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Doctoral Digital Portfolio

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Experiences in Racism: African American Women Working in Higher Education Institutions

By

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Dedication

This research paper is dedicated to my mother, Julia D. Ellison. Thank you for always being my biggest cheerleader and supporter through my educational endeavors.

Abstract

Even though there have been numerous advancements in employment opportunities for African American women there have also been many setbacks. Social movements brought on by the pandemic put issues in the faces of American citizens and can no longer be ignored. Whether or not members of society agree or disagree with the Black Lives Matter, or Me Too Movements they are here to stay. African American women working in higher education witness and endure infractions and microaggressions performed against them and other people of color daily (Muhs et al., 2012). These challenges will be investigated highlighting African American women working in higher education and how they deal with racism. This paper will explore how African American women have managed to progress and be successful while learning to cope with adversity.

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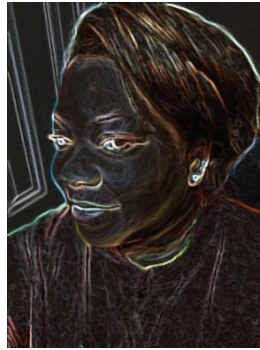
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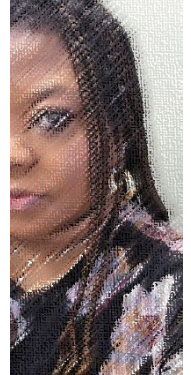
Artifact 2- Feeling Shattered



Artifact 3- Unseen and Unheard



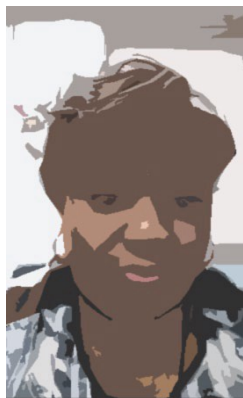
Artifact 4 - Hair Fascination



Artifact 5- Hair Fixation



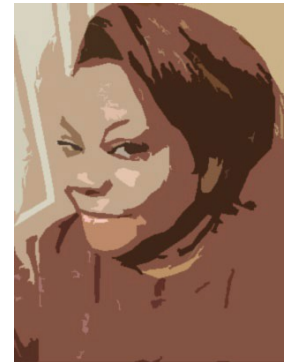
Artifact 6- No Black girl



Artifact 7- Just a Black Woman



Artifact 8- Say what now?



Artifact 9- Pat on the back?



Artifact 10 - Cracked up



Artifact 11 - Wow, really?



Artifact 12 - Walking on eggshells

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Women of color often say they are made to feel unseen and unheard. Their values and views are not given the same consideration and respect that those of other races are given. In the workplace these feelings can be heightened by situations that occur daily. African American women are constantly faced with being challenged or undermined by co-workers who think that they are less than (Abdulahi, 2023). For them to get ahead or even be considered for a promotion they must have double the work experience and education of those they are competing with (Fossett, 2021).

Recent social movements such as Black Lives Matter and Me Too have put a spotlight on many of the plights that women face. These movements have brought a sense of urgency to these issues and many others re-awakening interest in social issues regarding race, gender, and equity (Gause, 2020). Not only are women being challenged by the status quo, but they are also having to contend with predominately white male politicians who are making decisions concerning their civil rights (Bloomberg, 2023). Couple the ongoing social and political discord with being an African American woman and you have now entered another reality that presents an intersectionality of diverse issues that only magnify the adversities they will face. An additional hurdle is added when experiences in the workplace are included in this equation.

African American women working in higher education contend with adverse issues while trying to advance their careers and learning how to navigate their college's working environment. Too often they are faced with questions surrounding their education, knowledge, and capability to perform successfully in their position (Muhs et al., 2012). Many suffer from stress and burnout due to constantly being singled out and challenged by their peers regarding their expertise.

Others suffer from isolation and loneliness due to the lack of representation and an adequate support system. Colleges and universities must realize the importance of being inclusive and having diverse faculty and staff on campus. It is this diversity that gives students and staff the sense of belonging and feeling of being able to accomplish things. Having African American women working on campus gives students of color access to someone who can serve as a mentor or role model. Students of color can then begin to visualize themselves as someone working in their chosen career field (Patitu, n.d.). It also gives white students and faculty exposure to people they may have never had to interact with before (Patitu, n.d.).

White faculty and students being exposed to African American women on campus further initiates and supports discussion and development of different viewpoints. It also shows white students, faculty, and staff that leadership is not only white. Having leadership exemplified by African American women changes the narrative that many students have grown up with. Many students' entering college and universities have never had an African American teacher or principal while they were in elementary or high school (Bloomberg, 2024). Developing cultural, race and gender awareness understanding on campus is significant to the success of the college, students, faculty, and staff (Patitu, n.d.).

Additional findings involve discussion of why it is important for minority students to see themselves represented. Having diverse faculty and staff puts students at ease, allowing them to feel more comfortable and welcomed on campus (Patitu, n. d.). Students of color are also more likely to approach someone on campus who looks like them if they are experiencing issues (Patitu, n. d.). They are also more likely to complete their degree (Patitu, n. d.).

