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Geier Hall, named after Black female educator, Rita Sanders Geier, University of Tennessee, Knoxville

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Black Women Senior Housing Officers at Historically White Institutions of Higher Education

THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF BLACK WOMEN SENIOR HOUSING OFFICERS have received little attention in research about diversity in campus housing. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, there are more than 6,000 colleges and universities in the United States, with 2,144 serving as residential campuses. However, what is still to be told are the explicit stories of Black women who serve as senior housing officers (SHOs) at historically White higher education institutions. Upon embarking on the dissertation journey, both authors found that literature on this population is scarce. Through a discussion and elaboration of two distinct qualitative studies, this work adds to the conversation around Black women SHOs. Consistent with Black women storytelling and Black Feminist Thought, this manuscript will provide an insider's perspective on the internal and external barriers, sacrifices, and compromises that have impacted their professional ascension and success. The first part of the manuscript provides contextual information about Black women in higher education, campus housing, and Black Feminist Thought as a theoretical framework used by both authors to understand the lived experiences of Black women SHOs at historically White institutions. The second part features both authors' detailed account of their individual research studies. The third part focuses specifically on implications for future research and practice that can be used to recruit and retain Black women in SHO positions at historically White institutions.

There are more than 2,100 residential college campuses in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2019), and, according to the ACUHO-I database, as of 2019 there were more than 700 ACUHO-I affiliates designated as senior housing officers (SHOs). Still, research has not delved into the unique professional experiences of Black women senior housing officers serving as "the only one" at historically White higher education institutions. What we know is that literature on Black women in student affairs in particular and higher education in general is scarce (Graham, 2018; Turrentine & Conley, 2001; West, 2017).

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However, within a year of each other, the authors each conducted a qualitative research study (data collection for both occurred during spring/summer of 2020) to examine the internal and external barriers, sacrifices, and compromises that have influenced the success of Black women senior housing officers in student affairs within American colleges and universities.

THE ROLE OF SENIOR HOUSING OFFICERS

Senior housing officers are the upper-level administrators of residential programs and have the responsibility of navigating the multiple needs of students, campus stakeholders, employees, facilities, vendors, and community members in the total housing system. Additionally, SHOs pay particular attention to the recruitment and training of staff to facilitate students' learning and success (Davidson, 2012; Dungy, 2003; Palmer et al., 2008).

The staple texts for graduate preparation programs in student affairs, such as *The Handbook of Student Affairs Administration* (McClellan & Stringer, 2016) and *Student Housing and Residential Life* (Winston & Anchors, 1993), include little information about the experiences of student affairs senior housing officers, though there is a common recognition that they play a crucial role in the success of their division (Davidson, 2012; Gregory & Janosik, 2006; Palmer et al., 2008). Being in this crucial role means deploying specific skills that have been exercised over time by audacious leaders in higher education—one superpower of the Black woman leader.

RACE AND HOUSING

Racism of the past has impacted residential programs of today and the experiences of Black women senior housing officers. The first colleges and universities in the U.S. were designed to follow the Oxford-Cambridge model, with an emphasis on educating the student as a whole (Blattner et al., 2013) and the intention of educating young White men to become ministers (Vine, 1976).

During the early 20th century, while housing personnel were creating professional associations to discuss and employ best practices for residential programs, Black people were not permitted to participate in them. Nuss (2003) described the racial and gendered restrictive access as follows: "Racial barriers and discrimination prevented the full participation of minorities in these professional associations. African American student affairs deans were unable to attend conferences held in segregated hotels or restaurants" (p. 71). This lack of access and subsequent professional representation played a role in the ways that Black women forged their narrative of who they are as senior housing officers today.

