Mentoring Relationships Among African American Women in Graduate and Professional Schools

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Mentoring has been considered one of the salient factors in academic and career success. On college and university campuses, it is common to find students who consider the mentoring relationships fostered with professors and advisers to be highly influential. Mentoring is particularly important on the graduate level, because emerging scholars and practitioners who intend to excel in their respective professions have the opportunity to make connections and learn how to successfully maneuver within their areas of specialization.

African American women in graduate and professional schools often find it difficult to locate suitable mentors with whom to build such connections. This chapter examines traditional definitions of mentoring through a review existing literature, provides a framework for understanding the mentoring needs of African American women, and highlights a research study that explored mentoring relationships among African American women in graduate and professional programs. Implications for strengthening mentoring relationships and better supporting the needs of African American women conclude the chapter.

Mentoring Defined

The term mentor was derived from Homer’s epic tale The Odyssey. Odysseus selected his elderly friend, Mentor, to watch over his son Telemachus while he was away fighting in the Trojan War. Mentor was
responsible for guiding, teaching, and offering counsel to young Telemachus in his father’s absence. Although this is considered the origin of the term *mentor*, the word has taken on varied meanings in different fields over time. Mentors, according to Hill and Ragland (1995), “guide, train, and support a less skilled or experienced person called a novice, mentee, or protégé” (p. 72). Mentoring is a cornerstone in the success of graduate education and depends highly on student-faculty relationships propelled by trust, integrity, opportunity, and understanding.

**Mentoring: The Missing Link for African American Women**

As is mentioned throughout this volume, research on African American women in higher education is scarce. Consequently, few studies have been conducted that focus specifically on African American women and mentoring. Mumford’s study (1996) found that African American women have a wide range of mentors that include friends, relatives, work-based supervisors, and professional colleagues who provide spiritual, emotional, financial, and educational advisement. The women deemed those mentoring relationships important to their personal and educational growth and career development. Blackwell’s groundbreaking exploration (1983) of mentoring relationships among African American graduate and professional students found that women were less likely than men to have mentors. Similarly, more than three-fourths of the graduate students surveyed in Scandura and Williams’ study (2001) reported having mentors, yet the female respondents were significantly less successful than the men in their quest to initiate, cultivate, and sustain meaningful mentoring relationships with faculty.

Jackson, Kite, and Branscombe (1996) found that African American women overwhelmingly preferred African American female mentors. However, they had a difficult time locating such women on predominantly white college and university campuses. Participating in a mentoring relationship with someone who looks like them, who has similar personal, professional, and scholarly interests and is devoted to their holistic experience and personal success as a graduate student in their chosen field, is keenly important for African American women and other students of color.

Mentoring relationships are vital to the facilitation of successful experiences for African American women and necessary in order for them to break the glass ceiling (Guido-DiBrito and Batchelor, 1988; Locke, 1997). However, because of the low numbers of African American female faculty and staff on campus, graduate women do not always have the opportunity to interact with other same-race women. According to Hughes (1988), “Minority women students have the most limited access to ethnic role models and mentors like themselves” (p. 65). Thus, African American female graduate and professional students who seek mentoring relationships are at an obvious disadvantage.
Locke (1997) suggests that a growing system of mentoring needs to be in place to alleviate the problem of too few African American female mentors on college and university campuses. Mentors could play a major role in the recruitment and socialization of younger scholars who are equipped with the skills requisite for success. In their study of African American women and mentoring, Howard-Vital and Morgan (1993) found that the majority of their respondents someday intended to become mentors. This finding is consistent with literature indicating that those who are mentored are more likely to serve as mentors in the future (Jacobi, 1991).

**Alternative Support Sources**

Given the scarcity of mentoring relationships among African American women in higher education, many graduate women go beyond their disciplines to seek out mentors for academic, emotional, and spiritual support (Essien, 1997). Informal networks may range from parents and family to church members, neighbors, and civic and professional organizations.