Diversity does not only involve race and ethnicity. Being diverse simply means having people that are different (Hansen, 2022). Those things that make people different can be what we

were born with. For example, our race, gender, sexual orientation, age and abilities are things that make people diverse (Hansen, 2022). Other ways to incorporate diversity are through categorical demographics where people identify themselves as being members or associated with certain groups such as military, educational attainment and income level (Hansen, 2022).

Background Information

My career journey into higher education began with me starting off as an advisor and gradually working my way up to mid-level management. My intersectionality's are the following: African American, woman, First Generation College Student, over 40, heterosexual, South Texan, and middle class. I enjoy working with first generation, first time in college students. I like guiding them through the process of becoming a successful college student. My goal is to be a positive resource and advisor for them as they complete their academic journey.

When I have had a difficult day or have had racist encounters I primarily have always turned to my mother for guidance and support. My mother has worked in high profile positions and offices and is all too familiar with the challenges of racism that African American women face in the workplace. The experiences that I have had at one point, or another temporarily held me back from seeking higher positions. Racism can put you in a negative space in your career especially if you are a person who wants more professionally.

Often, the experiences I have had made me question my career choices. However, in the end I managed to fight through them and continue to move forward. When I have discussed my goals and aspirations with some people I have been questioned and told that I did not need to further my education or that I should just stay in the position I'm in. There are never words of encouragement. I usually get the "Why would you want to do that?" response and I think to

myself “Why not?!” This is a goal that I have set and a decision I have made for myself personally and professionally.

In my opinion there are several barriers that prevent African American women from career advancement while working in higher education. I have had my own personal experiences and have developed some reasons for myself based on them. One of them is the lack of support from those around you. This can be friends, family, or co-workers. Another is lack of cultural awareness and differences in the workplace. There is also a lack of administrator support or back up when needed in the workplace. Lack of administrator support also goes along with a major one which is lack of accountability and timeliness when addressing issues and must haves when racist experiences or behavior occur in the workplace. Once an issue has occurred it should be addressed immediately. When they are not addressed, employees feel like they do not matter and the lack of response and concern will set the tone for their work experience for as long as they are employed with an institution.

What people do not realize who are not African American or a person of color is that the experiences are not forgotten and that those feelings from those experiences never go away. That experience will forever influence that person both positive and negative. But mostly it will always be NEGATIVE. The experience stays with a person and plays forever in the back of their mind. Yet, I still choose to move forward.

Statement of the Problem

Community colleges historically and statistically have shown that they are welcoming to women. They traditionally have helped the most women students and employ larger amounts of women who are faculty, administrators, and presidents greater than other educational groups

(Gagliardi, et al., 2017). African American women hold 7% of presidential positions than at all types of educational institutions combined (5%) (AACC, 2018, Gagliardi, et al., 2017). These numbers are an example of how slow advancement opportunities to college president have been. It also reflects the small amount of diversity that has taken place (Gause, 2020). Even though progress has been made in access for women, community colleges still lack diversity especially African American women leaders.

Little research has been done regarding African American women and the racism they have experienced while working in higher education. Research that is available comes from the white perspective and lacks follow through on what African American women endure (Turner, 2002). The intersectionality of race, gender and background all are contributing factors to what African American women experience or how they are treated (Turner, 2002). Rarely, do white authors discuss the privilege they have compared to those of non-whites (Turner, 2002). White women have benefited most from programs designed to aid African American women (Wingfield, 2021). When a white woman is hired many campuses feel they have met their quota because they have at least hired a woman (Corley, 2020). At the opposite end of this conundrum is when an African American woman is hired, a campus is less likely to hire another African American woman because they feel they have met their quota by checking off two boxes (Corley, 2020). The person is not only a woman, but African American (Corley, 2020). Additionally, current writings also primarily focus on Black men and not Black women (Turner, 2002).

While conducting research a pattern of issues began to unfold that kept arising for African American women working in higher education. There are numerous challenges that need to be exposed that are hindering their advancement. These challenges can be easily addressed by

the administration in charge on college campuses. The challenge for administrators will be to recognize and address these issues as soon as possible (Corley, 2020). African American women often feel abandoned and alone in these situations due to lack of support (Corley, 2020).

Additional gaps identified deal primarily with African American women and mentorship. It is difficult for them to locate another African American woman as a mentor due to there being lack of representation on campus (Hall et al., 2012 & Showunmi, 2023). Lack of representation leads to issues with diversity. Diversity is important on campuses because students who identify with someone on campus also believe that they too can complete their degree. It also makes students of color feel more welcome and accepted (Corley, 2020).

There are issues with pay and gender roles. Males are paid more than women in the workplace along with being first to be considered for administrator positions (Weindling, 2018). Males are seen as being able to withstand the stress and duties of being an administrator while African American women are faced with challenges surrounding their race and job capability (Weindling, 2018).

Recommendations have been made suggesting that further research should be done on the data that some universities have been collecting (Corley, 2020). The study of this data would supposedly aid in increasing diversity and equity in pay on their campuses. However, the data is useless if the campuses doing the research choose not to share their findings with other institutions. Institutions of higher education could work together by sharing their data and creating more equitable working environments not only for African American women, but for everyone (Corley, 2020).

Researchers can contribute additional fact-finding studies and expose further causes of the problem. Locating additional sources and causes will help facilitate further discussion on how to combat the issue of there being a lack of African American women serving in administrative positions in higher education. In addition, employees can participate in the decision-making process developing solutions and helping start the conversation on their jobs.

