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Black Exodus: The Attrition of Black Campus Housing Staff

HOUSING AND RESIDENCE LIFE HAS IDENTIFIED THE NEED AND PRIORITY TO RECENTER THE PURPOSE AND ROLE OF OUR WORK in a post-COVID world. Housing and residence life has not, in the same way, identified the need and priority to critically examine how the systems and models of our work are founded within an oppressive system, steeped in whiteness and patriarchy, all of which create environments and climates that are dangerous and violent for Black/African American staff. In the almost three years since COVID-19 has shaken up our work, we have seen, as a field, a significant exodus of staff of color, moving out of toxic and harmful departments and out of the field itself. By examining staff departure trends and research, as well as the impact of racial battle fatigue, this article seeks to create meaning and understanding for departments around the larger issues behind their Black staff departures. It is imperative that we examine this attrition as part of a larger trend and a larger endemic issue, and not as isolated professional decisions, in order to create substantial systemic change to promote and provide equity within housing and residence life programs.

Editor's note: The authors have chosen to lowercase the word White, which would normally be capitalized according to APA guidelines, in order to avoid seeming to center whiteness.

C current conversations about the departure of Black student affairs professionals do not converge in a way that discusses the phenomenon in a multidimensional, intersectional way. There are no conversations about the specific interdependent marriage of race and individual experience and how those two factors impact the departure and future of Black staff in the field. As articulated by Phelps-Ward and Kenney (2018), “although much is known about Black administrators’ experiences at PWIs, their navigational strategies, support mechanisms, and career paths, significantly less is known about the experiences of Black staff in entry and mid-level positions” (p. 123). For the purposes of this article, I center the experiences of Black staff in campus housing to explore what has led to this attrition.

As is true of higher education in general, student affairs was initially created as a means for white professionals to support white students. In the 400+ years since then, there has not been any significant change in that philosophical foundation, even with the advent of professional standards, organizations, and accreditation processes created and implemented over time.

There have been some significant studies on the departure of student affairs professionals in general (Anderson et al., 2000; Frank, 2013; Hancock, 1988; Hirt & Creamer, 1998; Johnsrud et al., 2000; Johnsrud & Rosser, 1999; Kortegast & Hamrick, 2009; Lorden, 1998; Rosser & Javinar, 2003; Tull, 2009), and in recent years, some have focused on the departure of student affairs staff specifically in terms of race and culture (Dancy et al., 2018; Davis, 2013; Durant & Kottnerus, 1999; Jackson, 2004; Steele, 2016). As is true of higher education in general, student affairs was initially created as a means for white professionals to support white students. In the 400+ years since then, there has not been any significant change in that philosophical foundation, even with the advent of professional standards, organizations, and accreditation processes created and implemented over time. Thus, inquiry into the experiences of Black people within student affairs and the impact of this work on Black staff must be examined with those conditions and realities in mind. The fact that white supremacy has been the foundation of an oppressive system impacts how Black professionals determine their own satisfaction and fulfillment with their roles and their institutions, where they are ultimately judged within that space. As Stewart (2018) states, we must consider that

... these questions are of how and whether Black people can be constructed as wholly members of the student affairs profession, when mainstream frameworks of professionalism and fit in student affairs have primarily relied on white supremacy to create definitions of the ideal student affairs professional. (p. 18)

This dissonance comes into play in the dual status in which Black student affairs professionals find themselves: They are both hypervisible and invisible. As Stewart (2018) defines the terms, hypervisibility is the “condition of being subject to heightened scrutiny, observation, and policing because of one’s limited representation” (p. 21), while invisibility is the “corollary experience of being ignored, dismissed, and invalidated also because of one’s limited representation” (p. 18). This dual status robs Black student affairs professionals of the necessary validation of their lived experiences, while simultaneously confining them to the limitations of an antiquated and misinformed perception of Blackness based on white perceptions instead of reality. This is an intolerable position that makes it difficult for Black staff to find stasis, establish a sense of belonging, and/or find long-term success.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This study aims to highlight a connection between the unique experience of Black professionals in campus housing and how their experience within an inherently oppressive and supremacist system impacts staff departure rates. I argue that the long history of oppression, white supremacy, and anti-Blackness practices creates conditions within housing that precipitate the departure of Black professionals in a unique way. I also argue that the rates of Black staff departure, even within the current context of “The Great Resignation” and its corresponding increased rates of departure within most institutions, can be attributed to organizational structures and environments ill-suited to appropriately support Black staff in campus housing.

METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative study using a phenomenological approach which focuses on “exploring how human beings make sense of experience and transform experience into consciousness, both individually and as shared meaning” (Patton, 2015, p. 115). In this study the phenomenon is the Black Exodus from campus housing. Purposeful sampling was used to identify participants for this study; they were individuals who once worked in university housing and have since departed. Participants completed a survey that included demographic information questions as well as questions related to their experience in housing.

The sample consisted of 11 participants who identified as Black (Table 1 lists the relevant demographic information, *see page 78*). Six were men and five were women. Eight identified as straight and three identified as gay. Four were between the ages of 30 and 35, five between the ages of 35 and 40, and two between the ages of 40 and 45. All participants had been in the field for at least 6 years prior to departure. Three had worked in housing for 6–9 years, and eight had worked 10 years or more prior to departure. All had departed housing within the previous four years: one in 2018, seven in 2021, and three in 2022. Participants worked at various institution types. All 11 participants had worked at some point at a predominantly white institution (PWI). Two had worked at a Historically Black College and University (HBCU), and three at a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI). Additionally, seven had worked at a public university and one at a private university.

THE EXPERIENCE OF BEING BLACK AND WORKING IN CAMPUS HOUSING

There is no way to describe the multifaceted experience of being Black in America, Black in higher education, or Black in campus housing that will capture the nuance and depth required to represent all Black professionals. Knowing that we cannot address all Black experiences, this writing seeks to highlight those aspects of the racialized experience of campus housing that contribute to a negative experience and to the overall phenomenon of the Black Exodus.

TABLE 1
Participants’ Demographic Information

Participant	Gender	Sexual orientation	Age	Years in housing	Departure year
A	Woman	Straight	35-40	10 years or more	2021
B	Man	Gay	40-45	10 years or more	2022
C	Woman	Straight	30-35	6-9 years	2021
D	Man	Gay	30-35	10 years or more	2021
E	Man	Straight	30-35	6-9 years	2021
F	Woman	Straight	30-35	6-9 years	2018
G	Woman	Straight	35-40	10 years or more	2022
H	Man	Gay	35-40	10 years or more	2021
I	Man	Straight	35-40	10 years or more	2022
J	Man	Straight	35-40	10 years or more	2021
K	Woman	Straight	40-45	10 years or more	2021

Perception Versus Reality

One barrier to understanding the experiences of Black housing professionals is the conflict between others’ perception of their experience versus their own reality or their lived experience. Majority group members believe, in a hegemonic way, that “the way they experience a phenomenon is the same way that everyone experiences that certain phenomenon” (Davis, 2013, p. 12). There is a clear dissonance between how Black individuals experience the oppressive space of higher education and how non-Black people interpret and validate the experience that Black individuals have within the same space. This dissonance creates an environment where those in power perceive the environment to be acting and experienced in a way that is not accurate or representative of the population doing the work. As Davis (2013) states,

While organization literature can state the goals in creating inclusive environments, it may not always reflect what is really happening in the organization, and staff of color may not feel that the environment is as inclusive as upper management believes it to be. (p. 23)

This phenomenon creates vistas of liberal, equitable, and progressive environments where higher level thinking and collective justice are the goalposts. But they are, in actuality, updated versions of the existing hierarchies, simply glossed with new languages

and colorful marketing. Instead of using explicit measures of control, the updated version uses the subterfuge of persuasive language to reinforce a lack of significant structural change.