The establishment of support networks through family, friends, and the community is necessary to help women survive and excel in graduate programs. When they desire to have their issues placed at the forefront, African American women create or join networks with others who can relate to and understand their struggles, both personally and professionally. African American mothers have traditionally played significant roles in the mentoring of their daughters. During the college and graduate school years, many African American women rely on their mothers (who often live many miles away) to provide the inspiration, emotional support, and career advisement that is absent in mentoring relationships on campus. Other female family members, such as aunts, grandmothers, and cousins, also provide counsel and spiritual support to African American women during their pursuit of graduate and professional degrees.

African American women have also chosen to involve and align themselves with cohorts of other women who provide advice and a sense of sisterly connectedness. Since few networks exist on most campuses, many African American women derive their support from churches and informal community-based social groups. Many join what Reid-Wolfman (1997) refers to as “black secular organizations ranging from informal social clubs to structured national affiliates” (p. 165).

While formal networks could be made through campus organizations that have minority or gender-specific foci (for example, Black Law Student Association, Graduate Women in Business), many African American graduate women seek and build mentoring relationships with women external to their campuses. Wilkerson (1984) noted that professional associations have long been important networking outlets for women of color, because they provide an arena in which their voices can be heard and their issues can take priority. Professional associations and symposia afford African
American women the opportunity to interact with other positive and professional women of color, many of whom are highly regarded in their respective disciplines (Essien, 1997; Gregory, 1995; Miller and Vaughn, 1997). These women sometimes hold major leadership positions in other professional associations, including presidencies. Because the number of African American women in major leadership positions on college and university campuses is dismal at best, seeing other women of color in high-profile positions in professional associations motivates graduate women and confirms for them that success and respect in their chosen professions are attainable. Moreover, female-focused association committees (for example, the ACPA Standing Committee for Women, the AERA Research on Women and Education Special Interest Group) are valuable avenues for African American women who wish to learn from and foster long-lasting mentoring relationships with positive female role models.

In a study of African American female college presidents and chief executive officers, Sanford-Harris (1990) found that participants were actively involved in a variety of professional, civic, and social organizations, including the four national historically black sororities. Giddings (1988) suggests that these organizations have always been important sources of leadership training for black women, whose opportunities to acquire such skills through other organized campus and community groups are few (p. 16). Women who join these organizations during their collegiate or post-undergraduate years are exposed to opportunities for involvement and a host of leadership experiences.

In addition to providing outlets for leadership development, black sororities also affect the career development of their members. One of the greatest benefits of membership is the lifelong network that is established among members, both locally and globally. These networks enhance graduate school options, career advancement, and job mobility. According to Berkowitz and Padavic (1999), “the idea of seeking strong, professional Black women as role models and possible mentors was a recurrent theme for these college [sorority] women, who spoke of ties with graduate chapters as a way to gain access to successful African Americans” (p. 10). The African American women in their sample also noted that sorority affiliation was part of their identity and would forever serve as a source of support and networking, even beyond the undergraduate years.

**Reflections on Mentoring Relationships**

This section is devoted to discussing the findings of a research study conducted to learn about contemporary mentoring experiences among African American women in graduate and professional schools. Individual, semi-structured interviews were conducted with African American female students in postbaccalaureate degree programs in law, education, business, and the humanities at a large, predominantly white research university.
Half of the women were not engaged in mentoring relationships with other African American women, while the other half identified same-race women who served as mentors. Those without African American female mentors were asked about their mentoring relationships in general, while the others were asked questions pertaining specifically to the mentoring relationships they had with African American women. After reflecting on their personal experiences, the participants shared their thoughts on the value of having an African American female mentor, as well as the importance of same-sex mentoring among African American women.

The results of the study highlighted some important aspects of African American graduate women’s perceptions of their mentoring relationships. While each had different mentoring experiences, several similarities existed among the women regardless of whether they had an African American female mentor.

**The Value of African American Female Mentors.** Overwhelmingly, the women in the study felt that having an African American female mentor would be a rich and unique experience. Although half of the participants did not have same-race female mentors, they were able to pinpoint the characteristics that would set an African American female mentor apart from others. The women stated that only an African American woman could understand the complex intersection of race and gender in the academy and society. They felt they could establish a deeper, more meaningful connection with her because of her firsthand life and academic experiences. Also, she could provide advice to help them avoid professional pitfalls while being a sister and a friend. Reportedly, these characteristics were rare or unavailable in mentoring relationships with men and mentors from other racial or ethnic backgrounds.