More can be done by leaders in education. After the conversation has started, what will be the next steps? There are always discussions on serious matters, but it must be backed up by following through with action on the issue, or it will continue to get worse. People want change now, not later. The days of communities of color accepting what is given are over. They want answers and solutions to the problems.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to evaluate the experiences of African American women dealing with racism while working in higher education. The study will take a closer look at what coping mechanisms some African American women have in place to support and guide them. Emphasis will be placed on institutions of higher education and how they address the issue. Attention will be given to the goals and achievements of African American women while employed at institutions of higher education and the hurdles they had to overcome.

The goal is to gain from the research a better understanding of the effects racism has had on African American women working in higher education. Discussion will occur surrounding why some have carried on and continued the fight for leadership roles while others have chosen to play it safe (Corley, 2020). Current research available shows how many have decided to stay in positions because they no longer want to continue the fight (Corley, 2020). Some African

American women have reached a position that they are comfortable with that provides them with decent pay and a tolerable work environment (Corley, 2020).

Finally, discussion of what next steps and possible solutions will be had. Current solutions that are being deployed will be highlighted while discussion surrounding their development will continue and new solutions will be reviewed.

Research Questions

This study will examine the following research question(s):

RQ1: What are African American women lived experiences as employees in higher educational institution(s)?

RQ2: How does intersectionality pertain to their lived experiences as African American women in higher education institution(s)?

RQ3: What are their shared experiences for confronting the barriers and glass ceilings?

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Women's Rights/Movements

In the U. S., for its first 200 years, workers who were not white men were not allowed to serve or be employed in any leadership or organizational capacity (Wingfield, 2024).

Historically, women in this country have had to find their place in society. In 1769 American colonies began with laws based on English common law (Live Your Dream, 2023). Women were not regarded as true citizens nor held in high esteem. Once married, a woman's legal existence was suspended, and she was considered the property of her husband. She was no longer

considered a person, but as one with her spouse (Live Your Dream, 2023). In 1777 all states passed laws which took away a woman's right to vote (Live Your Dream, 2023).

During the early 1800's women were not given basic civil rights and fought hard for many years to gain them. The Woman's Suffrage Movement began in the 1800's and was a catalyst for African American women who were mistreated and abused at the polls (California, n.d.). This mistreatment led to African American women along with other women of color playing pivotal roles that were instrumental in the passage of the 19th Amendment (California, n.d.). The 19th Amendment states that women could not be denied the right to vote due to their sex (Wingfield, 2021). The amendment was important because it solidified the right to vote for all women. Previously, the 15th Amendment gave people the right to vote regardless of race. African Americans were permitted to vote; however, women were still not allowed to do so because of their gender (Wingfield, 2021). And even though the 19th Amendment gave women the right to vote African American women were still not allowed to do so due to their race and gender (Wingfield, 2021).

Women have fought long and hard for basic civil rights and for acknowledgement of their abilities as contributing members of society. The Women's Suffrage Movement began in the 1800's alongside the Abolitionist Movement (California, n.d.). It was during this time that Oberlin College was established. Founded by abolitionists, it admitted both women and African Americans (Chambers et al., 2020). As women's rights began to take center stage, various associations merged to form NAWSA or the National American Woman Suffrage Association whose only focus was for the advancement of white women (California, n.d.). Much of the literature available details how racial justice and women's rights were equally important to African American women. A major part of their activism included the combining of racial

equality and women's rights (*More to the Movement | Explore | Shall Not Be Denied: Women Fight for the Vote | Exhibitions at the Library of Congress | Library of Congress, n.d.*).

It was realized early on that they could not have one without the other.

Very few African American women were allowed to participate in the suffrage associations because they were run and organized by white women. African American women then mobilized and formed their own organizations (*More to the Movement | Explore | Shall Not Be Denied: Women Fight for the Vote | Exhibitions at the Library of Congress | Library of Congress, n.d.*) African American women founded what is considered the first suffrage association for African American women called The Alpha Suffrage Club and was founded by Ida B. Wells (California, n.d.).

In 1901 Jim Crow laws which included poll taxes and literacy tests were utilized as deterrents to keep African Americans from participating in elections (California, n.d.). African American women faced discrimination at the polls when they went to vote. Violence and intimidation in the form of exams were designed to make African Americans appear unintelligent and incapable of making sound decisions.

In 1963 The Equal Pay Act was passed promising pay would be equitable for all regardless of race, color, religion, country of origin or gender (Live Your Dream, 2023). However, recent stats illustrate that there is still an issue. Overall, women make seventy-nine cents for every dollar a man makes (McChesney, 2018). Take a deeper dive into this data and it will be uncovered that African American women earn sixty-four cents for every dollar a man makes (Wingfield, 2021). This disparity contributes to continuation of African American women experiencing occupational and economic disadvantages (Wingfield, 2021).

The exclusion of women of all races and men did not become illegal until 1964 (Wingfield, 2024). The Civil Rights Act was passed in 1964 (Live Your Dream, 2023). This act

prohibits anyone from being discriminated against based on race, color, religion, country of origin, or sex. However, the issue still exists for African American women. Even though measures are being utilized to achieve gender diversity, African American women are left behind yet again (Muhs et al., 2012). Race must play a role by being a determining factor for these new measures being put into place to be fully diverse and equitable (Wingfield, 2021). However, these challenges can be easily ignored by those not particularly interested in specifically which women are likely to have the most gains (Wingfield, 2021).