INTERSECTIONALITY

Core to these studies was a foundational understanding of how race and gender must be a consideration for how Black women experience their workplace. Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term “intersectionality” in the late 1980s (Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Jackson, 2019) to express that African American women typically do not experience race discrimination separate from gender discrimination; the two typically are experienced together (Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Davis, 2015). Brittney Cooper (2018) discussed intersectionality through the metaphor of being stuck in traffic, “confined to the intersections of social discourses that bypass us on their way to futures to which we don’t have access” (p. 106). The literature tells us that intersectionality is a firm acknowledgment that discrimination based on both race and gender operates in the everyday lives of Black women, including in professional work spaces such as the housing/residential program within higher education.

BLACK WOMEN LEADERS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The literature about Black female administrators in student affairs reveals that these women are continually having to confront challenges such as discrimination, prejudice, and unfair treatment and advancement (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). Patitu and Hinton (2003) explored the experiences of Black women serving as administrators, broadly, at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) and found that they dealt with “overt and covert racism, sexism, and homophobia. They have been devalued, excluded, marginalized or mistreated because of who they are” (p. 88). Despite the various forms of oppression that Black women administrators have faced at PWIs, they have been instrumental in improving the enrollment and persistence of Black students at these institutions (Glover, 2012).

FOCUS OF THE STUDY

Key to this article is the focus on Black women senior housing officers within student affairs in higher education and the emergence of research focused on the strategies and successes of this particular population. Each author demonstrates how her qualitative study has departed from the other and taken shape as different and distinct. Key differences for both studies include methodological approaches, theoretical frameworks, and data collection. These differences add to the rich collective and holistic narratives that are to be emphasized for future research and inclusion in a study of practical implications within student affairs in higher education.

Theoretical Framework

This research study is consistent with Black women storytelling, utilizing Black Feminist Thought (BFT) to approach the works through a rejection of negative images that socialize Black women into seeing themselves as less than their other racial and gendered counterparts (Collins, 2009). Author A specifically incorporates self-definition tenets by Okello (2018) to guide the study: “(a) validating and integrating standpoint

knowledge of minoritized bodies; (b) prioritizing self-love; (c) emphasizing agency in a matrix of domination; (d) foregrounding identity as performative; (e) and dreaming and imagining futures not yet known” (p. 538). Self-definition was defined as the ability to gain a sense of consciousness toward owning those internally defined narratives and understanding your value (Collins, 2009). Broadly, BFT is about amplifying the knowledge construction of Black women by Black women. Both authors acknowledge their shared positionality as Black women in higher education seeking to propel the voices of this professional group and centering the “complexities that comprise the everyday experiences of Black females” (Holmes, 2008, p. 105).

Research Questions

Both authors posed research questions that focused on the dynamics of Black womanhood while serving as an organizational leader. While there are multiple questions posed for each study, the studies converge in the following queries.

Author A: In what ways do these women define their positional roles as impacted by their race and gender? Author A sought to emphasize the ways in which Black women senior housing officers thrive as organizational leaders despite racial and gendered barriers. This specific question was an exploration of occupation, race, and gender and the interplay between all three.

Author B: How have the race and gender of these women contributed to their experiences in SHO positions at PWIs? Author B sought to introduce a conversation on the professional experiences of Black women senior housing officers that had not been discussed in prior literature.

Participants/Sample

Both studies shared general participant criteria: Participants must identify as Black/African American, must identify as a woman, must serve in a senior housing officer role, and must work at a historically White higher education institution in the United States.

Snowball sampling was used in both studies to gather participants (demographic information is included in Tables 1 and 2, page 63). While each study began with an initial participant, recommendations from the initial participant were used to round out the number of participants included in the data collection process. Snowball sampling was the opportunity to promote trust in the group for the sake of open dialogue and relationship-building.

