

## LEADERSHIP NARRATIVES/REFLECTIONS

# Leadership Reflection: Black Women Supporting Black Women in Higher Education Broadening Participation – Kitchen Table Conversations

Pamela M. Leggett-Robinson, Ph.D., CAPM<sup>1</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> PLR Consulting, Founder and Executive Director

Keywords: Black women, Safe Spaces, STEM, Higher Education, Kitchen Space

<https://doi.org/10.58507/001c.92221>

---

## The Journal of STEM Leadership and Broadening Participation

Vol. 1, Issue 1, 2024

---

Black women supporting Black women in STEM higher education is crucial to the creation of inclusive, supportive, and empowering environments. Black women often face unique barriers that can impact their success in STEM; therefore, holding safe spaces for each other is an integral part of STEM retention and career progression. Such safe spaces are not new to Black women. This leadership reflection uses the cultural space of the kitchen as a metaphor for safe spaces and offers an example of a current kitchen space to highlight the benefits of Black women creating space for other Black women.

### Introduction

Intentional, informal, broadening participation efforts by Black women for Black women in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) can be a powerful way to address the myriad challenges these women face in higher education. As much as higher education institutions propose and implement diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives to cultivate inclusive and equitable environments to broaden participation, the needle has only moved slightly to ensure that Black women occupy significant spaces in STEM. Black women no longer rely on DEI initiatives to provide seats around the STEM table; rather, they now create their own tables and seats in STEM – safe spaces where they can freely express themselves, connect with like-minded Black women, and find the support needed to overcome the unique obstacles they face. These safe spaces offer respite from the many things that undermine the confidence of Black women in STEM. Most importantly, they provide opportunities to challenge deficit thinking and empower Black women to thrive and excel in their chosen STEM fields.

### Background and Significance

One form of safe space is akin to the common practice among African-American women of gathering in the kitchen on Sundays, where they are immersed in rich dialogue that encompasses lived experiences, empathetic listening, laughter, and tears. The kitchen is a place occupied by Big Momma in the role of supporting matriarch rather than a dominating patriarch. The

Sunday kitchen offers psychosocial support that equips its occupants with coping mechanisms for their professional and personal lives. It is a place of refuge, healing, and well-being.

### **A Wednesday Evening Kitchen Conversation**

Over the past three years, four Black women in STEM participate in a virtual meeting every Wednesday evening. The group comprises members with various ranks within and outside of the academy. The commonality shared, however, is that each member has taught at an HBCU in the southeast region of the US at a point during her academic tenure. The group came together due to their contributions to the book *Overcoming Barriers for Women of Color in STEM Fields: Emerging Research and Opportunities*. Despite holding different ranks and positions at different institutions and organizations, each woman brings to the kitchen conversation her experiences of being an HBCU faculty member and traversing the path to tenure and promotion.

What started as a weekly meeting to discuss professional activities soon became a safe space for conversations ranging from the workplace to the home. Over time, our conversations have moved from a professional vernacular to a kitchen vernacular, including the words, sayings, slang, and a few expletives we need to get our points across. We encourage each other to soar to new heights, and, most importantly, strategically help each other to get to the next ‘new’. Just as in our family Sunday kitchens, we cry and laugh together, sharing a safe space to be our authentic selves. Although our table is virtual, the space has all the warmth and safety of the Sunday kitchen, filled with love and admiration, promoting a sense of belonging, collectively empowering and nurturing, and reinforcing our strength and resilience as Black women in STEM.

### **Discussion**

Conversations within this safe space allow the participants to be authentically and unapologetically present, without the pretense of scientific jargon. In fact, more often than not, we all use and appreciate everyday slang. The ability to use the communication style with which we are most comfortable contributes to our sense of safety, allowing us to define and shape our narratives without worrying about standard communication practices within the STEM workplace. Furthermore, expressive and informal communication fosters a sense of shared identity and strengthens cultural bonds. The ability for Black women to share their slang (about both personal and professional matters) without being questioned about its meaning is, in fact, *dope*.

The consistency of our Sunday kitchen gatherings is reflected in our safe space meet-ups. Consistency ensures accountability, evokes awareness, facilitates personal and professional growth, and foregrounds the next steps we must take as individuals and as a group. This serves as a corrective to STEM workspaces that typically nurture feelings of inadequacy and imposter

syndrome. Our virtual kitchen reflects the Sunday kitchen, where conversations are rehashed over time to determine actions that have been taken to move the situation forward or to work out a new action plan. This consistency encompasses deep listening and facilitates reflection.

Our virtual Wednesday evening kitchen conversations can serve as a template for other such supportive and inclusive safe spaces. For the safe space to work effectively, the group should include a variety of Black women of different experience and rank levels within academia and other institutions. The purpose of such variety is not to create a power dynamic or to impose certain values or ways of being; rather, as in the Sunday kitchen, this is a supportive dynamic founded on lived experience and wisdom gained. The words of the more experienced matriarchal women in these spaces of communal care and healing can be as gentle as a grandmother's hug while simultaneously demonstrating strength and courage. Just as in Sunday kitchen conversations, aunts, nieces, and daughters (i.e., Black women of varying ages and levels of seniority) are welcomed into the space to share their experiences. No voice is stronger than any other, and egos are checked at the door. Everyone has a seat at the table and, if company comes, someone goes to the next room to grab another chair.

### Conclusion

Black women supporting Black women through professional camaraderie is critical to the creation of supportive and empowering STEM environments. The importance of safe spaces for Black women cannot be overstated. As with Sunday kitchens, these spaces provide sanctuaries where stereotypes can be challenged, confidence nurtured, networks formed, and mental well-being prioritized. Such safe spaces empower Black women in STEM to reach their full personal and professional potential, enabling them to be agents of change for the next generation.

.....

**Pamela M. Leggett-Robinson**, Ph.D., CAPM, Founder and Executive Director of PLR Consulting in Atlanta, GA, has 17+ years of higher education experience, including STEM academic leadership, STEM coaching, data analytics, academic and student success programming, and program evaluation. She holds a Ph.D. in Physical Organic Chemistry from Georgia State University and is a Certified Associate of Project Management. PLR Consulting works with organizations and institutions to optimize STEM programs through management and evaluation. Dr. Leggett-Robinson creates successful STEM ecosystems for marginalized groups, especially women of color, through consulting, authorship, workshops, and speaking engagements.

Submitted: May 31, 2023 EST. Accepted: October 23, 2023 EST. Published: June 12, 2024 EST.