Not until 1965 were all African Americans given the right to vote due to the passing of the Voting Rights Act (California, n.d.). In 1969 the Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that women could work jobs once meant for men only if they too met the physical demands (Live Your Dream, 2023). It is also during this period that Shirley Chisholm is the first African American woman elected to Congress. This is an example of what African American women can become if allowed the opportunity.

In 1972 Title IX was passed prohibiting sex discrimination in all aspects of education (Live Your Dream, 2023). While in 1974 The Women's Educational Equity Act provided funding for nonsexist teaching materials and programs that encouraged educational opportunities for women and girls (Live Your Dream, 2023). Finally, in 1994 the Gender Equity in Education Act was passed paving the way to training teachers in areas such as gender equity and promoting STEM subjects to girls (Live Your Dream, 2023).

Upon closer inspection of these bills, it becomes quite apparent that women's rights, especially those which focus on women of color are in constant need of review to ensure continued protection of their basic civil rights. It appears that great strides have been made for women in general. However, it is white women who have benefited most from the very bills

designed to aide African American women especially in their careers. The intersectionality of being African American and female present distinctive challenges in the workplace (Wingfield, 2021).

Career Challenges

African American women are welcomed with open arms at some institutions of higher ed until they express interest in advancement (Gause, 2020). They are then seen as aggressive for wanting to advance and are intentionally held back or ignored once promoted to supervisory roles (Gause, 2020). In addition, leadership is oblivious or unaware of the campus climate and culture that exists and how it may adversely affect the working environment of African American women (Gause, 2020). African American women are forced to quickly assimilate into these environments if they wish to be included or even heard as they advance into leadership roles (Gause, 2020). If they do not learn to do so quickly, they are more than likely to miss out on advancement opportunities (Gause, 2020). White males are usually the preferred choice because they are seen as more capable of serving in leadership roles due to indoctrinated views on leadership and what people working in higher education view their leaders to be (Gause, 2020).

Community colleges have worked diligently to create equitable opportunities and environments for students. However, the same efforts should be given to increasing the number of African American women as leaders. There is a lack of representation of African American women in professional high status, high paying jobs in Academia (Wingfield, 2021). African American women face challenges at every turn. They face similar challenges that are experienced by those working in other industries (Jackson, 2019). Published literature discusses how they are questioned by others when they serve in positions of power. Co-workers will go

behind their backs expressing concerns that they may have regarding their job performance (Jackson, 2019). The lack of trust undermines African American women's capability to be successful on the job because they are viewed as incapable of performing their job. African American women are constantly having to prove themselves and show that they belong to get things done on the job (Abdulahi, 2023).

In many instances an African American woman is the only woman or person of color in the room (Gause, 2020). When one woman of color is promoted, it stalls further advancement of other women of color because it is considered as having met the required quota and no others are recruited (Corley, 2020). This leaves African American women feeling unseen and unheard due to their co-workers' opinions of them which usually are based on race and sex (Gause, 2020).

African American women working in higher education are least likely to obtain a leadership role. Many face concerns regarding requirements for upper management positions (Jackson, 2019). When opportunities for advancement emerge, factors that contribute to their refraining from applying range from caring for children, possible additional education requirements that require more time, and their current position being more dependable and flexible (First-Generation Women of Color in Administration: Challenges & Suggestions, 2019).

Hurdles faced by white administrators differs dramatically compared to those of African American women. When asked about the challenges they faced many stated it was the application process (Jackson, 2019). Once again white privilege is still at play and benefits non people of color proving that they do not experience the same challenges at the same rate as African American women (Gause, 2020).

The additional educational and professional experience that is needed for those who want to move into leadership roles experience delay in advancement compared to those who are non-

white. Often after dealing with various forms of bias, stereotypes, and tokenism, African American women then face self-image issues (Jackson, 2019). The constant barrage of negative experiences has caused them to develop issues with their own self-image such as imposter syndrome (Jackson, 2019).

African American women who move into leadership roles are faced with many challenges. The challenges faced by these women lead to many of them reconsidering moving into these roles. Their choosing not to move into leadership roles only makes it more evident the prevalence of old norms that only white men and women fit the leadership profile (Gause, 2020).

African American women contend with hurdles seen and unseen working in higher education. Often, they are forced to navigate uncharted territory that includes the deciphering of external and internal messaging regarding their employment at predominately white colleges and universities. They are also subjected to unfair evaluation of their positions as leaders while being given the bulk of minority students to provide support to (Bloomberg, 2024).

At certain time periods in their careers African American women seek out guidance from other women who could possibly serve as a mentor (Gause, 2020). There is a universal understanding amongst African American women to have a woman mentor of color who understands the challenges they faced because they too have experienced similar situations firsthand. A mentor of color or specifically African American can provide knowledge surrounding professional growth. In addition, many African American women working in higher education are seeking emotional support from a mentor who can provide them with the solace they seek (Gause, 2020).

African American women working in higher education must learn how to traverse unspoken and hidden rules of institutions of higher education. They may have trouble as they become familiar with campus politics and organizational culture (First-Generation Women of Color in Administration: Challenges & Suggestions, 2019). It is in higher education where white privilege provides a network of mentorship that already exists and is not accessible to African Americans (Gause, 2020). African American women are not automatically included in these mentoring opportunities because it is by invitation only (Gause, 2020).