An interesting characteristic that emerged among those engaged in mentoring relationships with African American women was the concept of mothering. Those participants felt their mentoring relationship resembled that of a mother and daughter. They referred to their mentors as second mothers or described the women as comparable to their mothers. These maternal mentoring relationships consisted of nurturing, care, concern, worry, and honesty. In additional to emotional support, the mothering role in mentoring proved to be effective in helping the participants learn survival skills such as how to maintain professionalism, dress properly, successfully navigate political environments, and reject negative stereotypes that have been traditionally used to characterize African American women.

When available, the participants perceived African American female faculty to be extremely valuable; no mention was made of African American female staff or administrators. An African American faculty woman is in a perfect position to teach about the politics of the academy, both within and beyond the department, the participants noted. Furthermore, she can use her experiences and knowledge to shape positive self-concepts among female graduate and professional students while
encouraging them to recognize their full potential as scholars and future career women in academe.

**Explaining the Void.** Many of the participants explained why so few African American women serve in mentoring roles. The most frequently cited reason was the absence of African American women in their academic departments. Many were pursuing postbaccalaureate degrees in programs that employed no African American female instructors. Thus, they had a limited pool from which to select same-race, same-sex mentors. Two additional concerns raised regarding the lack of African American female mentors, particularly faculty women, was the strong focus that these women placed on earning tenure and pleasing the white majority in their departments. These women were perceived as too busy and disproportionately loyal to research commitments. They placed their efforts more on personal and scholarly obligations and rarely reached out to graduate women. Participants also commented that negative reputations of faculty advanced by previous graduate students played a key role in their reasons for not approaching African American female faculty.

The participants’ comments suggest that African American women in higher education must balance striving to achieve personal goals and ensure job security with attempting to help graduate women achieve their goals and offset the pressures of the academic environment. Ironically, some of the women who had access to potential African American female mentors did not make a concerted effort to build mentoring relationships. This was particularly true of the participants who were studying in fields not traditionally recognized for having large numbers of African American women (for example, business). Those who were not engaged in mentoring relationships with same-race women were sometimes unwilling or had not thought seriously about seeking an African American female mentor within another department (including nonacademic student services offices) because it was important to have a mentor who shared their academic interests.

**Cultural Difference.** Participants agreed that most traditional definitions of mentoring barely scratch the surface in the context of African American women. Providing academic guidance and career advice, while important, were not the only functions of a mentor, they believed. The participants acknowledged other components such as nurturing, mothering, and culturally relevant counsel—roles that could best be played by another African American woman. The participants also deemed trust to be an important function of mentoring. They expressed a desire to be able to share personal issues as well as academic and career concerns with their mentors in confidence. The women did not think a culturally different mentor would be as trustworthy. They felt that an African American woman would better relate to their experiences. She would understand their tears, their failures, and their triumphs, both in graduate school and outside academe. In particular, they did not believe a white mentor, male or female, could understand
the depth of being an African American woman in general and in their respective areas of study specifically.

The responses regarding trust can be directly related to a “culture of dissemblance.” Clark Hine (1995) describes this as “the behavior and attitudes of black women that creates the appearance of openness and disclosure, but actually shields the truth of their inner lives and selves from their oppressors” (p. 380). Many of the women, particularly those in mentoring relationships with white faculty and staff, felt like they had to portray an image of “being okay” or not having any “real problems.” They were not willing to show their white mentors their personal side because it could reinforce negative perceptions of weakness or incapability of handling the rigors of graduate school. One participant noted, “I don’t share too much with them other than what’s going on with me academically and professionally, and that’s the end of it. . . . That may not be a fair relationship, because I’m not letting them in all the way. I’ve cried on the phone with my black mentor, but I would never think of doing that in the presence of somebody else who’s not like her. Often, crying is a sign of weakness—people have labeled it as such—and so I think they would misinterpret my tears.”