Silencing and Double Consciousness

Not addressing environmental structures and climate can create an environment that is perceived to be hostile and can cause Black professionals to become silent. Stewart (2018, p. 22) illuminates this concept by describing the “ideologies of absence” situation in which Black graduate and full-time professionals in student affairs find themselves treated as if they are “children who should be present (included) but not heard (disrupting the status quo).” This creates not only a physical silencing of Black staff, but a metaphorical and emotional silencing as well; Black staff are placed in a position where they do not feel comfortable speaking out about anything for fear of the labels and presumptions that would be levied upon them. This not only silences them but places a burden on them to “constantly be mindful of how they represented themselves which sometimes caused them to just be silent, even as issues were being raised around them” (cited in Davis, 2013, p. 69).

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. DuBois (1903) referred to this behavior as “double consciousness,” which refers to the necessity that Black professionals understand both the written and unwritten curriculum of how to navigate white systems. In this context, Gaines and Reed (1995) apply the term to the work that Black staff have to do to maintain their own perceptions of themselves, while working within a system that sends negative messages about their professionalism, their education, even their humanity. Additionally, Black professionals must confront marginalization and isolation on a daily basis, including use of exclusionary practices, such as unfair hiring practices, lack of mobility, constant questioning of qualifications and experience, and lack of influence, among others (Steele, 2016). A housing professional describes this feeling well.

I already know that feeling that you have to watch what you say, and you have to watch what you do because you don't want to be classified in that stereotype that is out there. You almost feel like you are combating the stereotype even though no one is necessarily coming out and saying it. It's just the overall feeling that you have to be mindful of.
(cited in Davis, 2013, p. 70)

Evans and Chun (2007) describe the prevalence of these struggles in the day-to-day experience of Black professionals, stating that “everyday forms of workplace discrimination are exhibited in subtle behavioral and organizational barriers that are much more difficult to identify, but nonetheless recurring and cumulative in impact” (p. 12).

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The Work Has Changed

Marshall and colleagues (2016) note that the presence of extreme work obligations can lead to burnout, fatigue, and eventual departure from the field, and they define burnout as the “state of fatigue and frustration arising from unrealistic, excessive demands on personal resources leading to physical and mental exhaustion” (p. 152). For example, when asked what would have changed their decision to leave their job, Participant B stated,

Nothing. The work has shifted. I got into this work to develop students and while some aspects of my former position lent itself to that, about 80% of my job was catering to the shifting demands of divisional leadership and managing the change in student dynamics.

Inclusion but Not Included

The experiences of being othered within student affairs are reinforced by a system of judgment that perceives otherness as a determining factor in who gets to belong and who does not—what is appropriate and acceptable versus what is not. Student affairs as a field, campus housing specifically, prioritizes inclusion, but overwhelmingly in the sense that all ideas are equally worthy of expression and discussion regardless of the harm they cause or the ideas they spread. Ideas and concepts are not viewed as legitimate or valuable unless they are found to be valid for the majority population within the professional workspace (i.e., white staff). We see this in policies for protected speech within residential communities, where Black staff are continually being harmed by the effects of living in an environment where hate speech is often responded to with merely educational efforts, and very little community care takes place afterward—and, even rarer still, the care that also includes and centers the Black staff within the community.

An ACUHO-I *Talking Stick* article focused on a study about free speech norms across higher education institutions where almost half of the respondents said that “they deal with between three and nine incidents” of “intolerant or disrespectful behavior” over the course of an academic year (Friedman & Perez, 2021, para. 4). Those most likely to be targets of this behavior were Black/African American (76%). In addition, one in 10 respondents reported that the hate speech policy at their institution needed “a complete overhaul” (Friedman & Perez, 2021, para. 8). Though the article did not indicate how this increase in targeted hate speech impacted Black residents or Black-identified housing and residence life staff, the sense is that they had an overarching desire to improve current policies. Efforts toward inclusion provided by the overwhelmingly white administration at the institution are often viewed as benevolence toward Black staff and result in further devaluing the work, experience, and voices of those Black staff who are on the ground level.