African American women must also contend with microaggressions. Interactions with co-workers where they assume that African American women who are in management or some sort of professional position is the help or belittled and questioned in front of everyone during meetings (Gause, 2020). There is also constant questioning of their authority or work that is being asked to be done getting back to them because other employees reported what they felt was wrongdoing. Once they are informed that they were incorrect they do not apologize (Gause, 2020). It is these personal slights along with the culture, structure, and administrators' management styles that are still systemic barriers that have been in place for decades. Until a path has been created that allows for opportunities for African American women there will be continued difficulties on their journey to leadership positions and when they assume the role.

Retention

Challenges of the load carried by African American women working in higher education is rarely acknowledged (Bloomberg, 2024). It is imperative that colleges and universities develop a strategy on how to attract and keep African American leaders in education (Bloomberg, 2024). African American women continue to work twice as hard than their counter parts and only get half the recognition (Bloomberg, 2024). Acknowledging that there is an uneven playing field in

higher education is no solace to African American women if nothing is being done to level it fairly (Bloomberg, 2024). Adequate steps must be taken to provide the support and guidance necessary to help them be successful (Bloomberg, 2024).

Colleges and universities who recruit African American women must be willing to address the negative attacks made against them. Introducing African American women to what was once considered white male spaces will require participation of administrators and staff ensuring a smooth transition. There will be issues that will need to be addressed. However, these issues should be dealt with promptly by administration so that African American women will not feel the need to prove that they can do their job (Bloomberg, 2024).

Institutions of higher education are hardly effective at retaining their African American administrators (Bridges, 1996 & First-Generation Women of Color in Administration: Challenges & Suggestions, 2019). Less than 20 percent of women working in higher education make up all full-time faculty in academia (Corley, 2020). African American women have little to no representation when it comes to high paying positions in higher education. However, when it comes to lower paying staff jobs, their numbers are higher (Weindling, 2018). African American women are paid less than white men, men of color, and white women (McChesney, 2018). Colleges and universities wanting to improve equity for African American women must begin by planning, setting goals, and utilizing unbiased data (Weindling, 2018). To address pay and inequities they must evaluate pay and representation across all job classifications while including possible intersectionality's (Weindling, 2018).

Current research available has discussed how many colleges and universities are aware of the challenges that African American women face (Weindling, 2018). They have done studies on retention to figure out how to best keep African American women employed with them but have

not shared the results of this data (Weindling, 2018). This was an interesting revelation from the research. If colleges and universities who have completed such studies would get together to discuss and collaborate on their findings (Weindling, 2018). It would have a huge impact on the field of education. The results of these studies would be informative information that would be beneficial to keeping more African American women employed and improving or increasing their chances at advancement (Weindling, 2018). Data collected could also be utilized in other ways and contribute to research in the field of education by opening more opportunities for other minority groups (Weindling, 2018).

Once colleges and universities have completed their evaluations they should share and compare the data results with other institutions of higher education (Wendling, 2018). The sharing of data with similar institutions would help to create equitable wages for employees and comparable salaries that would help to create a more diverse candidate pool for employment (Weindling, 2018). Researching employee turnover to include age and experience would also aid colleges and universities with knowledge of when and where they would need to increase staffing and diversity (Weindling, 2018). It would also give institutions some insight into African American women currently employed who could become potential candidates for advancement (Weindling, 2018).

A major contributing factor in determining if African American women would stay employed at a particular university was their ability to retain them. Statistics show that providing opportunities for advancement and creating a welcoming work environment specifically played a role in retention of African American women (Gause, 2020). Evaluation of university goals and diversity programs should be explored. Once a college or university has stopped exhibiting the examples of what they claimed to be, African American women leave to work for another

institution whose values match what they were trying to implement on campus with students and employees (Gause, 2020).

Another retention issue that should be addressed pertains to equitable pay in the workplace. African American women are paid sixty-four cents to every dollar a man makes (Wingfield, 2021). Literature published states how colleges and universities should re-evaluate staffing representation campus wide along with pay across job classes (Weindling, 2018).

Finally, there is the issue of gender roles and expectations in higher education. College presidents are still seen as the stereotypical white male with a spouse at home who understands the long work hours (Gause, 2020). There is the permeating theme and belief in higher ed that only males can successfully manage the work/life balance and requirements of being a leader (Archer, 2012; Williams, 2005). The lack of gender and minority representation at various levels of higher education continues to exist (Gause, 2020). It is these types of historical, racial, and stereotypical themes that remain true, yet unspoken when it comes to working in higher education (Gause, 2020).

Coping Mechanisms

There are hidden expectations put on African American women because they are black. Some see them as the expert on all things black, which is an unfair expectation and assumption (Patitu, n. d.). However, this can be a double edge sword for African American women as they ascend the leadership ladder. They are often given the added responsibility of seeing all students of color on campus (Patitu, n. d.). Leadership will place them in positions that surround diversity and inclusion (Patitu, n. d.). Many are already carrying heavy roles as administrators or faculty charged with handling multiple tasks involving the student body (Patitu, n. d.).

African American women are suffering in silence due to the load they carry. The cost of carrying the stress from working in higher education without meaningful support from a mentor or campus administrator will continue to lead to the exiting of African American women. This mass departure will play an active role in the outlook and development of college students and the workforce (Bloomberg, 2024).