The participants sought a sense of comfort in knowing that their personal business would remain confidential in their mentoring relationships. This assurance was often lacking in their relationships with culturally different mentors; therefore, they refrained from revealing certain parts of themselves and their struggles. Their responses further prove that African American women in the academy are unable to comfortably express themselves, their thoughts, and their true feelings for fear of being ridiculed, misunderstood, and misjudged.

Seeking Valuable Alternatives. The women in this study also mentioned other types of mentoring relationships they had experienced. They discussed the impact of peer mentoring as they pursued their graduate and professional degrees. Quite often, these peers were African American women from other graduate programs throughout the university. In many instances, the participants were the sole or one of few African American female graduate students in their academic department. Despite disciplinary differences, women across programs joined together to offer peer mentoring and support. “They can’t necessarily advise me on what to do, but at least I know there is somebody who is in the struggle with me; that makes it a little bit better,” one student noted. While a same-sex peer may not have been as knowledgeable about certain things, she could serve as a culturally familiar sounding board and someone to whom a woman could vent. The participants’ remarks were consistent with Carroll’s assertions: “Black women have few role models with whom to identify in developing healthy self-concepts. The great majority of their professors are White men, or, if they take Black studies courses, Black men. Rarely do they see Black women in responsible academic or administrative positions; and so students must
look to each other for support and role models. As a result, they often form peer groups similar to extended structures” (1982, p. 119).

Peers were particularly important for women who did not have African American female mentors. Relationships with their peers served as a way of compensating for the mentoring they were not receiving from African American female faculty and staff. Their same-race female peers formed a sister circle that the women used for fellowship and to support one another.

Also, the women in this study viewed their family members—specifically their mothers and aunts—as mentors. They commented that whether their mothers had received a formal education or not, it was good to have familial support and someone who would just listen and understand. Furthermore, the lessons that their mothers taught extended beyond the academy and into their world experiences. “Even if they do not specifically understand the process, they always are willing to lend a word about how to interact and deal with people. . . . so it’s always good to call home and still get those homegrown remedies on how to go through life and deal with things.”

**Committed to Giving Back.** Each woman expressed the importance of serving as a mentor to other African American women, regardless of whether she had a relationship with an African American female mentor. They felt that a large responsibility in mentoring was serving as a role model and presenting a positive image to young African American women. The participants owed it to themselves and to the African American women who aided in their success to reach back and pull others along. A doctoral student in education offered these comments: “All my life, from undergraduate through two master’s degrees and now a Ph.D., there was always one black woman who came into my life—whether she was a custodian, the vice president, a faculty member, or the lady who worked in the cafeteria—who gave me tips and guided me. So, I’ve always been compelled to do those same things for any black female student I come in contact with.” Realizing the challenges they faced in finding and maintaining meaningful mentoring relationships with other African American women, the participants were earnest in their desire to give back to the black community by serving as mentors to other women, particularly African American female undergraduates.

**Recommendations**

Mentoring relationships among African American women are vitally important. While numbers of African American women in faculty and administrative roles are low, the role that these women can play in assisting future generations of women in the academy is essential. The participants who were engaged in mentoring relationships with African American women could not say enough about the impact of these women on their lives. Those who did not have African American female mentors noted the positive
impact that such a presence could have on their success in graduate and professional school and in their future careers. Unarguably, a large responsibility must be shouldered by African American women to foster mentoring relationships with graduate and professional students. So what might be done to help create effective mentoring relationships for African American female graduate and professional students? Following are some approaches that can be taken by faculty, staff, and students.

**Recommendations for African American Women Faculty and Staff.**

It may be necessary for African American women faculty, staff, and administrators to initiate outreach to same-race graduate women on campus. Reaching out requires time. Making room within a weekly schedule to meet one-on-one with students or to create a sister circle with two or three African American graduate women, particularly those who are in departments that have no African American female faculty or staff, could be immensely helpful. In addition, encouraging these women to create a peer-mentoring circle allows them to depend on each other for support and lessens the burden that on numerous occasions has weighed down African American female mentors. It is also important for African American female faculty and administrators to stress that whether they have experience in a particular profession or not, they can serve as a resource, friend, confidante, and sister to graduate women. This is particularly important for staff and administrators, because many participants in the study perceived nonacademic mentoring relationships as not valuable or unworthy of exploration. As schedules tighten and responsibilities pile on, African American female faculty and administrators must continue to reflect on their previous mentoring experiences and the factors that contributed to their success and use those thoughts as a guiding motivation to reach out to same-race women in graduate and professional programs.

