



Protecting the Support: The Experiences of Black Assistant Professors and Diversity Initiatives

Dimitra Jackson Smith¹, John Kuykendall², Joy Jackson³

¹ Ph.D., Department Head, Tenured Associate Professor, Department of Higher Education and Learning Technologies, College of Education and Human Services, Texas A&M University-Commerce, USA, E-mail: dimitraj.smith@gmail.com

² Ph.D., Associate Professor & Dean, School of Education, Department of Leadership and Educational Studies, University of Indianapolis, USA, Email: kuykendallj@uindy.edu

³ PhD, MPH, CPH, Associate Professor, Department of Biology, University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff

Abstract

Black faculty are essential in the success of the experiences of Black graduate students. Given the low representation of Black faculty in academia, Black faculty are looked upon to assist in areas of diversity and provide service on diversity related programs. Black faculty are committed to serving in diversity roles, and value the opportunity to serve in mentoring and advising roles for students of color. Often times these service responsibilities can take time away from tenure and promotion responsibilities. While Black faculty provides service to initiatives of diversity and supports graduate students of color, who supports Black faculty? The purpose of this study was to highlight the experiences of three Black Assistant Professors in the academy to understand their experiences and perceptions as it relates to working with students of color, and the role of diversity in tenure and promotion. Utilizing Triple Quandary Theory, this study explores the experiences of Black Assistant Professors and their experiences with diversity service initiatives. This study sheds light on Black Assistant Professors' experiences and perceptions as it relates to working with students of color, and the role of diversity in tenure and promotion process. Implications are provided based on the overall results of this study.

Keywords: Qualitative, Research, Black, Assistant Professor, Diversity, Graduate Students

Introduction

The low representation of faculty of color in academia causes these faculty to be sought out by graduate students of color to fulfill many service related roles and activities, such as advising of student organizations, support, guidance and mentoring, in addition to their assigned faculty responsibilities related to advising, teaching and research (Settles, Buchanan, & Dotson, 2019). More specifically, research indicates that Black professors, overall are more often engaged in student interaction and mentoring than their White counterparts (Doharty, Madriaga & Joseph-Salisbury, 2020). Coupled with Black professors being more engaged in student interactions, is the tendency for Black faculty to engage in mentoring and advising activities that are more time consuming. Black faculty welcome the opportunity to positively impact the academic landscape of all students, with a specific focus on students of color. These opportunities may be unavoidable and consists of roles that Black faculty must play because no one else will perform the “tasks” (Griffin, Bennett, Harris, 2013). Scholars have also referred to these types of commitments as “cultural taxation, which is largely linked to service and is the expectation that faculty of color will participate in departmental and institutional affairs concerning race and diversity and include any extra burdens faculty of color experience because of their race or ethnicity (Padilla, 1994; Joseph & Hirschfield, 2010; Social Sciences Feminist Network Research Interest Group, 2017). In reference to “cultural taxation,” Brayboy (2003) indicates that these service opportunities include expectations as serving as the token voice for individuals of color. In an effort to uplift the Black community and remain true to their commitments to ethnic/racial communities, Black faculty may embrace more time-consuming service opportunities, such as mentoring, advising, and serving on committees of diversity matters (Baez, 2000; Griffin, Bennett, Harris, 2013; & Stanley, 2006). The literature is clear regarding the benefits of Black faculty-Black graduate student relationships – highlighting Black graduate

students having access to mentors who understand their unique experiences as people of color in higher education (Guiffrida, Lynch, Wall, & Abel, 2013; & Tuitt, 2012). The essential role that faculty of color plays in the experiences of minority populations, can take time away from research and responsibilities that lead to tenure and promotion (Reddick, Bukoski, & Smith, 2020).

Given the essential role that Black faculty play in the success and overall experiences of Black graduate students, the question then become, “Who is protecting the very faculty who are assisting in the success of students of color? Who is ensuring that the experiences of Black faculty are recognized, acknowledged? How can universities support Black faculty as the Black faculty support students of color? The purpose of this study is to highlight the experiences of three Black Assistant Professors in the academy. More specifically, this study draws attention to Black Assistant Professors’ experiences and perceptions as it relates to working with students of color, and the role of diversity in tenure and promotion process.