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Epistemic exploitation is the process by which non-white individuals are harmed by oppressive systems and highlights three iterations: “opportunity costs . . . the double bind . . . and the default skeptical responses from the privileged” (Berenstain, 2016, p. 572). The term opportunity costs refers to the unfair workload that is expected of non-white professionals, work that goes beyond the scope of their job description but is perceived to be the responsibility of non-white professionals within a white system. This includes assuming additional roles for non-white students in order to help them navigate the white system, including mentoring, advising, committee service, student organization involvement, and formal and informal guidance and counseling (Berenstain, 2016). In campus housing, this is what that looks like: being asked or required to serve as an advisor to an identity-based group solely because of your Black identity or serving as the unofficial Black representative for all Black-identified candidates during all phases of the search and onboarding/training process. One participant cited in Davis (2013) highlights the risks associated with this specific type of exploitation when engaging with Black students as a Black professional.

I feel their pains when they're coming in here telling me a story or in instances where I am there to experience a similar experience. So, me being in the role I'm in and working so closely with students of color, I kind of internalize their pains too. (p. 59)

The double bind refers to the paradox of being non-white in a white system. Non-white professionals find themselves in the intolerable and unsustainable position of being unable to disengage from situations or discourse that immediately impact their identity without being subject to judgment, negative consequences, or harm. The double bind refers to the lack of choice in their ability to either say something, which could result in alienation, isolation, or harm, or not say something, which could result in alienation, isolation, or harm (Berenstain, 2016). In Myrick's (2020) study of Black women senior housing officers, one respondent recounted the casual callousness of unintentional harm created by oppressive systems, as experienced during a crisis call.

I have worked with these people for a very long time. I have a lot of respect for them. They are good people. However, the breath fell out of me when I walked into the room and realized everyone in the room was a white man. When they walk into the room and notice that everyone in the room is a white man, do they see this as a problem, particularly for students of color who need support? These are the people who make all the policies, right? (p. 66)

Finally, the skeptical responses to the experience of non-white professionals when giving voice to their harm leads to distrust and disengagement in the work environment. This skepticism manifests in a typical and oft-occurring response of the majority (or white) environment when learning of injustice, inequity, or harm: the assumption that the action must be overt, malicious, or conscious in order to be considered oppressive or supremacist. As Participant A in the present study explained, when asked if her Black identity contributed to her departure, “I was the person advocating for all things Black all the time. Considering diversity often meant LGBTQ or ‘people of color,’ but anti-Blackness was only addressed when I brought it up, if then.”

THE BLACK EXODUS

One of the reasons most often identified for leaving student affairs is the lack of mobility or advancement perceived to be available to Black staff. While Black women are the highest educated demographic, both in the number of graduates and in the level of educational attainment, they are disproportionately underrepresented in non-entry level roles (Davis, 2020). In a study of Black mobility in white organizations, Collins (1997) found that many Black professionals stagnate in their climb to managerial positions, which adds to the imbalance of power across identity at the top of the organization. Participants C and G noted that the lack of upward mobility and unclear career pathways were causes for their departure from housing. Additionally, Participant C noted the lack of Black upper-level administrators and that support of Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) was a cause for her departure from campus housing. Participant K noted that she felt supported, not by her department or institution but “just my direct supervisor who was a Black woman.” The mattering that employees feel for being represented and included goes beyond just numbers. It could be the determining factor for whether or not someone remains at the institution.

Several factors have impacted the advancement of Black staff into upper administrative positions. Participant J shared his reasons:

One, I had the opportunity to pursue a position that oversaw two functional areas outside of housing. This position afforded an opportunity to move closer to my overall goal of becoming a VPSA [vice president of student affairs]. Two, the institution I was at did not value the housing staff, and three, I had a professional opportunity that did not include being on call.

Black staff career advancement is impeded by situations in which someone is the only or first Black person in the role, department, or division; feels a lack of optimism for their future based on their past experience and their environment; lacks readily available and applicable strategies to employ for professional growth; and feels the burden of increased expectations from white colleagues, superiors, and administrators about their output or performance (Webster & Brown, 2019).