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TABLE 1

Study A: Participant Profiles

Name	Self-identification	Religion or secular status	Years as SHO	Years in higher education	Additional identities	Generation	Self-defined journey
Angela	Black	Christian	3	17	Campus leader, mother, wife	Millennial (born 1980-1995)	Standing firm in my essence
Nicole	Black woman	Christian	2	19	Campus leader	Gen X (born 1965-1979)	Ongoing
Nina	Black woman	Christian	3	18	Scholar, campus leader	Gen X (born 1965-1979)	Ongoing
Nikki	Black woman	Spiritual Christian	5	13	Campus leader	Gen X (born 1965-1979)	Ongoing
Sarah	Black womxn	Baptist	2	20	Mother, wife, scholar, activist, campus leader	Gen X (born 1965-1979)	Standing firm in my essence
Cheryl	Black woman	Christian	3	23	Scholar, campus leader	Gen X (born 1965-1979)	Ongoing

TABLE 2

Study B: Participant Profiles

Name	Age	Relationship status	Children	Time in current position	Years pro experience	Highest degree earned
Cheryl	47	Single	0	3 years	23	EdD
Olivia	34	Single	0	6 months	10	Masters
Jessie Ross	37	Married	2	2 years	13	Masters
Karliss	52	Single	0	21 months	20	Masters
Yolanda	50	Single	0	9 years	22	Education Specialist
Jesse Stevens	40	Married	3	3 years	17	Masters
Kennedy	45	Single	1	2.5 years	22	Masters
Joyce	44	Single	1	1.5 years	19	Masters
Roxann	42	Married	3	3 years	18	PhD
Marcy	60	Divorced	0	2 years	29	EdD

METHODOLOGY

The methodological approaches are where the research studies depart from one another. The authors would argue that this distinct departure in methodology is what aids in the rich data found and discussed in the findings and implications section.

Study A utilized *sista circle* methodology, a historical tradition that has roots in Black churches and centers of community. Originating in the late 1800s, *sista circles* were created in response to African American women's exclusion from White women's and Black men's social clubs (Giddings, 1996). Traditionally, *sista circles* served as support groups of Black women from the same profession, community, or organization and were established on the basis of existing networks and friendships among Black women (Neal-Barnett et al., 2011). Cultivating a space for women to engage in a process that reflected them and their identities promoted the articulation of their self-definition.

Study B utilized narrative inquiry, emphasizing that the African American practice of storytelling, or narrative, "is deeply rooted in African-American culture. It is a tradition based on the continuity of wisdom, and it functions to assert the voice of the oppressed" (Amoah, 1997, p. 84). This approach was suitable because, in the words of Creswell (2003), "The 'voice' for the participants becomes a united voice for reform and change" (p. 10). According to Milner (2007), "Knowledge can and should be generated through the narratives and counter-narratives that emerge from and with people of color" (p. 391).

Data Collection

As the methodological choices were different, data collection naturally differed as well. Study A held an initial individual virtual interview with each participant, four weekly virtual *sista circles*, and a second individual virtual interview with each participant. The first interview was intended to reflect on the consent form, explain the research study, and provide opportunities for participants to ask questions. Each two-hour *sista circle* had a central topic of discussion. Some prompting questions were as follows: What do you want the story of the Black woman SHO to be? What do people expect from you? What do you expect from yourself? How do you thrive as a Black woman SHO? The final semi-structured interview was an opportunity to reflect with the participants on their experiences in the *sista circle* and reflections on the study topic.

Data collection for Study B involved in-depth, semi-structured individual interviews that served to capture narratives sharing the lived experiences of each person. Participants were asked to provide any additional information they considered relevant but had not been provided in their responses to the structured interview questions. Additionally, they were asked to share their curriculum vitae and/or résumé and complete a biography by reflecting on prompts about their professional journey.

Participants in the studies were no stranger to microaggressions that showed up when having their authority challenged or questioned. A failure to acknowledge their role is one of the most common contexts in which participants described having their authority challenged.

Trustworthiness

The studies of Black women senior housing officers aligned in terms of trustworthiness. Member checking was a vital component of ensuring that words articulated for White academia were aligned with how the Black women wanted their voices to be shaped. Member checking is a technique for exploring the credibility of results, which are returned to participants to check for accuracy and the resonance with their experiences (Birt et al., 2016).

