to their professional outcomes. Importantly, even though about half of the respondents graduated with a master's degree and others had completed their doctorate, their experiences did not follow an easy-to-translate pattern of distinction in experiences. Many claimed that during graduate school they experienced less control, more stress, fewer networks, and less production and success due to having no, or one, mentor; however, others had better outcomes (e.g., publications, grant writing opportunities, contribution to research teams) when they asserted more control through self-identified strategies such as using a network model for mentoring. Successful experiences, however, should not minimize or disregard the institutional power dynamics and difficulties faced by these Black women. Further, it is unacceptable that Black women found success in these spaces by carrying the burden of self-reliance to attend to psychological and academic stressors. These institutions accepted them into their graduate programs but failed to provide them with the support they deserved.

No, or Few, Supports Created to Nurture Black Women Led to Self-Reliance

Graduate school, by design, is a challenging training space. Academia is difficult for women and underrepresented minorities (Lewis et al., 2016). As Dennis and Jason (2018) demonstrated, Black women in academia often do not have the resources needed to formulate interests, develop skills, or gain expertise, and they often attempt to cultivate these means alone. Sharrise, an education graduate, commented:

As an African American woman moving into higher ed[ucation], I really didn't expect many folks to truly understand the types of support I may need. I knew the basics of what would be required of me, but I also knew it was my job to perform, research, teach, serve, and be visible. We [Black women] are always expected to prove and do more, that's just the way it is.

Trudy, an English graduate, shared a similar perspective:

I just think that we need to be aware that the system is often not set up to support us. It doesn't align for us. Making sure that you have all the other mechanisms established early to help support and facilitate your success is very important, so you know whether or not you have the faculty support person at your institution and also have that support outside.... That makes a difference.

Ronda, another English graduate was even more explicit:

I was the only Black woman in my [graduate] class.... I get to [the PWI] for my PhD, and I feel like someone just dropped me from an airplane. I just had to fend for myself... it was just ridiculous.... [The experience] was really irritating...and you can tell that I really was invisible.

Although the number of Black women in academia is growing, participants described their everyday experience as being invisible yet under surveillance and challenged simultaneously. For Ronda, the challenges to her existence not only came from faculty and administration but also from a peer.

There was this one older, White male grad student. I promise you. Almost every new semester, I would come into the graduate student lounge, and he would say, “You know this is for graduate students, right?” After about the third or fourth time, I wanted to say “[expletive], I’m a graduate student! Like how many times, like what the heck?”

Sharrise, Trudy, and Ronda explained their perceptions of being isolated by being the only, or one of a few, Black women in their graduate programs. For them, race played a central and domineering role in how they chose to navigate and respond to the challenges they faced. Regarding intersectionality, multiple social forces were at play in their lived experiences. One to consider, along with race, for these women was gender. When we asked, do they think that gender or other dynamics come into play? Interestingly, the participants’ responses did not center on men, but rather, on their relationships with White women. Uma, a medical graduate explained:

Uma: I think gender does, but I see the way they treat White females differently than Black females.

Interviewer: So, the White females seem to get more attention and aren’t ignored in the same fashion?

Uma: Yeah, or spoken to in the same condescending manner at times.

Janet expressed similar sentiments, stating that the women faculty were “very feminist” in graduate school:

I didn’t click with [their feminist views] (laughs). I think we had different ideas, so any potential female mentors were pretty much out the door. Actually, the only person who I clicked with was the department chair of that program. He was a Caucasian male.

The women in this study did not outwardly identify themselves as feminists (as this was not a line of questioning), but as noted here, ideologically, White and Black women did not bond under the guise of some sort of women’s coalition, even as both groups were navigating male-

dominated spaces. It may be the case that PWIs remain White heteronormative (heterosexual, White, male cis-gendered) organizations and White women are closer to White men than Black women in these social contexts.

Lack of Support Led to Building Distance between Themselves and the Institution

Many participants described constant microaggressions, isolation, and surveillance as too much to bear. The strategy of distancing and considering leaving academia altogether to handle the rejection and lack of support were common ideas shared throughout the interviews. For example, when we asked Uma how she planned to overcome the challenges experienced, she shared:

I just took the attitude of...four-letter word, everyone. And that's not a good attitude to have, but it works. It was a very immature attitude. If I can get what I want to get. Fine. If I don't, fine. When I'm done with this, I'll just leave. I don't want to. I kind of like this environment, but if things don't change, I won't stay. Because there's no diversity. None. Zero.