There are several specific barriers that confront Black professionals in campus housing and contribute to their attrition: “(a) lack of professional identity, (b) lack of career path, (c) poor working conditions, (d) inadequate compensation, (e) competition from outside of the academy, and (f) competition from within the academy” (Wolfe & Dilworth, p. 676). As Participant E recalled,

I was treated pretty decently at my PWI, but the Black tax was so heavy at the height of the pandemic [COVID-19] that I had to look at other options as they were presented. I thought I was years away from leaving the field, but when an opportunity popped up, I saw how much greener the grass could be.

There is no recruitment without retention, and there is no progress without evaluation. The commitment that housing has to adding dimensions of diversity to all their roles and positions must also be executed in a way that creates a sense of belonging, safety, and care for their current Black staff (Squire et al., 2020). When discussing whether or not they felt supported in their work environment by their supervisor, department, or institution, Participant C said, “No. I had a new supervisor, and she did not take the opportunity to get to know me, my work, or lived experiences.” Participant A noted that she felt supported outside the department but not within it: “From my direct supervisor, yes, I felt supported but not often from the department. Depending on the connection with the dean of students or VP to the Black community, the campus support varied.”

Understanding the motivation to leave a position is crucial in understanding the experience of Black campus housing professionals. When asked if they would return to campus housing, the majority of participants were clear about what they needed if they came back: better pay, work/life balance and boundaries, less toxic work environments, more representation in leadership, and new, competent leadership. Participant C noted that she would come back “in a leadership role over residence life, [with] higher pay, and depending on time. Time with family means way more to me now that I am a mother.” Some indicated a need for a break, while others expressed no interest in returning to campus housing. Participant J stated,

There are times that I miss housing, but I do not think I would return. I would love to have housing in my portfolio as a VPSA [vice president of student affairs] in the future, but do not see myself having housing as my primary job responsibility.

There is no recruitment without retention, and there is no progress without evaluation. The commitment that housing has to adding dimensions of diversity to all their roles and positions must also be executed in a way that creates a sense of belonging, safety, and care for their current Black staff.

... we must question why the experience for Black staff is harmful, unduly taxing, and, ultimately, in direct conflict with the stated missions and goals of housing departments.

Participant D felt that he needed to take a step back in order to protect his own well-being.

I honestly needed a break from the mental and emotional toll. I got into therapy and just feel like I am more myself and have permission to be myself. I think housing and residence life is at an identity point where it needs to meet the moment and determine what it wants to be and how to 'reset after the pandemic,' which is definitely ongoing.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE OF BLACK STAFF IN HOUSING

This study has provided important insights into the unique experiences of Black professionals within higher education systems, specifically housing and residence life, with an emphasis on those features that contribute to their attrition. Now, we will examine the bigger picture and implications for practice and research, as well as additional discussion around the departure of Black student affairs professionals.

In order to create work environments for Black staff to be successful, we must first examine how models of being and systems of operation maintain hegemonic structures. We must examine how housing programs maintain white supremacist structures within residential curricula, professional development models, and training programs and thus serve to reinforce what Dancy and colleagues (2018) refer to as the plantation model, which “institutionalizes a social arrangement of dispossession” (p. 187).

Second, we must question why the experience for Black staff is harmful, unduly taxing, and, ultimately, in direct conflict with the stated missions and goals of housing departments. We must extend current research on the experience Black students have within campus housing communities and find ways to include critical examination of the experience Black staff on all levels have within those same communities.

Finally, we must create space in the academy to give voice to different narratives and explore the data that can speak to the dissonance between the perceptions that institutions have of a particular role and how individuals experience that work in reality. We must stop creating an environment where the legacy of Black staff is one “that accords equal weight to service and sacrifice” (Hine, 2008, p. 110). ■

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How can housing departments better understand why Black staff may consider leaving their positions?
2. What role can institutions and/or housing departments play in the retention of Black housing staff?
3. What role can supervisors play in the retention of Black housing staff?
4. Why should the housing profession be concerned about the attrition of Black housing staff?

Discussion questions developed by LaFarin Meriwether, University of North Carolina Greensboro, and Chandra Myrick, University of Tennessee, Knoxville