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Voices Unveiled: Intergenerational Narratives of Black Women in Housing

Authors

PAIGE HICKS
Director of Residence Life
University of Chicago
Phicks@uchicago.edu

STEPHANIE TILLMAN
Program Coordinator for Academic Initiatives
Florida State University
Sftillman@fsu.edu

THE PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCES OF BLACK WOMEN in college and university housing and residence life reflect a deep entanglement of race, gender, labor, and institutional dynamics. While their contributions to the field are significant, their stories are often marginalized or rendered invisible within dominant narratives of leadership and student affairs. Framed by Black feminist thought and grounded in narrative literary analysis, this article explores the intergenerational strategies Black women employ to navigate the professional and emotional demands of this work. Drawing from published reflections, scholarly literature, and personal essays, this study identifies recurring themes that highlight the resilience and resistance of Black women and how they make meaning of their work. By weaving together critical theory, literary interpretation, and lived reflection, this article offers new insight into the cultural labor of Black women in housing. It calls for practitioners and institutions to recognize these narrative strategies not just as coping mechanisms, but as radical acts of leadership, survival, and care. Through this work, we aim to honor the stories that too often go untold and offer a blueprint for building more affirming and equitable professional environments.

Staff who work in housing and residence life programs are integral to ensuring student support, maintaining smooth internal operations, and achieving institutional priorities. Emerging scholarship is starting to take a critical intersectional look at the racialized and gendered experiences of staff in this field. While current literature exposes critical gaps within staffing and structural pipelines for each level, there is limited research that specifically analyzes the experiences and strategies of Black women within housing and residence life and integrates the perspectives of their race, gender, and generational affiliation.

The experiences of Black women working in this field are characterized by a complex interplay between race, gender, labor, and institutional dynamics: "Professional Black women because of their multiple minority status have to continuously tackle sexism, racism, and colorism" (Reynolds-Dobbs et al., 2008, p. 135). More specifically, they have to combat historically stereotypical images that may affect how people perceive and treat Black women in the workplace. While their contributions are undeniable, their stories and experiences often go unacknowledged and untold, overshadowed by dominant narratives and cultural scripts for what leadership, support, and retention should look like for all.

> Utilizing thematic motif analysis, we illuminate how, at various points in Black women's professional journeys, intergenerational knowledge circulates vertically through formalized mentorship and horizontally through observation, storytelling, and collective witnessing.

Utilizing Black feminist thought (BFT) and narrative literary analysis, this article explores published reflections, scholarly literature, and personal essays to identify recurring intergenerational themes, motifs, experiences, and strategies that Black women use to find joy and resist the effects of racism as they struggle against the pressures of systemic politics and structures. By identifying three intergenerational motifs—being the only one, having a strategic voice, and lifting as we lead—we illuminate how Black women navigate the professional and emotional demands of working in campus housing and residence life.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Throughout the analysis, we utilize Black feminist thought as a critical lens to understand the intergenerational experiences of Black women in housing. Developed by Patrica Hill Collins, Black feminist thought highlights the unique experiences of Black women and provides an intersectional analysis of how interlocking systems like classism, racism, and sexism can shape their lives within the United States. Black feminist thought positions every Black woman, regardless of vocation or earned education, as a site of knowledge production and encourages Black women to reclaim their ideas and their voices (Collins, 2020). We incorporate intersectionality, which emphasizes how overlapping identities can create their own form of oppression, marginalization, and resistance within systems (Crenshaw, 1994). Prior literature indicates that Black women administrators are "often hazed, shamed, and unsupported in myriad ways" (Pope, 2024, episode description) and have had to confront the challenges of "internal and external barriers [and make] sacrifices and compromises that have impacted their professional ascension and success" (Lewis-Flenaugh & Myrick, 2022, p. 60). By centering these lived experiences, this article affirms the varied strategies Black women deploy to survive the harsh terrain of educational institutions and organizations. This work is informed by the concept of intergenerational trauma, which recognizes that the historical and systemic exploitation of Black women's labor and resilience is transmitted across generations, making their coping strategies not just simply learned behavior, but also tools for survival (Banks, 2025). These shared experiences serve as powerful sites of learning, reflection, joy, and resistance.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

Storytelling is a powerful tool that provides counter-scripts to help understand the nuanced intersectional experiences of Black women. Barbara Christian, a scholar of Black literary feminism, noted that narrative theorizations (i.e., storytelling) have helped Black women "survive with such spiritedness the assault on our bodies, social institutions,

countries, and our very humanity" (1987, p. 52). Narrative analysis is a fitting methodological tool because it allows us to expand on Black feminist thought by exploring Black women's generative stories as a primary source for navigation and strategy.

