

LEADERSHIP NARRATIVES/REFLECTIONS

CareFull Scholars: A Model to Empower Black Women STEM Faculty at HBCUs

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Black women survive and thrive in the academy at great cost to their professional and personal lives. As Black women, we hold a deep sense of guardianship over HBCUs; however, we also harbor profound concerns. We aspire that HBCUs remain exemplars of true diversity and inclusion in higher education; yet few spaces exist in which we can candidly express our apprehensions without concern for backlash against us or our beloved HBCUs. Ongoing acts of resilience by Black women in academia can be fatiguing and disempowering. Thus, a safe space is needed for Black women in STEM to rest, connect in deep relationality, and strategize for real transformation and liberation within HBCU systems and structures. Insights shared in this narrative offer valuable lessons for how Black women can lead differently in STEM, while simultaneously advancing undergraduate STEM educational reform, notably at HBCUs.

Introduction

Black women survive and thrive in the academy at great cost to their professional and personal lives. The cost is extracted by time and work demands and because of the ways in which Black women have to *be* in order to achieve recognition and advancement (Wilson et al., 2021). Dickter et al. (2019) suggest that advocacy for women faculty in the natural sciences may be an important strategy to mitigating the challenges to advancement that these academics face. The four authors of this narrative are university professors at HBCUs in the southeastern United States. Biologist Gail Hollowell's research focuses on STEM persistence at HBCUs. Anthropologist Michelle C. Chatman conducts research into violence prevention in Black communities, urban inequity, and healing-centered social change. Psychometrician Avis Jackson summarizes assessment data from student ratings of instruction instruments and develops and conducts mentoring training programs for mentors and students. Psychologist and neuroscientist Cheryl Talley co-directs a \$9M research hub, focused on building communities of practice around HBCU scholarship. Collectively, we, the authors, are desirous of curating research that addresses psychosocial

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factors related to the success of Black women STEM faculty at HBCUs. Having similar backgrounds and HBCU experiences, we bring a cultural awareness and sensitivity to the circumstances impacting the retention and advancement of Black women STEM faculty in academia. We also bring a critique of higher education and the ways in which systemic factors produce racial and gender inequities. We believe our perspectives will better inform research concerning the importance of community care building to address the unique pressures of Black women STEM faculty at HBCUs.

Background and Significance

How does one collaborate, cultivate communities of care, and demonstrate self-agency in an academic culture that privileges competition, individual merit, and sexism? Most educational institutions recapitulate race and gender hierarchies found within society more broadly (Kubota, 2020; Stewart, 2021). Many scholars have advanced theories to explain racial inequity in higher education in the United States (Harper, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2021; Patton et al., 2015). While research has revealed the incessant nature of gender bias in the academy (Charlesworth & Banaji, 2019), the role of anti-blackness and misogynoir has received far less attention (Noble & Palmer, 2022). HBCUs often, and perhaps inadvertently, emulate the same harmful racial and gender dynamics amplified at predominantly white institutions (Crenshaw, 2019; Perlow, 2017; Spencer, 2017; Wright et al., 2017). Additionally, these dynamics may be exacerbated by historical and ongoing infrastructural and resource disparities that exists at HBCU's due to systematic underfunding. (Adams & Tucker, 2022; Pai et al., 2024).

As Black women, we hold a deep sense of guardianship over HBCUs; however, we also harbor profound concerns. We aspire that our institutions remain exemplars of true diversity and inclusion within higher education. Yet, few spaces exist where we can candidly express our apprehensions without concern for backlash against us or our beloved HBCUs. Misogynoir and the challenges that Black women face in the academy can be equated to broader societal systems of oppression (Cole, 2021; Roby & Cook, 2019). Efforts to confront misogynoir within higher education, particularly at HBCUs, are needed more than ever due to the critical role Black women in STEM play in student retention (Morton & Parsons, 2018; Ong et al., 2018; Price, 2010).

Black women STEM faculty are disproportionately assigned lower-level, introductory courses (Ceci et al., 2014) and take on caring roles and added responsibilities of “locus parentis” (Guiffrida, 2005). This support for students can come at a high professional cost, potentially contributing to Black women faculty reporting high levels of job-related stress (Pitt et al., 2015) and fewer reaching full professor status (Davis & Maldonado, 2015). While it may be necessary to assume the role of nurturer, this role is not always recognized or valued when seeking promotion and tenure (Hill et al., 2010).

However, providing protective care for students may have a detrimental impact on Black women STEM faculty. We hypothesize that an anti-misogynoir focused intervention can serve to increase scholarship opportunities among Black women STEM faculty at HBCUs, as measured by published research and submitted grants. Such a model, which includes self-authorizing community building, supportive networks, and attention to self-care, can be applicable to other marginalized STEM communities at HBCUs.

The CareFull Scholars Program The HBCU STEM Undergraduate Success Research Center (The Center) was established in 2018 at Morehouse College in collaboration with Spelman College and Virginia State University. The purpose of The Center is to research STEM student success. The Center's Analytic Hub was designed to answer the question, "What works at HBCUs and why?" The Analytic Hub found that Black women STEM faculty serve an important protective role for STEM students. However, the support that Black women STEM faculty offer to students through additional instructional time, mentoring, and coaching, stretches their capacity to produce their own scholarship, thereby threatening their academic career mobility. Black women scholars need communities in which this gendered disparity is acknowledged and which provide mechanisms that help them to center their scholarly productivity for the purposes of tenure and promotion.