As further discussed in the methodology section of this study, the term Black is used an overarching identification. It is also essential to note the terms “professor” and “faculty” are used interchangeable throughout this study. This is due to the varying terms used in the literature as well as by the participants in this study. This study was guided by two open-ended prompts:

- (1) What are your thoughts and perceptions regarding engaging in diversity initiatives that may be time consuming?
- (2) What are your thoughts regarding the role of diversity in the tenure and promotion process?
- (3) How can universities protect Black Faculty as they support students of color?

Review of the Literature

Black Faculty in Academia

Research has demonstrated that as of 2017, Black faculty members continue to be an underrepresented group within higher education, as only 6% hold full-time faculty positions nationally compared to 76% White full-time faculty. This statistic is can be alarming as only 4% represented Black full professors (NCES, 2020). In addition to their underrepresentation, Black faculty members face many barriers and inequalities regarding scholarship, promotion, and achieving tenure status (Allen, Epps, Guillony, Suh, and Bonous-Hamarth, 2000). According to Allen et al. (2000), Black faculty members are less likely to advance in academia, land a job at a higher tiered university, and more likely to remain at a lower academic status. This is typically attributed to the burdens of time consuming service, advising and mentoring responsibilities that Black faculty value as components of their faculty role. Felder (2010), and Constantine, Smith, Redington, and Owens (2008) demonstrated that Black faculty members take on more service-oriented roles for two reasons: 1) Due to the underrepresentation of Black faculty members on college campuses, Black faculty members are consciously aware of their sociocultural responsibility to take on advising and mentoring roles for students of color; and 2) Institutional and departmental administrators expect that Black faculty members take on such roles. For instance, administrators expect Black faculty members to serve on many diversity initiatives committees (Felder, 2010; Gewin, 2020).

Padilla (1994) coined these time-consuming responsibilities of service as cultural taxation. Cultural taxation represents Black faculty members or faculty of color having to take on extra responsibilities due to their racial or ethnic background. As Black faculty members spend more time on service and teaching responsibilities, their productivity in scholarship suffers which can be detrimental to their promotion and tenure (Allen et al., 2000). Hutson (2006) also discussed how teaching evaluations play a major role in the promotion or lack thereof for Black faculty members. It was hypothesized that “faculty of color have lower ratings [on course evaluations] because they teach less popular courses that receive lower course evaluations overall” (p. 599). Although there may be reasons for lower course evaluations as evaluations are not race related, research has demonstrated that there is bias against faculty of color and women faculty in particular subjects or disciplines, such as (Hutson, 2006; Kelly 2014). Consequently, the retention, success, and promotion of Black faculty members is negatively impacted.

Another major inequality among Black faculty members is salary. The U.S. Department of Education (2000) conducted a national study which examined the gender and racial differences among postsecondary faculty: “In faculty outcomes, for example, white faculty generally had higher salaries ... than Black faculty” (p. vi). It was noted that Black faculty members’ dedication to positively impacting the academic experiences of students may led them to more likely have full-time positions at two-year institutions (both community and vocational) versus doctorate granting institutions (Amey & VanderLinden, 2002). Hutson (2006) demonstrated a pay difference of \$4,000 to \$12,000 among salaries for Black faculty members compared to other racial groups. Although Hutson (2006) pulled data from a 1998 survey, salary discrepancies among Black faculty members are still prevalent today. According to the University of California, Berkley’s (2015) study on salary equity at the institution, “the average

salary difference between white men and minority faculty members is equivalent to about 1 to 2 years of career experience” (p. 21). Inequalities in salaries due to racial inequalities create dissatisfaction in the workplace.