The emotional, physical, mental, and communal space of Black women in campus housing cannot be separated from the stories they tell and share about their labor, leadership, or mere survival. By interpreting published research, literature, and composite narratives, we are investigating the political, emotional, and spiritual strategies ingrained in their experiences.

The purpose of this article is to explore the intergenerational strategies Black women use to manage the professional and emotional demands of working in campus housing. Guided by Black feminist and intergenerational lenses, we posed the following research questions:

- *What narratives emerge across the literature about how Black women navigate university housing contexts?*
- *How does literature explore intergenerational patterns in Black women's experiences in visibility, communication, and mentorship?*

By analyzing these narratives and texts, this article will offer new insights for practitioners and leaders committed to the retention and success of Black women in the field.

INTERGENERATIONAL LENS

This article is unique and timely, as it acknowledges and honors the strategies Black women working in housing have used throughout generations. Black women professionals in housing span different eras, institutions, and sociopolitical contexts, yet they often share similar experiences despite differences in location, age, and career level.

We define intergenerational strategy as the ways Black women learn, build upon, question, and resist the practices of those who came before them. These strategies are not prescriptive or rigid; they evolve over time and are impacted by context, institution, career stage, and political conditions. While evaluating these strategies, this study intentionally avoids making age-based generalizations, focusing instead on how the effect of core practices, such as strategic communication, advocacy, boundary setting, and mentoring, continue to reverberate.

As Banks (2025) suggested, legacy and resilience travel across generations; participants were expected to recognize and build upon the sacrifices of those before them, which is captured in statements like "carrying on the legacy" (p. 51) and "use your pain to help somebody else" (p. 59). These statements reveal how values, lessons, and

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expectations are transmitted over time, teaching Black women to transform hardship into leadership. These cultural practices reveal that the individual struggle of Black women is reframed as collective advancement. In this way, resilience becomes more than an individual trait; it is a generational inheritance that guides how Black women lead, mentor, and persist.

Utilizing thematic motif analysis, we illuminate how, at various points in Black women's professional journeys, intergenerational knowledge circulates vertically through formalized mentorship and horizontally through observation, storytelling, and collective witnessing. This approach honors the complexity of Black women's leadership development and resists harmful and deficit narratives that frame early-career professionals as naïve or senior leaders as inherently empowered. Instead, our work emphasizes how Black women in housing co-create survival and leadership strategies across boundaries of age, role, and geography. In doing so, this study affirms that the labor of resistance and reimagination is collective, ever-evolving, and continuous.

This article situates Black women's experiences in housing and residence life within an intergenerational framework, emphasizing how strategies, knowledge, and cultural practices are transmitted across professional generations. Intergenerational strategies here refer to the ways that Black women learn from, support, and build upon the experiences of those who preceded them, while also adapting these lessons to new institutional contexts.

BLACK WOMEN IN HOUSING AND RESIDENCE LIFE

For years, residence halls have served as more than just a place for students to sleep. Housing and residence life programs are responsible for building community, supporting retention and persistence, and maintaining the operational business needs of the department. From late-night duty calls to strategic residential mentorship programs, professionals in this field are expected to be crisis managers, educators, and caregivers.

As the field continues to evolve, expectations continue to intensify for all staff levels, requiring them not only to manage daily operations, but also to find meaningful ways to meet their own mental health needs and implement a complex engagement framework. While institutions find innovative ways to support the holistic development of students, it is often at the expense of staff well-being and success.

Throughout several of the articles we reviewed, many Black women talked about their experiences being "one of the only" employees in the space. In one study, a participant explained that this expectation can weigh on employees and make the work more difficult.