Janet left a law school program and transferred to a foreign language graduate program because she felt no space was created for her in law school. She explained how faculty showed interest in her but did not extend themselves on her behalf:

In law school, [mentoring was] non-existent. I think a couple of the females were a little more sympathetic to me because there were so few females at this particular law school, and one female professor implored me when I decided to leave law school that we needed more females in the profession and to stay. But I didn't get the experience of anyone really going out of their way to try to keep me there, expose me to opportunities, or introduce me to anyone. It didn't quite click with me.

Melanie, a psychology graduate, tells her story of unfulfilled expectations when it came to her experiences in mentorship with a White female faculty member:

[It was] absolutely awful. Nonexistent. I met a woman when I came down for Applicant Information Day, and she had a great program that I was interested in working on. I felt that she recruited me more so because I was a Black face for her community project. When I arrived – she was very open about, “I'm [going to] mentor you...do this, this, and that and the other.” But when I arrived, when I first met with her—her first statement was, “I only communicate via email.”

Many of the interviews focused on experiences with mentors in graduate school. One of the most memorable was the story of Whitney, a business graduate, who recalled her experience as specifically different from her non-Black classmates:

I was bounced around from advisor to advisor for no reason that I could clearly understand. My first year, I was put with someone who wasn't in my field. The second year they put me with the department chair, which you can imagine you don't get a lot of

mentoring and help. My third year, I just said, “I’m sick of this. Can I choose?” I picked a junior faculty member, and unfortunately, he chose to leave the school. The story goes on and on. So, unlike my [non-Black] counterparts, where they were getting invited over to their advisors’ homes and knew their families, I didn’t have that experience at all.

Whitney’s story is not uncommon. It describes, in short, how so many Black women graduate students fall through the cracks, perpetuating the leaky academic pipeline where women opt out or fail to remain in academic careers (Ysseldyk et al., 2019). Many women in this study expressed feelings about the lack of control over their academic and professional development opportunities just as they are beginning to understand and develop their identities as graduate students and professionals. Through an intersectional and womanist lens, these women are developing these aspirational identities as they make sense of their positionality as Black women in a white academic landscape. This is a landscape where they witness peers who are not Black quickly assimilate and benefit from institutional and interpersonal supports, such as same-race and shared background mentorships. Not only did these women feel as if they were getting less than their peers, but they were also feeling left out altogether. Upon entry into many of these graduate programs, they began to process the multiple and compounding disadvantages of being a Black woman in historically White and male-dominated spaces. In most cases, academic programs are well aware that they are not race- and gender-friendly. In response to this problem, many programs have created offices, committees, and programming for DEI initiatives.

Diversity Initiatives Felt Contrived and Misrepresented the Real Diversity of the Programs

DEI initiatives have helped recruit underrepresented minorities, but retention and equity remain problematic. As a follow-up question to Uma, we wondered what efforts her medical university had taken to retain her. Uma’s response gave insight into a significant institutional blind spot regarding diversity initiatives. She replied:

They’re trying. They’re hiring [a] diversity [director]—but you could hire all you want. Hiring that diversity director is not going to make the place more diverse. It’ll make it one extra Black person. Putting a picture on the website doesn’t tell me anything...this doesn’t work for me. [It’s the] same face all over the hospital but that’s just one.

She adds another point about the intersection of race and gender:

I just think people need to be more sensitive to race and gender and understand how it could affect someone’s life, career, and future because it could make or break someone. I think everyone should have diversity and sensitivity training, especially if you didn’t grow up in an environment where there was lots of cultural diversity. I think people are insensitive to how they really are. They aren’t aware of how they really are.

For the women in this study, many of the diversity efforts in their programs did not feel sincere, nor did the programs value a sense of belonging in their DEI efforts. DEI initiatives tended to center on tokenism—using the imagery, voices, and accomplishments of a few Black members

to give the impression that the institution is progressive rather than making fundamental changes to improve race and gender opportunities and experiences. Despite the steps universities were proclaiming to take to support diversity efforts, these typically fell flat for these students and did not have a significant impact. As Uma suggested, diversity and cultural sensitivity training would be more effective ways to contribute to real change.