The CareFull Scholars Program (CSP) is one such intervention. It emerged from the Center's Analytic Hub during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic to provide a safe space for Black women STEM scholars. CSP encourages the adoption of practices that support scholarly productivity and enhanced well-being based on four tenets: collective well-being, authentic relationships, equitable engagement, and intellectual rigor. Collective well-being defines changes in work/life balance and the integration of contemplative practices. Authentic relationships encompass accountability, trust, and vulnerability; in essence, a community of care. Equitable engagement is the commitment to participation and peer mentoring, through which colleagues listen, support, and encourage each other. Finally, intellectual rigor is the production of scholarship that is relevant, high quality, and forward-thinking. These components are practiced within the foundational context of a regular writing routine. Participants are encouraged to work on an individual academic writing project in a shared virtual space. An additional benefit of the CSP is that it offers a liberatory community and the space for women to speak what they have experienced and know to be true, including that the academy can be harmful and difficult to navigate, even at HBCUs. The CSP model (Hollowell et al., 2023) offers a highly relational, embodied, and healing-centered antidote to the challenges that Black women STEM faculty face (Perlow, 2017).

The ongoing acts of resilience required of Black women in academia can be fatiguing, and disempowering. Thus, a safe space is needed for Black women in STEM to rest, connect in deep relationality, and strategize for real

transformation and liberation of the systems and structures within which they work. The CSP model provides necessary structures to support balanced and holistic productivity among Black women scholars in a manner that acknowledges the institutional toxicity and hierarchy endemic to the structure of academia. More specifically, the CSP model allows Black women to safely conduct their scholarship with ambition, authenticity, and vulnerability, free from the gaze of whiteness and patriarchy. In this space, the full complexity of Black women's identities can be acknowledged, and within this community of supporters, embodied practices, and knowledge of our worth and power, we can shape our own experiences in the academy.

Conclusion

Through the supportive structure of CSP, we, the authors, have increased our scholarly output. Moreover, we have found a safe, transparent, liberatory, Black woman, relationship-centered community, and gained a greater sense of empowerment to self-advocate within HBCU academic culture. Among our achievements have been the acceptance of two collaborative manuscript submissions, an edited book volume proposal with a major academic publisher, and greater self-advocacy within our respective institutions. We have also found that CSP serves as a protective resource not only for Black women STEM scholars, but for scholars from other marginalized identities. As such, another significant outcome of the supportive community and structure of the CSP has been a recent proposal submission, entitled "FREE STEM: Forwarding Racial Equity and Engagement in STEM." One critical component of this proposal will be to collect data on the lived experiences of Black women STEM faculty at HBCUs. Once funded, this multi-faceted \$5M research effort will include the collaboration of seven institutions and research in fields of bioinformatics, psychometrics, systems engineering, and discipline-based educational research. We believe the critical role of Black women STEM faculty, their overall health and well-being, and their self-actualization in the academy, are highly correlated with student success. Representation matters, but it is compromised when Black women faculty are devalued and denied opportunities to thrive in their careers. Greater understanding of the complex relationship between institutional equity and health, Black women STEM faculty self-actualization and power, and Black student STEM persistence at HBCUs is essential. In sum, insights shared in this narrative offer valuable lessons for how Black women can lead differently in STEM, while at the same time advancing undergraduate STEM educational reform, most notably at HBCUs.

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education and has developed student activities to support project-based learning, undergraduate research experiences, and entrepreneurial thinking. Her research focus includes student motivation, science identity, and African American persistence in STEM.

Michelle C. Chatman, Ph.D., is Associate Professor of Crime, Justice, and Security Studies and Director of The Mindfulness and Contemplative Action Lab, an experiential classroom and research lab for healing-centered mindfulness and contemplative approaches at the University of the District of Columbia. Her research areas include Black community well-being, urban inequality, youth development, mindfulness, and contemplative pedagogy. As a sociocultural anthropologist, her research explores and urban inequality, Black family well-being, youth justice, and healing-centered leadership and social change. She has lectured broadly on the intersection of contemplative approaches and social justice at numerous institutions in the U.S. and abroad. She is co-editor of *Contemplative Practices and Acts of Resistance in Higher Education: Narratives Toward Wholeness* (Routledge, 2024).

Avis Jackson, Ph.D., is a Program Coordinator, Project Manager, and Research Associate for the Center for Predictive Analytics at Morgan State University. She serves as a psychometrician, where she manages, facilitates, organizes, and assists with developing evaluation and assessment strategies for proposals and funded projects. She directs the MSU Measuring Abilities Supporting Student Success^{T M} undergraduate non-cognitive instrument development project. As an adjunct faculty for the Psychology Department and the graduate program in Psychometrics, she teaches research methods and critical thinking classes. As a consultant with the MSU Center for Innovative Instruction and Scholarship, she facilitates mentor training and faculty development. Her research interests include critical thinking, non-cognitive measurement, and mentoring.

Cheryl Talley, Ph.D., was Professor of Psychology and Neuroscience at Virginia State University. For over 15 years, her research interests included examining factors that lead to lasting behavioral change, specifically those related to high academic achievement. Through published studies and National Science Foundation funded projects, she and her colleagues explored the role of affective factors, such as academic identity and emotional regulation, in student success. Building on her training in affective neuroscience, she utilizes various cognitive strategies, including mindfulness training, to help students develop strong academic identities and associated behaviors. She is also the lead researcher for the Analytic Hub, HBCU STEM-Undergraduate Success Center.

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