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Juantia Johnson-Bailey
University of Georgia

Angela Humphrey Brown
University of Georgia

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Participation and retention factors relating to Black reentry graduate and undergraduate women in the College of Education

Juanita Johnson-Bailey, Assistant Professor
Angela Humphrey Brown, Doctoral Candidate
Department of Adult Education, University of Georgia

Abstract: This qualitative study, which focused on participation and retention factors, examined the educational experiences of nine reentry Black women who were students at a predominately White research university. The research centered on extracting common themes and on identifying factors that influenced or hindered their educational tenure.

Introduction: Adult women who return to college comprise the fastest growing segment of the college population. Since the 1970s women have been returning to college in record numbers. Statistics show these returning women represent 41% of all female college students (Touchton & Davis, 1991). They are different from the average student because of their age and needs. These students are important to the future of higher education and warrant study not only because of their potential economic importance but because higher education should be concerned with determining and answering the needs of this new population.

This group has been recognized as a gendered phenomena and its members have been designated "reentry" women. By definition, a reentry woman is someone who either interrupted her college education for a period of five or more years or a woman who delayed entering college directly after high school and is currently attending college (Lewis, 1988). This group is composed of women of different races and cultures. Yet, if conclusions are drawn from the literature it could be assumed that this group is composed of "generic learners" who are White and whose concerns are similar across the group.

However, such conclusions belie the large numbers of Black females who are included in the catch-all category of reentry students. According to Evangelauf (1992), Black females comprise the largest number of students of color at the graduate and undergraduate level. Their numbers are twice that of the other groups of color and from this data it can be extrapolated that Black women comprise the largest group of reentry students of color. Yet, only two studies have been identified on reentry women which have included Black women as respondents (Demos, 1979; Kaplan, 1982). Neither of these studies recognized or reported any differences between the White female and Black female respondents or even conjectured that differences may exist. Yet many articles and studies report that the experiences of women and Blacks in higher education are different from those of White males (Briscoe & Ross, 1989; Fleming, 1984; Hall & Sandler,

1982; Moses, 1989). These studies document the discrimination experienced by Blacks and women because of their race or gender. Yet little literature could be found to address how a group that includes by definition Blacks and women would be impacted by a double bias.

Reentry Black women's participation in higher education is not explicitly apparent from the literature. According to Bell-Scott (1984), research on Black women in higher education has been a subject that has been routinely ignored in education studies. Agreeing with her, Ihle (1986) and Johnson-Bailey, Tisdell and Cervero (1994) observe that it is difficult to know what is occurring with Black women in higher education because major government and educational studies report data by sex or race. These two categories are considered the major designated minorities and no studies cross reference the two data bases. In this dilemma lie the statistics on Black reentry females in higher education. It is indeed one of the flaws of the literature, that most studies have been done on middle age middle class White women (Caffarella & Olson, 1993). Caffarella and Olson (1993) found this to be particularly inappropriate as educators have begun to make "generalizations" about reentry women based on the available data. In response to this problem Cafferalla and Olson (1993) call for researchers to be less culturally confined when sampling.

Significance: The education literature does not document reentry Black women's learning experiences. A recent study (Johnson-Bailey, 1994) contributed to the educational theory and praxis by offering research specific to a particular group of learners, Black women, and thus assaulting the myth of the "generic learner." The study demonstrated that the marginality of Black women sets them forth as a group whose experiences are inclusive of many types of students because of the unique position of Black women as the embodiment of race, gender, class, and color issues. Black women were therefore seen to be an invaluable research measure. The research further indicated how classroom hierarchies and the hidden and covert curriculum affected the educational tenures of reentry Black women. Finally, the study was significant because the research methodology of narrative analysis empowered the Black women to speak for themselves (Bell-Scott, 1994; Collins, 1990).

Whereas the previous research focused on Black reentry women identifying how the emerging themes of race, gender, class, and color impacted the schooling narratives of the respondents, this current research focused on participation and retention issues. This research identified factors that contributed to successful educational tenures. Issues such as situational, psychological, and institutional barriers that are reported in the literature as routinely hindering reentry students were examined (Pitts, 1992; Safman, 1988; Tittle & Denker, 1980).

Theoretical Framework: This study used Black feminist thought as its theoretical framework with its theories and extensive body of writings (Collins, 1989, 1990; Davis, 1981; Giddings, 1984; hooks, 1984, 1989; Hull, Bell-Scott, & Smith, 1982; James & Busia, 1993; Lorde, 1984; Wallace, 1978) which posit that Black women have a collective consciousness that is based on the experience of living in a hierarchial society built on race, gender, and class. The resulting

epistemology encourages the use of personal experience as a criterion with which to dialogue and judge knowledge (Collins, 1989).