They Built Community with Each Other as Collective Effort Generated Achievement

The data thus far demonstrate that Black women in graduate school faced many challenges and deficits in their experiences. However, experiences for Black women are not universal. For many participants, finding a Black community within the PWI was crucial to their survival. Selena, an education graduate, noted, “We actually set up Facebook pages. We only set up Facebook pages to keep in contact. It was called PhD. Sisters. All Black Women.” Some participants were able to gather other means of social support when they lacked support from the faculty. Here, Ronda describes how imperative her other sources of support were to her survival in graduate school:

The Black graduate student association, my other friends in the department, who were White and Black, and whatever, really did help me. They introduced me to some of their professors, who ended up being on my dissertation committee. I almost gave it up because the chair I had [previous to her], he was only using me for research. And I realized that. And once I was finished with his research, he wouldn't call me back [so she] really took me under her wings.

Tina, a social work graduate, also explained how a shared connection with other students and faculty of color made a difference:

As graduate students, we were oriented prior to the start of the school year with students and instructors of color. We were able to engage in a panel discussion and interaction with former students and current students. We had access to many of the African American instructors and professors through the Black Student Caucus and an open-door policy. Throughout the program, whether it's in the elevator or passing through the halls, instructors and professors just asking us how we're doing and checking on us beyond just an academic standpoint...how we're doing and how we're adjusting with the culture and the climate of the school. In addition to that, we were oftentimes invited to professors' houses for potlucks and gatherings, which was nice to create a sense of community for us as well.

As demonstrated in Tina's quote above, it is not just the professional opportunities to work on research teams, publish, and present at conferences. What was also important for their success was the invisible labor that many of their mentors, especially Black mentors, engaged in that made a difference. By asking the students about work-life balance, checking on their mental health by inquiring how they are doing, and demonstrating accountability with consistent communication, many women made gains in their academic careers.

The need for Black women in graduate school and Black women faculty to have collaborators and contributors to reducing the silencing and removal of Black women highlights the importance of mentorship and the need for mentors. Mentors can be peer students and/or colleagues working together to accomplish their work as they navigate the academy (Fries-Britt & Kelly, 2005). As found by Dennis and Jason (2018), mentorship offers a sense of purpose and direction. Some Black women want one mentor, whereas some Black women have various mentors for different foci, including mentors whose racial identities and/or gender identities are different from theirs. Still, some Black women do not have a mentor either by choice or because no one is available. Though some schools have created mentorship programs for junior faculty and students, mentorship can struggle based on student and faculty demographic differences. The women were clear that their personal experiences were checkered—with highs and lows—and even as they prevailed through hardships, they had many rewarding experiences.

Positive Mentoring Reduces Inequality Gaps at PWIs

The students spoke about the search for mentors to support their successful progression through their graduate programs. However, they had difficulties finding mentors who would support them and provide assistance, especially when they found themselves struggling in the program. These barriers caused them to seek out mentorship actively and inevitably caused them to rely on mentors who often shared lived experiences and identities with them.

Kimberly, a criminology student, described her graduate mentoring experience:

I didn't have a mentor whereby that person came and wanted to take me under his or her wing [with research and professional development training] and also advise some guidance. In fact, I felt like I was completely lost. Drowning.

Then, she shifted her experience by taking charge of the mentorship relationship:

[I met with the department chair and said], "I need help. I'm all over the place. I'm proposing that we have this professional relationship where you will point out to me where I am not doing well, where I need improvement, and be my anchor in this program because everybody else was moving forward. Everybody else was doing well, but I'm feeling unsupported, and I'm feeling I'm drowning." He agreed and so he is the person that I'd come to and talk to about everything, but it wasn't like it wasn't on his end. It was really that I pursued it.

Melanie, the psychology graduate, described the benefits of working with a resourceful mentor:

The number one important reason for getting a student through a program successfully, holistically, and particularly a student of color, is mentorship. I realized that whatever program I go to, I just need a phenomenal mentor, so I can learn from and grow because, in the end, no one really cares where your PhD is from.

Uma, the medical graduate, also spoke of a positive graduate mentorship experience with a Black faculty mentor:

It was excellent. I had a [Black] woman who was in charge of diversity. And she took all of us under her wing and made sure that we [were] targeted in the right direction and made sure that we were taken care of. So, I was lucky. I knew that if I was messing up or if I was doing well, I had someone who was always on my team.

Ronda ends with a call for women to be more active, innovative, and available.