Published findings suggest African American women who believe they have achieved success at work still struggle with racism, sexism, hostility, and resentment in the workplace (Showunmi, 2023). Five themes persisted for African American women in the workplace when racism and sexism were stressors for them. The stressors are promotion, defending their race and lack of mentorship, shifting or code switching to overcome barriers to employment, coping with racism and discrimination, and being isolated and excluded (Hall et al., 2012 & Showunmi, 2023). Findings acquired from this study showed that African American women used emotion and problem focused coping to tackle stress brought on by the workplace (Hall et al., 2012 & Showunmi, 2023).

Additional research studies on African American women and their experiences in higher education discusses usage of various mechanisms utilized to cope with the day-to-day stress of working in racially charged environments. African American women working in higher education have managed to survive the challenges they regularly face involving racism thanks to support from friends, family, and colleagues (Patitu, n.d.).

Many utilized prayer and laughter as ways to combat their daily stress along with meditation (Patitu, n.d.). Others reached out to friends and family for support whether by phone or in person. Some met with mentors which were at times hard to come by (Patitu, n.d.). Being

able to talk to someone who has witnessed and experienced the same challenges they have faced, gave them the validation and support they needed.

To cope with isolation and loneliness at the University of Michigan, women of color formed the Women of Color in the Academy Project (WOCAP) at their Center for the Education of Women (Patitu, n.d.). This center came about due to discussions that were held by women of color faculty who needed a safe space where they could continue with discussions of issues pertaining to women of color and students.

Other strategies utilized as coping mechanisms are dumbing down or shrinking oneself. This allows them to fit in with the rest of the group yet remains unnoticed (Showunmi, 2023). African American women often felt they had to minimize who they were so that they could receive acceptance in the workplace (Jackson, 2019). They adapted by shifting their identities to cope with discrimination (Holder et al., 2015 & Showunmi, 2023).

Career Development

Research has shown that deliberate and intentional actions must be done by colleges and universities to show that they value and respect the work of their African American females (Sharma et al., 2022). Colleges and universities must make the conscious effort to ensure that African American women receive the support necessary to be successful. They must also recognize the importance of having African American women work alongside everyone else. This can be achieved during Strategic Planning meetings held by colleges and universities where they review their mission and goals through SWOT Analysis. Here they can assess what they can do to make their campus more inclusive and diverse (Sharma et al., 2022).

Literature states that African American women struggle with revealing their true selves culturally on campus because of the climate that exists (Rice, 2010). Often, they are not included in the decisions made even though they have earned their position as a high-ranking administrator. Information is withheld from them by their supervisors who do not want to work with them because of their race and gender. This intentional exclusion leaves them out of the decision-making process even though they have earned the right to be there by advancing up the career ladder (Turner, 2002). Intentional exclusion done by leadership of African American women from teams and projects whether due to lack of mentoring or unfamiliarity slows their progression in the workplace and their realization of leadership positions (Wingfield, 2021).

Women of color face numerous barriers during their quest to obtain positions of power in higher education that can hinder their professional growth and development (First-Generation Women of Color in Administration: Challenges & Suggestions, 2019). Once African American women reach higher paying jobs at colleges and universities, they go on to face more challenges and have shorter career life in their higher education positions compared to men (Abdulahi, 2023). They also face more questions regarding their qualifications, lack of respect and authority, and hostility from co-workers (Abdulahi, 2023). In addition, overwhelming amounts of racist and sexist experiences involving the usage of racial slurs and gender bias (Abdulahi, 2023). Colleagues not caring to take the time to understand and invest in one another's life and cultures create ongoing workplace conflicts (Abdulahi, 2023). These systemic issues with racism and gender bias will keep African American women from experiencing success in their careers the way men have been able to stifling creativity and innovation (Abdulahi, 2023).

Many view institutions of higher education as welcoming to women. Even though progress has been made regarding access for women, it has not always been parallel to that of

campus student populations (Gause, 2020). Many claim that all are welcome and aim to focus on being equitable for their students yet lack providing the same opportunities for African American women (Gause, 2020). As African American women move up the ladder into leadership roles, they face resistance which leads many to decide not to seek higher positions (Gause, 2020). African American women choosing not to pursue these types of positions only keeps the status quo going of white women and white men only in academia. They do not have to contend with the obsessive amounts or types of issues African American women face (Gause, 2020).

White women are also more likely to have received help from other women to help them advance their careers while African American women have not (Corley, 2020). In addition, white women are more likely to not offer any assistance to their African American co-workers (Showunmi, 2023).

White privilege is still a major hinderance to African American women advancing while working in higher education. It is validated every time an African American woman is passed over by a white male or female who is less qualified and lacks experience (Gause, 2020). To combat this issue institutions of higher education must make the conscious effort to invest in African American women as leaders for their institutions (Gause, 2020). Efforts must be made to create and grow diverse leadership that is reflective of goals the institution has made for itself (Gause, 2020).

African American women in leadership roles aide colleges and universities by their ability to identify systemic issues such as prejudice and privilege creating a more equal employment dynamic decreasing the college's power over the process (Gause, 2020). There must be variety in an institution's approach to cultivating new leaders. Incorporation of succession

management strategies for the purpose of cultivating African American women as leaders will help colleges and universities develop diverse administrators (Gause, 2020).