Methodology: This was a qualitative study which used narrative analysis as the specific methodological instrument (Denzin, 1989; Etter-Lewis, 1993; Riessman, 1993). A semi-structured interview format and an interview guide were used to direct data gathering (Bodgan & Biklen, 1982). The respondents were interviewed, the tape recorded interviews were transcribed, and the resulting data were analyzed as text. The women were assigned pseudonyms.

The sample consisted of nine Black women who were either attending or had recently matriculated from the College of Education: 1) three had obtained undergraduate degrees; 2) two were pursuing and three had obtained master's degrees; 3) one was pursuing and two had obtained specialist's degrees; and 4) three were pursuing and one had obtained doctor of education degrees. The sample seems to exceed nine respondents because several of the women obtained multiple degrees from the College of Education. Four departments within the College of Education were represented by this purposeful sampling. The women fit the traditional definition of reentry women (Lewis, 1988) in that they interrupted their college education for several years, delayed entering college directly after high school, or were over thirty years of age.

Results: An analysis of the data revealed that three major issues affected the participation of the Black reentry women studied: 1) the accessibility and encouragement of the department's graduate coordinator; 2) the recruitment to the program by students who had participated in the program; and 3) the encouragement of mentors (usually high school guidance counselors or college career counselors who were familiar with the program and who were also Black). Further examination disclosed that four issues affected retention: 1) the presence of and mentoring by Black professors and staff; 2) the presence of and networking by Black peers; 3) respect from the department's professoriate, and 4) the availability of continued funding.

A detailed examination of the participation issues showed striking similarities between the respondents' experiences. Two of the women related incidents where they approached graduate coordinators in other Colleges at the University who actively discouraged their application to graduate school. One was told that she was not graduate school material and the other was told that she was not a serious student since she only wanted to attend part time. Both women delayed their reentry for years, one for two years and the other for 18 years. They both had successful reentry tenures.

Five of the women stated that it was the friendliness and encouragement of the graduate coordinators in the College of Education that helped them complete the difficult and intimidating process of applying to graduate school. With the exception of one respondent, all described a tentativeness about applying to the University because of stories that they had heard regarding the inherent unfairness towards Black students.

Four of the respondents were recruited to their various programs by other students, two by White students and two by Black students. The difference in the recruiting experiences was that the Black students warned of campus racism but still judged the academic experience as excellent and the task as achievable. Two other women were encouraged to attend by their mentors. The remaining women made application based on the academic reputations of the programs.

An analysis of the data regarding retention revealed that throughout their programs the participants struggled with feelings of isolation and self-doubt that were particularly apparent in classroom interactions. A few professors referred to them as either "exceptions" to their race in terms of intelligence and performance or as possible affirmative action admissions. One woman remembered being told that if she wished to be successful in graduate school she should find an editor because her grammar while understandably inferior was not acceptable. She was told on another occasion that, "You talk White but you write Black."

A major difference for all of the participants was the presence of Black professors, particularly Black women professors. All the students used similar wording such as "having someone around who looks like me." Eight of the women reported being mentored by Black women professors and receiving information from the network established by other Black students (especially Black graduate assistants). It was their opinion that the information given to them would not have been obtained from other sources. This was particularly relevant when applying for and receiving graduate assistantships and financial aid. While four of the respondents had graduate assistantships, none of them received them their first year and they only made application after receiving information and support from the previously referenced sources.

All of the respondents spoke of the importance of professors that were accepting of student diversity and of professors who respected their contributions. Accordingly, it was these professors (a small number in most of the departments studied), who helped the students continue their programs. Their classrooms were described as "havens" and "respites."

Conclusions/Implications: Overall the study revealed that the barriers that usually affect reentry women's participation, such as child care, class scheduling, lack of family support, financial difficulties, and past school failures were not mentioned by these women as concerns. The main factors that attributed to their participation were accepting environments (which included helpful and positive graduate school coordinators), recruitment by other students, and encouragement by mentors familiar with the department's program and atmosphere. These findings are inconsistent with the existing literature on the generic reentry student (Cross, 1981; Lewis, 1988; Tittle & Denker, 1980).

Additionally, the most important factors affecting the retention of Black students were the presence and mentoring of Black faculty and staff, the presence of Black peers and the resulting network, the positive attitude of some department faculty, and the location of new sources of funding. These findings agree with the existing literature (Adams, 1992; Bowser, Auletta & Jones, 1993; Daloz, 1986; Hill, 1972; Johnson Bailey, Tisdell, & Cervero, 1994; Steele, 1991).

The study implicates that future research on participation and retention issues should not consider students as a homogeneous group. There is no generic adult student. Factors of gender and race, as well as other significant markers, should be considered when conducting research on adult populations. The study also indicated the importance of faculty diversity and the importance of the graduate coordinator or other admissions officials being aware of cultural norms and ques. In addition, consideration should not only be given to managing classroom dynamics but also to monitoring student networks and interactions since negative classroom interactions were sighted as a major reason for low retention rates.

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*** Additional references will be available at the presentation.***