Women, and not just Black women, you have to be very inventive. You can't wait on anybody to do things for you. You've got to be proactive and find other women. There's something to be said about just women helping women. Whenever you become associate level, or whatever, to mentor younger women—especially Black women. If we want longevity, we've got to mentor.

In summary, our findings demonstrate that despite the institutional challenges many Black women graduate students face, these women were able to persevere through their programs' challenges and barriers in three main ways: a) they became self-reliant to gain more control over their educational experiences; b) they built community with other Black women including peers, mentors, and university committees; and c) they asserted themselves to find a supportive mentor. All three strategies demonstrated in this research highlight the emotional and invisible labor in which Black women graduate students engage to attain their academic goals. These women were conflicted that their approaches could be misinterpreted to reinforce archetypes of Black Womanhood –The Angry Black Woman” being stoic, argumentative, and irrational (recall Uma, “I just took the attitude of...four-letter word, everyone. And that is not a good attitude to have, but it works”) and The Strong Black Woman being strong, self-reliant, and resilient (recall Sharrise, “We [Black women] are always expected to prove and do more, that's just the way it is”; Corbin et al., 2016; Geyton et al., 2022). This is why having a support system, including “a phenomenal mentor” (Melanie, psychology graduate) who would “take you under their wing” (Ronda, English graduate, and Kimberly, criminal justice graduate) by engaging in professional and emotional labor with care was so important. Having this support system in place offset the isolation of self-reliance.

Discussion

Our study identified significant ways Black women graduate students made sense of their experiences in PWIs, including feeling institutionally unsupported, distancing themselves due to this lack of support, and perceiving diversity initiatives as contrived. These experiences led them to depend on self-reliance to build community spaces for social support and assert themselves in finding strong mentoring relationships to attain their academic and professional goals. Our study centered on Black women graduate students who were positioned for lesser power based on institutional ranking in academic settings. Similarly, our findings aligned with Burton et al. (2020), who explored the experiences of Black women in leadership and authoritative positions in academic spaces and found the same issues of power and rankings. This research adds to the

literature revealing that despite institutional ranking and power, Black women's experiences and strategies for addressing race-gender issues in academic spaces are consistent at the graduate student and higher administration levels.

Theoretical Implications

Using both intersectionality (Carbado et al., 2013; Cho et al., 2013; Collins, 1986; Collins, 2015; Collins & Bilge, 2016; Crenshaw, 1991; Crenshaw, 2017; Lorde, 1984) and womanism (Ayyildiz & Kocsoy, 2020; Walker, 1983; Walker, 2008) as complementary frameworks, our analysis supports previous research on the unique challenges Black women in academia experience as outsiders within. Consistent with intersectionality theory, even as Black women are experiencing social mobility within education, they continue to be strikingly disadvantaged in academic environments; consistent with womanism arguments, these dimensions are shaped by racism (e.g., exploitation, tokenism, isolation, surveillance, gendered racism, discrimination, and racist patriarchy). Their success under these oppressive conditions typically is obtained based on support, mentorship, or involvement with institutional programs run by senior Black faculty, staff, or administration (often Black women). Otherwise, Black women graduate students had to circumvent the formal mentoring process, breaking professional development norms, to get what they needed. Unfortunately, those without these resources had to acquiesce to a system that generally ignored them. Findings from this study highlight the need to create supports that nurture Black women graduate students, authentically represent diversity efforts, support collective efforts to generate achievement, and ensure the availability of positive mentoring to lessen inequality gaps.

Graduate Programs Policy and Practice Implications

As a result of the current study, we offer five strategies to address systemic challenges that Black women face on campuses with the goal of supporting their overall success and matriculation. They are to (a) create intentional intersectional spaces for Black women, (b) promote practices that elicit feedback, (c) demonstrate evidence of a commitment to DEI efforts, (d) create conditions for collective effort to generate achievement, and (e) create positive mentoring relationships to lessen inequality gaps. These strategies validate Black women graduate students as contributors to knowledge, research, and innovation. We provide further insights regarding specific strategies to support Black women graduate students in Table 2. Each of our findings from the study is listed with a corresponding goal and suggested strategies.