Black Faculty Experiences With Students of Color

According to Tuitt (2012), Black graduate students have varying expectations of Black faculty members and their roles at a Predominately-White institution (PWI). Due to sharing a common racial/cultural background, Black graduate students expressed feeling more comfortable with and trusting of Black faculty members in the classroom (Tuitt, 2012). Black graduate students also reported being more willing to participate in class discussions and/or going to office hours of Black faculty. Additionally, in regards to having a shared racial/cultural background, Black graduate students felt that Black professors should serve as an ally and offer support (Tuitt, 2012). This type of support can range from serving as an “intellectual guide,” role model, or mentor (Tuitt, 2012, p. 194). Black faculty members provide guidance for Black graduate students to help them navigate their academic program, research interests, and career aspirations. Black faculty members also serve as an “example of success” that Black graduate students can connect with on an “academic, personal, and cultural level” (Waymer, 2012, p. 410).

Black faculty members are more inclined to take on service roles for students of color, especially Black graduate students, due to their socio-cultural responsibility (Barker, 2007; Padilla, 1994). Academics from minority ethnic groups are also identified to serve as mentor to junior faculty from minority ethnic groups, and to sit on committees of diversity that takes time away from their research and additional tenure and promotion requirements (Reddick, 2020). Waymer (2012) shared his personal account as a Public Relations professor and obligation to serve underrepresented students: “I have decided not only to engage in but to commit my life to service and mentorship to all students who will receive, but especially to Black students” (p. 416). Other expectations that Black graduate students had for Black faculty members also included using more diverse course material, having an understanding of racism and oppression, and being more accessible (Tuitt, 2012). According to the director of the Center for Science, Technology & Economic Policy, “African Americans may be called on to do more service... Institutions need to be aware of the service burdens they place on faculty members,” (Reddick 2020).

Theoretical Framework

The Triple Quandary Theory is appropriate in understanding the experiences of Black faculty as it relates to engaging in time-consuming service roles of working and interacting with Black graduate students. Boykin and Toms (1985) Triple Quandary Theory highlights the interplay of three tenets that are applicable to this study. The first of the tenets is the mainstream experience, which highlights the need to be an effective, working citizen in society. This theory draws attention to what it means to have achieved the American dream. The second tenet, Black cultural socialization, encompasses nine dimensions that are relayed through verbal and nonverbal behaviors. These dimensions include spirituality harmony, movement, verve, affect, communalism, expressive individualism, oral tradition, and social time perspective(s). The minority socialization experience is the third and final tenet. During this socialization, adaptive responses are developed to assist in dealing with particular experiences that emerged from oppression (Boykins and Toms, 1985). Faculty undergo many experiences as tenure-track faculty members. These experiences may be related to their scholarship and research, interactions with students and colleagues, as well as individual personal experiences. These professional and personal experiences are compounded for a Black faculty member in the academy. Black faculty are expected, either on a personal level, by Black graduate students, by the institution or a combination of the aforementioned, to participate in time consuming service roles, which and can prevent Black faculty from engaging in responsibilities that lead to tenure and promotion. Black faculty welcome the opportunity to assist students, and be involved in diversity and inclusion initiatives. Due to the time commitments of engaging and interacting in different service roles, these efforts, should be compensated and recognized in promotion requirements. According to Reddick, 2020, “the thing about cultural taxation is that the services requested are not in lieu of a current workload. They are in addition to that workload. Black faculty are willing to do this work because they recognize that it is important and they want to give back to their communities” (Reddick, 2020, para. 9)

Similar cultural experiences may cause Black graduate students to look to other Black faculty to assist them in reaching and finding harmony among the three intersecting tenets. This theory sheds light on how Black faculty define, manage, perceive, and negotiate time in their desire to assist students of color to achieve the American dream individually and as a student body, while also maintaining scholarship that leads to tenure and promotion.

Methodology

Participants

This study consists of narratives of three Black Assistant Professors who are within five years of their tenure track position as an Assistant Professor. The term “Black” was used to protect the specific race and ethnicities of the participants. One of the participant’s race/ethnicity can be easily identified. Due to the small number of participants and the perceived sensitivity of the topic, the specific race/identities, titles of the academic departments, university affiliations, and actual names of the participants are omitted from this study to protect the identity of the participants and their stories. The participants included professors in Higher Education at Research PWIs and includes 2 females (Tori and Jade) and 1 male (Andy).