Chapter 3: Methods

It is rare that stories of African American women working in higher education and their experiences with racism have been shared. Many African American women hold entry to mid-level positions and do not attempt to obtain positions of higher status due to racism they have faced. This study will attempt to gain a better understanding as to the reasons behind this viewpoint and how those who have succeeded manage to cope.

Originally, my research was going to consist of case studies involving African American women working in higher education and the experiences they have had with racism. However, I changed my methodology from the case study method due to not receiving enough participant responses. The methodology I have chosen to utilize is autoethnography while still focusing on African American women career experiences with racism as academic professionals in Higher Education. Autoethnography is a qualitative research method that utilizes self-reflection and personal experience to explore cultural social occurrences (Simply Psychology, 2025). The research paper will also incorporate vignettes or stories from my own firsthand experiences that I have had as an African American woman involving racist encounters in the workplace. In addition, artifacts that I created will be included. The artifacts serve as a reflection of me as an individual. The items also present a clear representation of the mood, climate, or space I was in at that time the vignettes occurred. My artifacts serve as a culmination of my academic career which I began as an art major, receiving my first degree, a BA in Art.

Theoretical Framing

Transformative Learning Theory involves how people apply received and perceived information. The concept involves how one's interpretation of experiences affects one's view of the world (Naughton, 2010). As individuals we all have had experiences that changed our view on life or situations. It is these experiences that help us formulate our ideas on life and how we interact with others. We develop our views and feelings towards people and world events based on our own firsthand experiences in life. Each of us has had our own unique journey. No two lives are the same.

Dr. Jack Mezirow developed the Transformative Learning Theory. Dr. Mezirow developed the theory after studying adult learners who had returned to college after taking several years off. He discovered that when they returned, they had rearranged their way of thinking (Naughton, 2010). Previous knowledge gained coupled with new knowledge learned aided those students in the re-examination of their previous education and training. While re-evaluating their educational experience the adult learners being studied also reevaluated their previous views on experiences they had and changed their perspective. Their new view of life and its experience and change in perspective surrounding it caused students to examine their world view and change their views on it too (Naughton, 2010).

Educational institutions wanting to incorporate Transformative Learning Theory into their campus culture must be prepared for both the positive and negative outcomes that employees may experience. Doing so will require campus administrators or consultants to guide employees through the 10-stage process where they will teach employees how to become more aware and transformative individuals (Fleming, 2018).

Stage one is Experiencing a disorientating dilemma. During this stage some African

American women in this study may have experienced a disorientating dilemma. A person has experienced an event that has upended everything as they know it. Their belief in something or someone has been broken. They become disappointed and reexamine their values and beliefs. An unexpected situation they were placed in or a life altering event pushes them forward causing a transformation and evaluation of their value systems (Fleming, 2018).

In stage two, an individual will reflect upon current values and beliefs. They begin to reexamine current and past events that have occurred and compare them. A participant begins to ponder the life events that have brought them to this moment. As they reflect on occurrences of the past and present the experiences have provided them with outcomes, both favorable and unfavorable, that have shaped their lives. The process can be an emotional one exposing fear that may bring about buried feelings with which they have never dealt with (Fleming, 2018).

Critically assessing present assumptions occurs at stage three. At this stage, an individual begins to take a more in-depth look at systems and ideals they once swore by. A participant questions the validity of opinions once held and determines their worth. They must decipher if their opinions and beliefs coincide with their current value systems or keep them from advancing as individuals (Fleming, 2018).

Stage four involves recognizing shared experiences. During this stage, an individual may have trouble with managing the new knowledge they have gained. Having to re-evaluate their beliefs and question what they originally thought was right can be challenging. It is during this time that a person can reach out to their mentor or peers to discuss what they are experiencing. By doing so they will learn that they are not alone. They will see that their peers are also having trouble with information they have recently come across and how they will incorporate it into their life and or work. Friends and family may or may not agree with the participants' opinion

about what they are experiencing or way of thinking. In the end though, they will see that they are not alone and that there are others out there who are experiencing the same challenges (Fleming, 2018).

Exploring options for new roles, relationships and actions is stage five in the transformational process. A person can now look at information learned and where they can incorporate it into their work or home activities. Now that they have been exposed to diverse solutions for coping, they want to decide how and where they will utilize it. It is during this time they may overcome their fear of tackling a challenging issue (Fleming, 2018).

At stage six an individual can plan their course of action. After evaluating ideals, beliefs, and values, a person can go into the next phase of the transformational process with confidence. They can create a course of action that will keep them on their path to a successful transformational person who has become more aware of who they are as an individual and what they believe in. Finally, they can begin to see themselves complete their transformative process (Fleming, 2018).

In stage seven, the individual continues acquiring knowledge. Continued information gathering and education must go on. The person continues the path of transformation by continued development and exposure to skills, terms, and experiences that will foster better communication (Fleming, 2018).

Stage eight involves trying out a new role, relationship, or behavior. A person practices applying knowledge learned from situations and other fact-finding sessions. Exposure to innovative ideas and theories are no longer just being read about but put in motion. A participant can see for themselves what works for them and what does not while still working towards being transformative (Fleming, 2018).

In stage nine, building competence and confidence in the new role, relationship or behavior is the focus. The participants continue to utilize what they have learned and apply it to the area or areas they wish to see transformed (Fleming, 2018).