Table 2. *Strategies for Supporting Black Female Graduate Students*

Findings	Goal	Suggested Strategies for Graduate Program Administrators
No supports created to nurture Black women	Create intentional intersectional spaces for Black women in graduate programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Develop and ensure funding for a Black Women Graduate Student Association for your unit or campus ● Connect students with social media groups that are tailored specifically for Black women graduate students and faculty for external support.
Students engaged in building distancing when they internalized barriers	Promote practices that elicit feedback from Black women graduate students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Develop and communicate grievance channels, including ways to provide formal and informal feedback
Students reported that diversity was misrepresented and that campuses did not demonstrate evidence of a commitment to DEI	Demonstrate evidence of a commitment to DEI	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Develop and supply a list of Black-owned businesses in your area to support relocation, health, wellness, and recreation and support them. ● Sanction or remove faculty members that have a history of microaggressions or create challenging environments for students and faculty.
Students reported self-reliance with engaging in collective efforts to generate achievement.	Create conditions for collective effort for Black women, which help them generate achievement and relieve the burden of self-reliance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Accept and support a critical mass of Black women graduate students. ● Cocreate an individualized year plan for scholarly success, including opportunities for paid assistantships with students.
Students reported that positive mentoring reduced the inequality gap at PWIs	Create positive mentoring relationships to lessen inequality gaps with faculty who are truly supportive and affirming of intersecting identities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Assign Black women graduate students to strong research teams with supportive faculty ● Encourage Black women graduate students to self-select a peer and senior mentor inside or outside of their department and/or institution.

Strategy 1: Create Intentional Intersectional Spaces for Black Women

First, starting, sustaining, and supporting Black women graduate student associations within a program or university provides affirmative spaces for them with scholars sharing similar backgrounds. Failure to create these spaces will result in them potentially feeling isolated and not knowing how to navigate the environment. Due to their intersectional identities and realities, space needs to be specific for Black women. Participants noted that they did not expect these spaces to be created for them but were also dismayed that these spaces were completely nonexistent. It is not the responsibility of these students to create these spaces, which carries an additional service burden. However, we offer that the university should seek to establish and sustain them with the necessary funding. Additionally, a Black woman faculty member should be appointed as an advisor for this group with the release of agreed-upon teaching or research responsibilities. This would provide the unit and university support for students and assist them in acclimating to the climate.

Second, we propose connecting students with social media groups explicitly tailored for Black women graduate students and faculty for external support. These spaces provide outlets for Black women to express their frustrations, seek support, and receive mentoring and advice. These sites are designed as resistance movements focused on empowering Black women and acknowledging the chilly climates on their respective campuses. It would be helpful to connect these students during orientation to their programs. Also, we suggest posting this information on program websites or in program handbooks.

Strategy 2: Promote Practices that Elicit Feedback

To enforce the goal of promoting practices that elicit feedback, we recommend that units and universities develop and communicate grievance channels, including ways to provide formal and informal feedback. There should be explicit processes on how feedback will be incorporated or considered for unit and university improvements. As our research affirmed that Black women students are expected not to fit within academic spaces even before their arrival, it would be helpful to provide space that allows them to have channels for providing feedback and anonymous and non-retaliatory reporting. Acknowledging the difficulty Black women might endure as graduate students helps validate their concerns as they matriculate through a program. It also allows them to communicate their concerns and prevents pushing them to the margins.

Strategy 3: Demonstrate Evidence of a Commitment to DEI Efforts

Demonstrating evidence of a commitment to DEI efforts can begin with first demonstrating an awareness of the need to support and assist in building networks for Black women graduate students. First, supply a list of Black-owned businesses in your area to support health, wellness, and recreation, including doctor and dentist offices, psychological counseling, hair salons, bookstores, coffee shops, wellness studios (yoga, meditation, gym), and Black social and recreational groups (book clubs, outdoor lifestyle, dining). If relocation is needed and they are interested in purchasing a home, then access to a realtor would be helpful. Further, insights about the community, including details on local schools and neighborhoods, would be helpful. These resources help to acclimate Black students to the region and surround them with a

community of support. It is essential to have this information publicly available so students can immediately build their network of communal support prior to or upon entry into graduate programs.

Second, ensure that units are prepared and willing to confront, sanction, or remove faculty members who have a history of creating toxic environments for Black students and faculty. Sanctioning and removing these faculty members demonstrates a commitment to allowing Black students and faculty to fully immerse themselves in the educational environment. Part of the sanctioning could involve ensuring that these faculty members participate in professional development on race-based training through an intersectionality lens so they can attune more to the unique experiences of Black women. Our findings indicate that graduate students who had to engage with these unsupportive faculty were more likely to disconnect from the program or leave the university.