Research Design

Using qualitative research, this study utilized scholarly personal narratives (SPN) to collect, analyze and disaggregate the data from the experiences of the Black Assistant Professors. The researchers of this study believed that, given the overall focus of this study, the individuals who have had specific experiences with engaging in significant diversity initiatives can most accurately generate knowledge and derive meaning from their interactions between their experiences and ideas. This narrative research focused on the lived experiences of three Black tenure-track Assistant Professors. By gathering the data through a collection of their various stories, the researchers included narratives about their experiences as provided by the participants and explored their meanings. Foucault (1977, 1991) posited that humans, as cognitive creatures, can possess the knowledge and understanding of things only if the things inherently have meaning.

Data Analysis

This study took an authentic approach to understand the experiences of three Black Assistant Professors and their perceptions of engaging in diversity initiatives that may require a significant amount of time and initiatives that have the potential to take time away from tenure and promotion requirements. This study consisted of two open-ended questions that allowed the participants to freely share their stories as written narratives. The participants were asked to share their thoughts and perceptions while keeping the following two prompts in mind: (1) What are your thoughts and perceptions regarding engaging in diversity initiatives that may be time consuming?; (2) What are your thoughts regarding the role of diversity in the tenure and promotion process?; and (3) how can universities protect Black Assistant Professors as they support students of color. The aforementioned questions were asked of each participant regardless of the affiliated university and number of years as an Assistant Professor.

In the data analysis process, each written narrative was read independently of each other and common themes emerged. To assist with the data analysis phase of this study, Creswell (2014) quality data analysis was used. An adaptation of the Data Analysis Spiral was used to manage, organize, describe, classify and compare the data in analytic circles as opposed to a fixed linear approach. Within this spiral, the thematic analysis was used to analyze and identify reoccurring patterns and codes. As codes emerged among the narratives, the codes were reorganized into categories. Six preliminary themes emerged from the data. From the six preliminary themes that emerged, this study resulted in three final themes. Member checking was conducted to ensure that the “findings are the result of the experiences and ideas of the informants, rather than the characteristics and preferences of the researcher” (Shenton, 2004, p. 72). Descriptions were generated for each of the themes and recoding of the themes was conducted when necessary.

Discussion of the Emergent Themes

The narratives in this study yielded three (3) emergent themes. The first theme was Personal and Professional Fulfilment. This theme focused on faculty’s perceptions and thoughts regarding engaging in diversity initiatives. The second theme was Diversity should be included in my role. In theme two, the Assistant Professors shared their thoughts on the role that diversity opportunities should play in their position as an Assistant Professor. Lastly, the third theme was Doing the right thing and doing what is right. This theme focused on ways that the Assistant Professors expressed managing responsibilities associated with research and publishing and tasks related to tenure and promotion and while engaging in service opportunities with student populations of color.

Theme 1: Personal and Professional Fulfilment

As an Assistant Professor at any institution, there are clear tenure and promotion requirements. There are also opportunities to engage in activities that may fulfill an Assistant Professor personally and professionally, such as mentoring and advising graduate students who may share similar cultural experiences as the Assistant Professors. Additionally, Assistant Professors of color may be expected to engage in service activities that may be in time

excess of tenure and promotion requirements. While these time-consuming opportunities may not be factored into their scholarship, Assistant Professors may feel obligated, motivated and encouraged to continue in diversity service tasks. The Assistant Professors in this study expressed engaging in diversity service initiatives in terms such as “passion,” “motivating,” “personal commitment,” and obligation.

Tori explained that engaging in service opportunities around diversity that may be time consuming is a personal fulfillment. In her explanation of her perceptions of this fulfillment, she shared:

The time spent assisting students of color is one that is owed to the community. It is an unwritten obligation that you sign up for. It is a passion, motivation and drive. To know that you are using your talents and blessings to give back and assist students of color in reaching their goals is rewarding.

Andy shared similar sentiments and explained that he will continue to spend his time giving back to the experiences of students of color. In sharing his commitment to diversity service tasks, he stated:

I will spend my time ensuring that Black graduate students are positioned to not only graduate but to also move on. I will spend my time mentoring, advising, sharing my experiences, sharing my successes and my failures. I will spend my time speaking at graduate and undergraduate events. I will spend my time chairing and sitting on committees. The issue is not how I spend my time. The issue is whether or not the institution values how I spend my time.