> *Being one of the only, or one of a few . . . certainly can be a challenge sometimes. . . . That comes with responsibility; whether or not I want to accept it, whether or not it has been officially designated to me, I see that comes with responsibilities. For me, that is a good thing, but sometimes it can also be a challenge.* (King, 2020, p. 101)

In the same article, all participants mentioned that stress from working in student affairs led to a decline in their well-being. As one of them acknowledged, "I have delayed some surgeries. I'm not necessarily taking care of myself, because we are always thinking about, 'If I'm not visible, then they are going to think I'm not doing my job'" (King, 2020, p. 111).

Environmental and material conditions often fail to meet staff needs, especially those of live-on professionals who are required to take on significant emotional labor. For Black women in housing and residence life, there is often a colossal and deleterious gap between the espoused values of an institution and their lived realities.

Racialized Gender Roles and Labor

Black women in housing are frequently positioned as mentors, guides, and nurturers and are expected to shoulder the emotional burden of their students, teams, and institutions. These expectations are rooted in the Strong Black Woman (SBW) Schema, a pervasive script that pressures Black women to display unfailing emotional and physical strength and suppress vulnerability (Abrams et al., 2014). This historical trope reinscribes the perception of Black women as self-sacrificing, resilient, and unwavering (Breeden, 2021), and these stereotypes influence how Black women are managed, perceived, and rewarded.

While all employees are expected to maintain uniform job responsibilities, Black women are also asked to manage and support the invisible aspects of student and organizational success, such as conflict mediation for students and staff, cultural competency for departments and institutions, and community care for all. Literature on racialized gender roles for Black women in education confirms that organizations and systems often place high expectations on Black women to care for people, which often leaves little time for themselves (Quaye et al., 2025). This research further underscores the racialized gender role implicit in workload distribution, pointing to vivid examples of exhaustion, tokenization, and burnout among Black women administrators. The labor that Black women produce daily for organizations and institutions is exhausting, unacknowledged, and rarely compensated or appreciated.

Invisibility and Hypervisibility

Drawing from our data analysis, we found that Black women in housing and residence life face a double burden of hypervisibility and invisibility in their professional spaces.

- **Hypervisibility:** At times, Black women may be "the only one" present in leadership. In these instances, they may be expected to perform, represent, or speak on behalf of an entire identity group. This hypervisibility also shows up in the ways that Black women are policed for their dress, presentation, speech, tone, and workload. Supervisors may offer personal critiques, often disguised as professional advice, requesting that Black women refrain from overly emotional or aggressive responses. The policing, monitoring, and tracking of Black women in workspaces contributes to hypervisibility and stifles professional growth and efficiency (Dickens et al., 2019).

- **Invisibility:** Simultaneously, invisibility is enforced daily in workplaces by the lack of sponsorship, promotion, guidance, or structural investment from people or organizations (Showunmi, 2023). As a result, Black women who work in housing and residence life are often left to their own devices to develop strategies to negotiate organizations and institutional politics, resulting in approaches that are highly personal, communal, and spiritual.

NARRATIVE THEMES AND MOTIFS

We found three major motifs across several texts that highlight the strategies of intergenerational resistance: being the only one, projecting a strategic voice, and lifting as we lead. As stated earlier, these aren't rhetorical colloquialisms that have been passed down from generation to generation but are part of the cultural technology to help Black women navigate professional spaces that often fail to see and understand them holistically.

Being the Only One

This motif captures the severe isolation many Black women experience in housing and residence life programs and encapsulates the lived reality of negotiating professional spaces where Black women are simultaneously hypervisible and invisible.

In hypervisible situations, Black women are expected to speak for and represent an entire race or identity group: "The hypervisibility that comes with being 'the only one' can lead to White employees constantly second-guessing Black women's instincts. This questioning attitude can lead to Black women suffering in silence and can exert a negative impact on their wellbeing" (Showunmi & Maylor, 2013, as cited in Showunmi, 2023, p. 2). In contrast, within invisible contexts they are excluded from decision making and formal and informal power networks. This motif shows up frequently within Showunmi's research.