Strategy 4: Create Conditions for Collective Effort to Generate Achievement

As Black women graduate students may find themselves engaging in self-reliance to build conditions that support their achievements, it would be helpful for campuses to consider recruiting, enrolling, and retaining a critical mass of Black women graduate students in their programs. Recruitment plans need to detail intentional efforts and plans to specifically target Black women to apply to their programs. Programs focused on ensuring equity for women should also center Black women in these recruitment efforts, as this demonstrates a willingness to prioritize and visibly recognize Black women in these spaces. Enrolling a critical mass of Black and Brown students lessens perceptions of oppression and discrimination on their respective campuses (Hurtado & Ruiz, 2012), influences their sense of belonging, and ultimately relates to their educational success (Hurtado et al., 2007; Miller & Sujitparapitaya, 2010).

The collective effort also focuses on cocreating an individualized multi-year plan for scholarly success with each Black woman graduate student. These plans should be developed in partnership with an assigned faculty mentor during the first semester. The plan should include information on research opportunities, connecting the student with faculty with similar research interests, development of metrics for scholarly contributions, and details regarding available graduate assistantships. Funding for these students demonstrates the unit's commitment to Black women students and advancing their goals.

Strategy 5: Create Positive Mentoring Relationships to Lessen Inequality Gaps

Positive mentoring to lessen inequality gaps requires mentorship be intentional and that students be paired with faculty who will support their success. Faculty selected to work with Black women graduate students should affirm their strengths and identities within academia. Researchers found that when female students are paired with toxic mentors, it increases their self-doubt (Welton et al., 2014). This toxicity can result in devaluing their research contributions and blatant acts of racism (Zambrana et al., 2017). The mentor should be strengths-based in their mentoring approach, as these students are already experiencing a heightened level of self-doubt. The mentor needs to assume the need to empower this student. We recommend that the mentor regularly check in with the mentee and ask the following questions: 1) How are you doing? 2)

How are you adjusting to the culture? 3) How are you dealing with the climate? These questions affirm the positionality of the student and allow them space to vent and process.

Second, we propose humanizing approaches to the mentoring process that allow for self-determination and consideration of social, cultural, and personal needs and preferences (King & Upadhyay, 2022). These humanizing approaches allow for the development of supportive relationships. Black women graduate students need to be informed of strategies for selecting strengths-oriented and supportive mentors. An approach could entail arranging for graduate students to meet faculty and peers internal and external to the department and institution and then self-selecting mentors instead of assigning a peer and senior mentor. Chen et al. (2016) supported the notion of mentors outside of the academic unit to avoid conflicts of interest and to support confidentiality and privacy. The external mentor provides additional space for the student to receive further development not afforded to them on campus. It also can help connect them to networks of other scholars around the country and build their social capital. It also allows students to express their needs and concerns with a mentor not employed at their respective university.

Conclusion

Although Black women have made strides in educational attainment with the highest increase in degrees earned among all races and gender groups, they have done so at the high psychological and academic cost of carrying the burden of self-reliance to succeed. It is pertinent that graduate programs make an immediate shift in their policies and practices to support Black women graduate students and relieve them of this burden. It is not the responsibility of Black women graduate students to carry this burden of self-reliance, but the onus is on academic institutions to be aware of these costs and mitigate them. This shift requires an intentional focus on their multi-layered identities and a willingness to support spaces that affirm their collective needs. It requires rejection of the White heteronormative context for the graduate school experience, as it has not been shaped to attend to the cultural needs of Black women (or anyone other than cis-gendered White men) graduate students.

In a time when higher education is looking inward to better understand and be accountable for their historical and contemporary contributions to institutional racism in the academy, it is equally important that these organizations understand the short and long-term harm they have caused Black women. Black women graduate students, many of whom may be first-generation college students, have shattered glass ceilings and overcome systemic obstacles to make it into graduate school. It is critical to disrupt academia and move Black women from being perceived and treated as laborers to being credited and validated as contributors to knowledge, research, and innovation. The women's experiences presented in this paper represent voices that too often get muffled under the weight of the microaggressions, institutional discrimination, exclusion, and hardships they experience to exist in PWIs. We have demonstrated that even under these conditions, Black women can be supported and nurtured as they pursue the highest degree attainable. We offered concrete and practical strategies and

suggestions to guide institutional policy and decision-making with tangible, measurable, and action-based solutions.

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