Jade shared that a part of her responsibility as an Assistant Professor is to give back, regardless of the fact that these service tasks may not be acknowledged and may not play a role in her workload. Her personal commitment is to her community. She shared:

I will not stop giving back to my community via university programs and events just because it may not be factored into my workload. Yes-I may go above and beyond in service, but that is my personal commitment and obligation to my community. The university has a job to do and I have a job to do- and that is to give back.

All of the Assistant Professors value the opportunity to engage in service activities of advising, mentoring, chairing and engaging in diversity matters. The Black Assistant Professors understood that the time spent engaging in these activities may not factor into tenure and promotion requirements and workload; however, their motivation and passion was to continue serving in these capacities was, in part, due to personal commitment to their cultural communities.

Theme 2: Diversity should be included in my role

The second theme that emerged from the Black Assistant Professors' experiences is the belief that service opportunities, that currently require that faculty take time from “faculty related tasks,” should be incorporated into the overall role of being a faculty member. Engaging in service opportunities require time and should be taken into account regarding workload. The Assistant Professors in this study believe that their role as an Assistant Professor also entails engaging in diversity and inclusion activities that may be time-consuming. Tori's Department chair suggested that she “clear things off her plate,” referring to Tori's involvement with diversity service activities. Tori questioned her chair and asked “Why isn't this a part of my job as an Assistant Professor?”

Andy shared many of the same thoughts as Tori and believes that the amount of experience and expertise that faculty of color bring to the institution should be considered in the faculty role. In his further explanation of his thoughts around diversity and its inclusion into the faculty role, he stated the following:

It is unfortunate, counterproductive, and a disgrace for institutions of higher education to not recognize the essential role of faculty of color. Faculty of color bring an enormous amount of experience and expertise and contribute significantly to the academic institution. I know it is not representative of all institutions, but I cannot understand why diversity and equity initiatives are viewed separately from what it means to be a faculty member.

Jade believes that involvement in diversity matters should be mandatory of all faculty and included in tenure and promotion requirements. According to Jade:

It should be mandatory. It should be a requirement. Why not just factor it into my tenure and promotion requirements? Diversity affairs should be a concern of everyone in the institution.

Theme 3: Doing the right thing and doing what is right

The last theme falls in line with the third tenet, minority socialization, which focuses on adaptive responses to feeling oppressed. While the literature highlights oppression coming from members of majority groups, research has also indicated instances where members from within can trigger emotions of oppression. While the faculty value their role in supporting diversity roles, they also expressed the time required to be productive in all areas, including areas of cultural relevance and areas of tenure and promotion. In discussing the role of diversity in their position as faculty, the faculty expressed being thankful, and remembering why they became faculty members.

Tori discussed focusing on being thankful and content with herself. She stated the following: At the end of the day, if I can help at least one student who looks like me in their academic journey, I can sleep at peace at night. Do not get me wrong, it can be tiring and sometimes there is not enough hours in a day. If diversity efforts, mentoring and advising efforts were factored into tenure and promotion requirements, it would make things easier, show an appreciation for faculty and it would show students that they are valued.

Andy discussed the importance of remaining loyal to his people and praying. He elaborated on the following:

I pray for strength. I cannot fail my people. I have to find time to fulfill my obligations to my people and to the profession. It is interesting that I just said those 2 things separately... but that also proves my point.

Jade discussed the idea that providing service in areas of diversity should be required of everyone. She also expressed thinking about her why and why she values supporting and spending time giving back to her culture. When asked to share more, she elaborated on the following:

My thoughts and perceptions is that matters of diversity should be a focus and requirement of everyone...of all faculty and staff. The success of undergraduate and graduate students of color should be a priority of the institution as a whole. In times when I feel overwhelmed, I think about my why and I push on. I think about why I do what I do. I think about all of the students that I get the opportunity to assist. I think about my own children who will eventually be students in higher education. I think about all of that and I find the strength to push on. I am not sure if this is the best strategy, but it works for me right now.