> *Being Black and a woman in employment means fighting for recognition. It is not enough to have been chosen for gainful employment. Black women also need to prove themselves. This constitutes an emotional burden which many are not prepared for. This burden is invisible and is only seen by those who understand what it is and what it means to be Black and a woman in the workplace.* (Curtis & Showunmi, 2019, as cited in Showunmi, 2023, p. 9)

In essence, participants were invited to attend the meeting but were not able to shape the agenda. This feeling of tokenization is also reflected in research on the experiences of Black women in higher education in general. In a study of race and gender in college and university settings, researchers found that, at times, Black women have heightened expectations and little institutional backing when making decisions (Johnson et al., 2025).

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Intergenerationally, this motif shows that there has been a systemic legacy of exclusion and endurance in the field. Newer professionals recognize the "only one" dynamic and must contend with the expectation that they will nevertheless lead, guide, and represent without official supports in place. Veteran leaders shared anecdotes of surviving this reality for decades, usually at a cost. These reflections serve as an inflection point for Black women in housing and residence life to resist, document, and disrupt these patterns without internalizing the failure of the institutions around them.

Projecting a Strategic Voice

The high expectations for those who work in housing and residence life can result in physical burnout, but Black women are also expected to perform a significant amount of emotional labor, which often involves modifying language, tone, dress, and demeanor to align with White heteronormative dominant norms. For these women, there is a constant expectation that they remain professional while working in public spaces and supporting crisis response efforts.

In Lewis-Flenaugh and Myrick's (2022) study, many of the participants recognized that the way they were communicating impacted how they were perceived.

> *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.* (p. 66)

It takes a lot of emotional labor for Black women to police their own communication while White women seem able to be direct without being labeled as aggressive. These reflections highlight the internal audit of Black womanhood against the backdrop of institutional Whiteness. This sentiment is supported by research focusing on the stereotypes of Black women, such as the "Feisty Sapphire," a stereotype that depicts Black women as having attitude problems because of their "ability to talk back and respond to people in a stinging and overly assertive tone" (Jewell, 1993, as cited in Reynolds-Dobbs et al., 2008, p. 138); if a Black woman "is too outspoken or aggressive she can become marginalized in an organization" (Jewell, 1993, as cited in Reynolds-Dobbs et al., 2008, p. 141).

A participant in Lewis-Flenaugh and Myricks's (2022) research described similar experiences of regulating self-expression and engaging in strategic communication.

> *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. (p. 66)*

These reflections highlight how Black women who work in housing constantly engage in self-surveillance to ensure that their tone, volume, emotional expression, and written word are palatable to dominant audiences.

Undergirded by Black feminist thought, the strategic voice motif supports Patricia Hill Collins's (1986) work on the "outsider within" paradigm. Collins speaks extensively about Black women being able to see the perspective of the dominant social group while remaining overlooked and not accepted by the group. This unique location for Black women gives them the tools to interpret and decode institutional dynamics while remaining vulnerable to being unacknowledged in these same spaces. Instead of viewing communication style as an individual trait, this motif invites others to see and recognize Black women's voices as a site of racialized power. Throughout the generations, strategic communication has equipped Black women to survive and to advance while also resisting the patterns of discrimination within their environments.

The approaches to strategic voice evolve over time and across different contexts. Some professionals reflected on balancing clarity and restraint in racially charged spaces or developing confidence in deciding when to speak plainly and when to disrupt expectations. These shifts are not inherently tied to age and title; they are tied to lived experiences, institutional knowledge, and access to support. What is evident in these reflections is that there are shared strategies for expression, support, and identity.

Lifting While Leading

In housing and residence life, Black women are not only expected to complete their job responsibilities, but to also be responsible for the emotional well-being, mentoring, support, and cultural and community translation for those around them. This motif captures the dual burden Black women face when having to center leadership and to care for entire departments. Black women navigate this work without acknowledgement, appreciation, compensation, or recognition of this undue burden.

While participants in Lewis-Flenaugh's (2021) study did not explicitly name the motif of lifting while leading, their narratives reflect it; one recognized how her own resilience became a tool for helping others in the environment.

> *Yes, I think at this point in my career, I appreciate knowing that I can serve students who are people of color in a unique way that looks different because I am one of the very few administrators on campus that sit in roles like mine.* (p. 92)

Her words reflect a high ethic of care that is rooted in community. This participant is offering guidance not only from positional authority but also from lived experience.