Study A ensured that the women were able to see and review the resulting themes and their corresponding participant profiles from the interviews. This gave them an opportunity to check any possible errors in interpretation, provide additional information that could further support the data, and summarize preliminary thoughts about the findings. Study B followed up with each participant to verify that the findings reflected her intended meaning or meanings. The participants were given a copy of their individual narratives and asked to review them and recommend changes or additions to their profile. Allowing participants to engage actively in the data analysis process is critical for building relationships between them and the researcher.

LIMITATIONS

The studies were not without limitations. Because they aimed to explore the experiences of Black women at historically White colleges and universities, there were no participants employed by Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Hispanic-serving institutions, Tribal colleges, or other culturally specific ranges of higher education institutions.

Time was another barrier. Both studies were launched during the very early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. Constraints served as significant challenges during the data collection process, as many participants were heavily involved in developing and implementing contingency plans related to COVID-19. Finally, virtual spaces also served as a possible limitation to this study. Due to the pandemic, the studies were facilitated virtually to ensure the health and safety of the participants.

FINDINGS

Cautious Communication to Navigate Workplace Politics

Participants from both studies identified communication styles as a challenge when working to navigate office politics and to confront the angry Black woman stereotype.

The limited number of Black women at PWIs meant that their voices were distinct from the White standard established in the organization. Jessie affirmed that communication differences were largely based on race and gender.

Because of my race and gender, my communication style is very different [from] most of my White female colleagues. This has been frustrating for me at times because my communication style just is not like theirs. It is not wrong; it is just mine.

When reflecting on how others saw her, Yolanda similarly indicated that others' thoughts about her were likely connected with the way she communicated.

I had a colleague send me an email. When I replied to the email, my response was labeled as being snarky. I think those kinds of comments, "being snarky"... it goes back to the reality that there are not a lot of me or people like me on this campus.

In Study A, several participants shared stories of being actively dismissed or ignored. As Sarah noted,

The ability to be able to walk and talk with people from all different places . . . and the reality of trying to walk in the skin that I'm in and get folks to do what I need them to do requires a whole lot of manipulation on my part to make things happen.

In order to thrive, she had to be able to speak the language of others in order to maintain forward progress in her work as a senior housing officer. The ability to be multilingual across cultures and utilize it to benefit her ultimate goal is a consistent superpower for Sarah.

There was a level of scrutiny observed across the two studies. While Study A illustrated the ways that communication styles and patterns were surveilled by the White organization, Study B expanded upon that to acknowledge the skills of understanding the maneuvering at play and using it as an advantageous competency.

Who's the Boss? Circumventing Dismissiveness from Whiteness

Participants in the studies were no stranger to microaggressions that showed up when having their authority challenged or questioned. A failure to acknowledge their role is one of the most common contexts in which participants described having their authority challenged. As Marcy noted,

People will still want to invalidate you, after they have vetted you for the position. You have done the interviews. You have done the presentations. You showed up with the credentials and the experience, and there will still be those who want to discredit you.

The Black woman senior housing officer is very conscious of her power and the ways in which she can utilize that to advance others who are underrepresented in the university setting. . . . Despite the challenges participants faced on their predominantly White campuses, these women actively chose to advocate for others.

The Black woman's ability to engage agency in her practice comes at a cost when White employees lack the know-how to consider the possibility of causing harm in their interactions, resulting in Black women needing to engage their professional skill sets to digest the experience of invisibility in the workplace.

Nikki's experience demonstrates what other women have acknowledged as an unfortunate occurrence in a historically White institution.