**Recommendations for Graduate and Professional Students.** African American graduate women must be willing to reach out to African American female faculty and administrators, both within and beyond their department. While a professor in sociology or the vice president for student affairs may not fully understand the plight of a female graduate student in biology, they both may offer valuable support and insight on successfully navigating environments in which African American female representation is dismal. They also may have long-standing relationships with African American female biologists on other campuses with whom they can connect the graduate student. Sometimes it takes student initiative to cultivate these cross-disciplinary connections. The sociologist who is very committed to supporting African American female graduate students may not even know that she has a sister in the biology program that is in need of mentoring.

Using fellow African American female graduate students as a peer-mentoring network can also help to put the stresses of graduate school into perspective. Given that many African American women are in academic programs where black women are grossly underrepresented and are sometimes
the lone black woman in their program, they may consider the graduate and professional student organizations as potential places to connect with their same-race, same-sex peers from other academic programs. Students can also participate in professional associations and attend annual conferences to network with other African American women in their profession. Additional networks such as the church can be a resource for building a spiritual foundation, receiving encouragement, and connecting with African American women from the community. Furthermore, the black sorority network can be used to meet new women and build potentially meaningful mentoring relationships. African American graduate and professional women may also benefit from expanding their mentoring circle to include other-race or male mentors. While trust tends to be a major issue in such relationships, taking the initiative to approach university staff for assistance and slowly building a connection may eventually develop full-fledged mentoring relationships, despite racial, cultural, and gender differences.

Recommendations for Non–African American Faculty and Staff. Myers (2002) suggests that mentors do not have to be of the same race or gender as their mentees; however, they must be aware of the politics of difference. Mentors would need to be aware of the circumstances that could emerge as a result of race and gender, as well as how those characteristics alone set African American graduate and professional women apart from other students on their campuses. Given the extreme shortage of African American faculty and staff at predominantly white institutions, it is important that culturally different faculty and staff—especially white professors and administrators, who remain the majority—willingly reach out to assist African American graduate women, whether in a mentoring capacity or simply providing general guidance and encouragement. Non–African American faculty and staff must also be reflective in recognizing and alleviating the biases and stereotypes that they may personally hold regarding African Americans and respond more empathetically to the issues and concerns of this population. Furthermore, considering that trust issues tend to be a significant barrier, it is important that culturally different faculty and staff members ensure confidentiality when mentoring African American women.

Recommendations for Student Services Units. Several university departments and student services units can be instrumental in helping African American female graduate and professional students to locate mentors. For example, women’s centers can work collaboratively with other campus offices to offer programs that allow African American female faculty, staff, and graduate students to interact socially (for example, a black women’s tea or an African American female authors book club). The women’s center may also take the lead in producing a directory of African American female faculty, staff, and students to be distributed to African American women across degree programs, including undergraduate programs. Alumni affairs offices may partner with academic units and the black cultural center to
explore ways of better connecting African American alumnae with current graduate and professional students in mentoring capacities.

Institutions should also offer financial resources that can be used to offset the expenses associated with attending professional conferences and symposia, because they tend to be marketplaces at which graduate women interact in, learn from, and cultivate long-lasting mentoring relationships with other African American women. Another suggestion for strengthening a university's relationship with African American women involves actively seeking and recruiting more African American female faculty and staff members. The dismal representation of African American faculty and staff at predominantly white institutions yields an extremely limited pool of same-race mentors for African American female graduate students. Simply making a concerted effort to meet the mentoring needs of this population would, at a minimum, communicate an institutional concern for the success of black women at the university and beyond.

References


Bibliography


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