> Black women lift others not because they are expected to, but because they remember what it is like to carry themselves alone.

This notion was emphasized by a different participant who found it important to connect with others in the workplace environment:

> *I do this work to show that it can be done. There are not many of us, as other people have already talked about. I am the first woman director on my campus in this role. I am the first Black director in this role. So by default, 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 . . . that will make it easier for someone who looks like me to get these types of roles.* (Lewis-Flenaugh & Myrick, 2022, p. 68)

Another participant shared a poignant reflection that emphasized the lifting while leading motif directly:

> *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.* (Lewis-Flenaugh & Myrick, 2022, p. 68)

This intergenerational work doesn't always happen in formal meetings or mentorship programs. It often happens during hallway check-ins, the meetings after the meeting, the text messages of encouragement, and the sharing of resources. This quiet and sometimes invisible labor shapes how professionals are able to persist and learn within systems. This powerful dialectic tool allows generational history and knowledge to be passed down to other professionals in the space. The belief in others around them has been one of the most powerful strategies for supporting and protecting the experience of Black women in housing.

These reflections demonstrate a pattern of Black women in residence life taking on the roles of cultural and community interpreter, emotional anchor, and institutional buffer for others around them. They fill in gaps and connect with people to ensure that others are successful in the workplace. This motif reflects an internalized ethic of care for the larger community. Lifting while leading is a form of leadership that values legacy, protection, and care. And, though lifting helps staff and students feel heard and seen, it can lead to exhaustion and emotional overload. This ethic of care can become an unsustainable form of labor, as Banks's (2025) study found when one participant shared the difficult truth: "It's seemingly hard to create a space for another Black woman because I am dealing with so much every day that I may not be emotionally available to bring in someone else to help develop them" (p. 58).

Though lifting while leading can be burdensome, it is also a collective bridge for the future. This strategy recognizes the collective mobility and brilliance of others. Black women lift others not because they are expected to, but because they remember what it is like to carry themselves alone.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The motifs explored throughout this article illuminate the often layered, racialized, and gendered labor that Black women face daily while working and leading within housing and residence life. These are not incidental experiences; they are structural and institutional patterns shaped by socially dominant norms and narrow definitions and scripts of professionalism. At the same time, the motifs reiterate the deeply strategic ways that Black women survive and transform environmental conditions. Throughout most of the studies reviewed, participants identified personal strategies they used to resist barriers in the environment. Several were able to rely on their connection to faith and/or spirituality. As one of the participants in King's (2020) study stated, "I pray every morning. I have to read my devotionals. I bring that home on the weekends and make sure I bring it back" (p. 112).

All our participants chimed in to share similar views about how a combination of meditation, spirituality, and/or religion helped them make meaning of their experiences in student affairs. Additionally, affinity-based community served as an outlet for Black women in student affairs to connect and engage with each other in communities that supported their evolution and growth (Henry, 2025). Finally, the authors observed how multiple participants in different studies created and extended space for current and future generations of Black women in the workplace. David-Lewis (2025) emphasizes the importance of creating spaces for Black women to connect and engage. These strategies are shared, remembered, adapted, and passed across professional generations and contexts.

What is clear from these narratives is that there is a collective legacy of resistance and power for Black women who work in housing and residence life. Through storytelling, peer connection, and lived witnessing, Black women are able to stand on the shoulders of the ones before them to lay the foundation for current and future generations of professionals. This intergenerational strategy is a critical form of cultural labor that links survival to forward movement and prioritizes individual and collective strength and care.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND LEADERSHIP

Housing and residence life programs must recognize the communal and intergenerational strategies and labor that Black women engage in daily. The following recommendations are built directly from the motifs explored throughout this article.

Affirm Peer and Intergenerational Networks

Black women leaders in housing frequently rely on informal support systems, such as intergenerational mentorship, peer connections, and sisterhood, to navigate exclusionary or isolating environments. Meaningful mentoring relationships among Black

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women can be critical to persisting in higher education, as these relationships honor their intersectional identities, provide vital supports, and have the power to restore and sustain (Gardner et al., 2025).