Sitting around the room with like 15 people . . . And I just remember, [an emergency unit] came in and I spoke up. . . . as I was there representing res life. The guy who was VP of communication was like, "Who are you again?" And I was like, "Hello! We have communicated through email for like four years. You have talked to me, met me, and now you're facing me asking who are you?" . . . It was just the realization of, you can be in a space for four years with people. You can meet them in meetings. All of us had our pictures [included on] our email. And you can still be unmuted and someone be like, "Who are you again?"

Similarly, Angela routinely attended a small meeting of four to six people, where the highest ranking staff in academic affairs were present. As she recalled,

I was always talked over or around. I would make a comment, and it wouldn't be acknowledged, and when it was, it would be more of a smile and nod. It was demeaning, and I felt stupid. I didn't see the point in being there. It was hard because everyone in the space was White except for me.

These moments when their authority was challenged are examples of microaggressions and overt disrespect; many participants asserted that this was due to their race and gender. Though they were qualified for their SHO roles, murmurs of affirmative action and questioning of who is in the role abounded. It is important to note that this area was the most challenging space for Black women to thrive, although agency was a part of their leadership practice.

Advocacy to Lift as We Climb

The importance of advocacy was a significant finding for the two research studies. These leaders discuss the challenges and value-add of walking the walk in their senior leadership role to support underrepresented student and staff populations. Jesse S. discussed a few of the initiatives that she implemented upon assuming her SHO role: creating a weekly newsletter with identity-based, celebratory months highlighted; providing time in departmental meetings for staff to process bias incidents; and working to ensure that they felt supported when such incidents occurred. Not long before her interview for the study, she had created a "re-imagined" position to focus on diversity and inclusion efforts.

Being strong as a Black woman can be a complicated label to wear in contemporary conversations. While it acknowledges resilience, it erases vulnerability.

Nina's testimony strongly captured the conflict of choosing representation as a thriving practice while maneuvering through the challenges of being a Black woman in the workplace.

If we're not willing to stand in this space and be present, if we're not willing to sit at a table and bring up issues that do impact students of color, because of our own lived experiences, then it would never be.

Her words are indicative of the plight of Black women: embracing a burden placed upon her and utilizing her own superpowers to role-model resistance through her presence, her knowledge, and her influence. Nina also described a central moment when she spoke and others listened.

I do this work to show that it can be done. I'm the first Black woman in this role, and that weighs on me every day. I feel that my failure is letting down anybody else that ever wants to do this work. And it is not fair to carry that burden. But it is the reality. I have to prove that we can do this because someone after me, I believe that will make it easier for someone who looks like me to get these types of roles.

The Black woman senior housing officer is very conscious of her power and the ways in which she can utilize it to advance others who are underrepresented in the university setting. Nicole shared the following:

I had a student contact me with financial hardship. And it was a young Black woman, and I made a decision to release them from their contract. And if somebody wants to question that, I'm comfortable in that. And if I had to make that decision for 20 other kids so that one can do it, then that's what I'll do. Because that's what I believed was right. I just refuse to apologize for that.

In this case, her genius is demonstrated in the ways she looks not at the individual and existing policy but at the potentially oppressive structure that exists and within which she is operating. Despite the challenges participants faced on their predominantly White campuses, these women actively chose to advocate for others.

Current Sacrifices and Compromises for the Superwoman

Being strong as a Black woman can be a complicated label to wear in contemporary conversations. While it acknowledges resilience, it erases vulnerability. Kennedy noted how the need to be strong could unintentionally perpetuate the angry Black woman stereotype: "It is like they expect me to be strong, but not too strong. I should not be too confident because that makes them feel weird." What people do not see are the ways that Black women must navigate spaces due to the external images that are imposed upon them.

All the women in the sista circle acknowledged the role that the strong Black woman trope plays in their professional life. It is worth noting that Black women have superpowers, though not superhuman ones, rejecting this trope yet acknowledging the duality of their strength and sacrifice. Nicole expressed this in a reflective tone:

I am managing this concept that at work I'm showing up, so then people put so much on me. It's almost like not seeing my humanity. . . . There's a lot of things that are sacrificed in my personal life, in this concept of strength. Almost to the point that I have to . . . remind family and friends . . . I feel too, I get hurt, and I get upset. It is a natural response for anybody in crisis or anybody working through something. And we should allow that space to be. It doesn't make me a weak person.