Discussion

Black faculty are key in the overall success of academia. Black faculty serve as the foundation for all students, especially Black students, at various institutional types. Their ability to respond to heavy needs of their community base is a skill that is often over-looked in every aspect of society, even in academia (Edwards, Ross, 2018; Turner-Kelly & Gayles, 2017). Black faculty are positioned to respond to the needs of diverse populations and, according to the Black faculty in this study, these experiences should be valued in the tenure and promotion process, as well as recognition initiatives such as awards and grants (Griffen, Bennet, & Harris, 2013; Reddick, 2011). The findings of this study support the literature on the experiences of Black faculty as it relates to an abundance of service responsibility around diversity initiatives (Settles, Buchanan, Dotson, 2019; Doharty, Madriaga & Joseph-Salisbury, 2020; Harper, 2013), mentoring and advising Black graduate students in addition to other graduate students (Settles, Buchanan, Dotson, 2019; Doharty, Madriaga & Joseph-Salisbury, 2020), and the fact that the invisible roles of Black faculty go unnoticed and unrecognized (Griffin, Bennett, & Harris, 2013).

In this current study, the three Black Assistant professors shared their experiences with their involvement in service initiatives around diversity. The definitions and perceptions found in this study, align with the literature and highlights the need to focus policies and practices on supporting Black faculty and the essential role they play to our nation's colleges and universities. While the Black faculty mentioned that participating in advising and mentoring roles in access of their faculty requirements, can be tiring and time consuming, they expressed gratitude in being able to give back to their community in such a way. They expressed feeling passionate about serving on various diversity committees and assisting Black graduate students and all students of color in their graduate studies. Institutions should view the ability of Black graduate students to positively impact the experiences of Black faculty as vital components of the institution that should be rewarded. Black faculty have multiple layers of commitment from themselves as Black faculty, Black graduate students, and from the institution. The health and wellness of Black faculty must be considered in all levels of academia. Moreover, their commitment to the success of all students, especially Black graduate students, must be acknowledged and recognized.

Recommendations

In addition to their overall experiences as a Black faculty member, the faculty members in this study shared suggestions and recommendation to assist them in responding to personal and professional service opportunities around diversity. Unanimously, the participants shared the importance and impact of their role as a Black faculty member on the experience of Black graduate students. The Black faculty also expressed their role in giving back to the community and to their culture. However, Black faculty did recognize that being looked upon to advise and sit on different programs, organizations, and associations of diversity matters, can be emotional, and exhausting.

The three participants suggested that the “invisible” work of Black faculty, as it relates to service, be recognized in tenure and promotion standards. There should be an institutional reward system, beyond personal satisfaction, for answering the call to respond to a group of students that are often overlooked in the academy. In many cases, Black faculty are the reasons that Black graduate students completed their study and graduate (Hirshfield, 2012).

Second, the work around diversity should also be recognized via identified grants and resources that are offered to Black faculty to ensure the wellbeing of Black faculty and the success of Black graduate students. With the unsettling of Blacks in America, Black faculty are the pillars of Black graduate student success. The third recommendation from the participants is that faculty who do not identify as Black must also aid Black faculty in responding to the needs of Black graduate students. The responsibility of aiding Black graduate students is the responsibility of the academic institution as a whole. Trying to be strategic and align service commitments and tenure efforts was also identified as a way to navigate the academic (Guillaume, 2019).

Conclusion

This study explored the experiences of three Black Assistant Professors in the academy regarding their experiences with diversity commitments and initiatives. The stories of the participants shed light on the essential role that Black Faculty play in the academic lives of Black graduate students and students of color. This important role can be very impactful for Black faculty, who value their role as mentors and helping students. The participants indicated that as Black faculty members, Black students turn to them to fulfill diverse voids in their lives, both academically and personally. Black students trust Black faculty to understand their experiences as Black graduate students and sometimes, a Black faculty member’s desire to respond to service needs, can take time from tenure and promotion activities. In the name of passion to the profession and to their cultural background, Black faculty may embrace the extra service responsibilities. With low representation of Black faculty in academia, it is essential for Black faculty and Black academic institutions to explore solid structures for good working relationships.

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