These supports are critical, as "Black women leadership is about survival, formal and informal networks, and collective empowerment" (Rosser-Mims, 2010, as cited in Lewis-Flenaugh, 2021, p. 3). Similarly, Hughes (2025) identified support networks as a core theme in the leadership trajectories of Black women senior housing officers, while the research of Beckwith and colleagues (as cited in Lewis-Flenaugh, 2021) recognized that Black women often have few real opportunities to rise in the ranks: "The challenges of ascension for African American women into C-suite positions indicated [that] mentoring, affinity groups, and training and development were themes of missed opportunities for the women in the study" (p. 18).

Mentorship as a survival and growth strategy requires attention on two levels. Institutions should acknowledge the importance of these networks and shift from viewing them as optional or extracurricular to investing in them as core components of leadership development through intentional and accessible structures. This includes supporting affinity spaces, developing intentional cross-generational mentorship pipelines, and investing in professional networks that are based on shared identity and affirmation rather than assimilation. At the same time, Ingram (2021) recommends that "African American Women . . . take more ownership over their careers, by proactively seeking networks and advancement opportunities" (p. 114).

Highlighting both perspectives illustrates the tension between personal agency and structural and organizational responsibility. It is important to affirm Black women's agency in taking ownership of their careers, but relying solely on individual initiatives without institutional support perpetuates inequity, as Black women are often burdened with the labor of being the only representative from their cultural or racial group in professional spaces. This dynamic is underscored by the Strong Black Woman schema: "Black women must represent a depiction of perfection, appearing strong while suppressing emotions" (Banks, 2025, p. 18), and these expectations are "derived from stereotypes that have existed historically within our social structure" (p. 8). Lewis-Flenaugh contends that "historically White institutions only [mimic] the larger society" (2021, p. 96) by reinforcing stereotypes and limited advancement. When institutions fail to provide structural mentorship pipelines effectively, they normalize resilience as a prerequisite for survival rather than a shared responsibility for equity. In this way, individual initiative isn't empowering but constitutes another form of invisible labor that masks systemic inaction.

Redefine Professionalism and Leadership

Conventional ideas of professionalism often reflect the dominant definitions coded in White patriarchal standards that prioritize composure over authenticity and conformity over cultural expression. As a result, Black women in leadership are pressured to adjust how they speak, dress, or show emotion in order to meet these standards. Institutions must reexamine how they define professionalism and expand their frameworks of leadership to include emotional intelligence, cultural nuance, and relational ways of leading. Black women should not be expected to edit or shrink themselves to be seen as competent or to feel they belong; rather, the workspace should be a place where they can lead as their full selves.

Compensate for Emotional and Cultural Labor

The labor of lifting while leading—e.g., mentoring, being the only one, and navigating and interpreting institutional politics—is exhausting, strategic, and deeply impactful (Breeden, 2021; Henry, 2025; Lewis-Flenaugh & Myrick, 2022). It requires time, energy, and a deep sense of responsibility that is frequently overlooked and uncompensated. Acknowledgment through kind words or gestures simply isn't enough. This form of leadership demands structural investment: equitable pay, clear pathways for advancement, balanced workloads, and structured support. Supporting others is not a side task; leaders are expected to care for students, mentor staff, and translate culture, and this labor is a form of leadership that deserves tangible support.

Fund Legacy Building and Not Just Retention Efforts

Retention of Black women in housing and residence life is only the starting point. Institutions must also invest in their ability to create and leave a lasting impact. As Lewis-Flenaugh and Myrick (2022) note, "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" (p. 61). These women are actively redefining the role of SHO leadership. Legacy building isn't merely a generic form of professional development; it is a way to entrust Black women leaders with resources, authorship, and decision-making power that shape the future of the profession. Institutions must commit to intentional recruitment, retention, and promotion strategies for Black women in housing and residence life, ensuring that pathways to senior leadership are equitable and accessible.

> By situating the narratives of Black women in the context of generational intelligence, we underscore that these intergenerational strategies are not incidental but are intentional acts of leadership, care, and resistance.