Strength and emotion are juxtaposed in her experience because to be strong is to avoid displays of emotion that cause people to question that strength. Black women senior housing officers emphasize the sacrifices and compromises as costs to their professional advancement. They are consciously making these decisions that influence their trajectory in the student affairs role.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Transforming the current work environment at historically White institutions is key for higher education administrators. If they are serious about diversity, equity, and inclusion and the subsequent dismantling of oppressive systems, then we must identify and interrogate how the people and systems impact Black women organizational leaders.

Develop Stronger Cultural Competency

We recommend that divisions with oversight of the senior housing officer role perform a culturally responsive audit of practices and processes to ensure that there are steps to reduce harm in the workplace. The evaluation process should be carefully reviewed for its structure and content, making sure that it is not limiting and culturally biased.

Resist the Strong Black Woman Trope

Organizations that wish to retain strong Black women must actively acknowledge and reject stereotyping within White patriarchal organizations. Collins (1986) suggested that many of the characteristics that make up Black female stereotypes are “actually distorted renderings of those aspects of Black female behavior seen as most threatening to White patriarchy” (p. 17). The White person’s fear of threat is not for the Black

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woman to internalize. Instead of adding responsibilities with ill-matched compensation, expressing confusion at their display of emotion, and putting the organization ahead of their pain, we implore those who work with Black women in leadership to monitor how they acknowledge both the strengths and the vulnerabilities of Black women. Understand that Black women may sacrifice a lot throughout their years to be in the place they are. Own that when others are tired, a Black woman is exhausted.

Recruit and Retain Talent

The lack of representation of Black women administrators at PWIs calls for more Black women in these roles. There is a serious need to focus on efforts to recruit and retain Black women SHOs. Almost every participant indicated that her entry into the housing and residence life profession was as a resident assistant, and many housing organizations also employ a significant number of graduate assistants. There is an opportunity to implement formal programs to develop and retain a diverse talent pool early on the career ladder.

Hold Institutions Accountable

According to Lloyd-Jones (2009), many African American women administrators employed at PWIs may experience increased racial discrimination and hostilities due to the compounding effects of their race and gender. They should not be solely responsible for addressing diversity and inclusion on these campuses. There must be measures in place for institutions to assess and improve their efforts to develop and implement meaningful ways to create welcoming and supportive environments for Black women to feel a sense of belonging.

CONCLUSION

Both studies demonstrate a need to expand the research about Black women senior housing officers. While these women represent a small portion of senior-level administrators in student affairs in higher education, their impact is significant. They provide oversight for housing and residence life programs with missions centered on student support, learning, and success. They lead staff within organizations that serve as practical training grounds for many student affairs professionals. Despite racial and gendered barriers, Black women SHOs are thriving in their leadership practice by engaging agency, acknowledging the imperative to be multilingual in the workplace, lifting others up to influence truly equitable practices, and making conscious choices about the cost of being a Black woman SHO. Their often-silenced voices deserve to be heard. We must acknowledge the ways that these women are defining how to survive and thrive, with the hope that their experiences may serve as pathways for other Black women leaders. ■

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are the contemporary challenges for Black women senior housing officers at historically White institutions?
2. How can organizations and non-Black women best support Black women senior housing officers in their leadership?
3. [Black women] What is a professional strength you use most often in the workplace?
4. [Black women] What can we do to continue the sisterhood of professional and personal support for continued career excellence?
5. Black women senior housing officers thrive despite racial and gendered barriers. How have they navigated their experiences as being both Black and women to do so?

Discussion questions were developed by Jaymee Lewis-Flenaugh, Grand River Solutions