GENTELLIGENCE AS AN INTERGENERATIONAL LENS

Black women experience ageism and racism more frequently than do other professionals and must navigate multiple layers of discrimination in professional settings. The book *Gentelligence* (Gerhardt et al., 2021) provides a helpful lens for thinking about intergenerational workforce practices, particularly through its four key practices: "(1) Resisting Assumptions, (2) Adjusting the Lens, (3) Strengthening Trust, and (4) Expanding the Pie" (p. 9). This form of intelligence

> *. . . is a multidisciplinary framework that emphasizes the intentional recognition, integration, and strategic utilization of generational diversity within organizational and educational settings. Rooted in psychological and sociological principles, the framework challenges age-based biases and generational stereotypes by promoting cognitive flexibility, mutual respect, and intergenerational collaboration.* (Gerhardt et al., 2021, para. 4)

While the notion of Gentelligence was developed to support general workforce collaboration, the principles resonate with some of the patterns observed among Black women in housing and residence life:

- **Resisting Assumptions:** Avoiding unconscious biases about colleagues' generational identities parallels the ways Black women challenge assumptions about their leadership, professionalism, and decision making.
- **Adjusting the Lens:** Understanding the intent behind others' behaviors aligns with strategic voice. While Gerhardt and colleagues (2021) propose this as a collaborative practice, it also functions as a survival strategy for Black women, who are required to navigate institutional dynamics and interpret communication across generational and hierarchical lines.
- **Strengthening Trust:** Building reliable relationships across perceived differences aligns with the intergenerational mentoring, peer support, and communal care that sustain Black women's leadership trajectories.
- **Expanding the Pie:** Creating collaborative, win-win outcomes mirrors the labor of lifting while leading. Black women share strategies, resources, and knowledge to advance not only their own professional success but also that of others in the community.

By connecting these practices to these patterns, we acknowledge broader organizational principles of intergenerational collaboration while centering the culturally specific, resistance-oriented, and legacy-driven knowledge transmission that sustains Black women across professional generations. This lens provides a bridge between organizational scholarship and lived experience, highlighting how Black women's intergenerational strategies are both strategic and deeply rooted in communal care, resilience, and mentorship.

By situating the narratives of Black women in the context of generational intelligence, we underscore that these intergenerational strategies are not incidental but are intentional acts of leadership, care, and resistance. Gentelligence provides useful vocabulary for naming and amplifying the ways Black women in housing have long modeled practices of bridging, mentoring, and coalition building across generational lines.

CONCLUSION

Black women in housing and residence life leadership are not only working within systems that were never built with them in mind but are also reshaping those systems in real time. Their leadership challenges the narrow definitions of professionalism and expands what is possible in student affairs and higher education. But this work comes at a cost when it is not sustained by institutional support.

As our findings and implications suggest, supporting Black women in housing and residence life requires more than representation. It demands intentional investment in their networks, a redefinition of leadership and professionalism, compensation for emotional and cultural labor, and funding legacy-building efforts that center their visions for the future.

This article has sought to honor the stories of Black women who carry others while rarely being carried themselves. By viewing their strategies through critical lenses like Black feminist thought and organizational frameworks like Gentelligence, we affirm that their intergenerational labor is a resource to be valued, compensated, and structurally supported. The authors invite others to continue this important conversation about understanding experiences and investigating past and present strategies that will propel Black women to continue engaging in meaningful work within housing and residence life. ■

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How can we ensure Black executives, Black professional staff, and Black students' narratives are heard, preserved, and valued? In what ways do different forms of storytelling shape and influence the development of those narratives?

2. In what ways can practitioners work to close the significant gap in scholarship on Black women in university housing?

3. How do existing bureaucratic structures and institutional inequities in residence life reinforce the intersecting impacts of race, gender, labor, and systemic power dynamics of Black women in university housing?

4. In what ways can university housing systems disproportionately exploit individuals with minoritized racial, gender, and socioeconomic identities?

5. What impact do hypervisibility and/or invisibility have on a Black woman pursuing a career within university housing? How might these dynamics be reinforced within these roles? In what ways can they contribute to harm?

6. How can professionals actively dismantle the harmful structural and institutional patterns within university housing systems?

Discussion questions were developed by Brooke Gordon, Clemson University.