Finally, in stage ten there is reintegration. The participants are utilizing new practices they have learned by incorporating them into their everyday life. Their views surrounding the world, events, and critical issues may have changed, but they are now capable of expressing a more well-rounded and transformed opinion (Fleming, 2018).

Transformative Learning Theory can be an important teaching tool. First it encourages diversity. Colleges and universities learn how to be more sensitive and open to those with varying viewpoints than their own. College campuses can incorporate goals and objectives that explore the cultures of employees. Exposure to different opinions also encourages diversity by allowing participants, faculty and staff to learn how each other sees the world and lives in it.

Another pro of transformative learning is discourse (Fleming, 2018). Faculty and staff properly exchange views without it turning ugly. They are allowed to discuss one another's views on events and cultural values and beliefs. It allows for better understanding as to who their peers are and who they are as individuals. It also lends itself to the sharing of ideas that may be beneficial to others by providing insight into ideas that have not been explored. Individuals, faculty and staff can compare their views with others and formulate innovative ideas or courses of action for solving problems (Fleming, 2018).

Critical thinking and problem-solving skills are used in the transformative learning process. This pro aids in sharpening soft skills that employers today see as a must have to be successful on the job.

Researchers are debating the direction and arguments for Transformative Learning Theory. They are challenging the process and or outcome of individuals and communities. Discourse states how there is constant focus on growth and positive habits of people. There is the assumption that all are improving themselves as people and their actions after meaningful instruction (Naughton, 2010).

Literature on Transformative Learning Theory suggests further exploration of the topic is needed. There can be unintentionally negative outcomes due to world events (Naughton, 2010). The disorientating dilemma of the theory brings up emotions triggered by negative world events (Naughton, 2010). Events such as the assassination attempt of president, Donald Trump or the last presidential campaign and election can trigger emotions and expose feelings that can have a negative impact on society.

Adults re-examining their priorities may become more tolerant of racism and ethnic cleansing for the purpose of patriotism. Events such as 9/11 and the Holocaust were examples of disorientating dilemmas (Naughton, 2010). Such events had a negative impact on communities. 9/11 contributed to the unfair targeting and persecution of Muslim Americans. Citizens and government agencies were ok with this mistreatment such as torture tactics because it was on behalf of the country and patriotism (Naughton, 2010).

Current discourse also puts focus on world events such as the Holocaust and how it was orchestrated by trusted people in the community who had received some sort of formal college education (Naughton, 2010). The discourse highlights how the atrocities of the Holocaust were performed by educated individuals who should have known better. Trained engineers-built gas chambers while nurses poisoned children. It also sheds light on studies utilizing Transformative Learning Theory and how they did not include people from non-formal backgrounds

(Naughton, 2010).

In addition, very few individual or societal transformations have been analyzed and included in current literature on the topic. Discourse around the dark side of the Transformative Learning Theory has placed a cloud of suspicion around education (Naughton, 2010). Are behaviors exhibited during the world's most evil and tragic periods taught or reinforced somehow? The intent of Transformative Learning Theory is not to teach how to harbor ill will towards others. However, the theory can bring about negative feelings if not properly addressed.

When we focus primarily on positive transformative experiences, we devalue meaningful human experiences that were negative. We take away the opportunity for those human feelings and emotions to be validated and explored (Naughton, 2010). Acknowledgement of those feelings from people who have experienced tragedy or witnessed horrific events and the effects of those events warrant being studied (Naughton, 2010). An avenue or forum should be readily available for people to express their transformative feelings that are negative. Feelings left unexplored may manifest itself if left unreleased in other ways. People not being able to express their feelings in those moments may lead them down a path of unintentional evil, ill will, or harm (Naughton, 2010).

The takeaway from these events should be used to educate others and future generations. It is imperative that society understands the significance of events and those leading up to them that may have influenced people to develop negative feelings. How society chooses to address people who have experienced these events is important. It lets those affected know that their feelings matter and are valuable. We want to learn now what can be done and how to address these feelings and issues moving forward. We should not wait for the next tragedy or study to

occur. There is enough evidence written in the discourse surrounding the dark side of Transformative Learning Theory. Evidence can be studied and researched to develop strategies for combating potential harm in the future.

The COVID-19 Pandemic was a disorientating dilemma that everyone around the world experienced. People everywhere are still recovering and dealing with issues stemming from the pandemic's effects. All one must do is turn on the tv and they will see evidence of this in the news. Someone somewhere is attacking people or shooting at people for no apparent reason. Whether it was individuals' mental health or countries' GDP, we were all affected by it in some way.

Experiences due to COVID 19 were transformative. However, many of these experiences were not positive ones. We were forced to quickly adapt and deal with numerous transitions and tragedies that were never-ending. It was as if we were being hit with one wave after the next and could not help but drown at some point. Those who managed to survive or barely kept their heads above water are still in shock that the pandemic occurred.

Feelings from unspeakable tragedies and horror continue to be left unchecked by society. This could potentially lead to the creation of a generation of people who lack empathy for people in the future facing tragedy or demanding situations. It would be naïve of us to believe that at the end of a Transformative Learning study or experience that a participant will always conclude on a positive note. Published discourse states otherwise (Fleming, 2018).

Discourse about the theory discusses how it can be utilized to manipulate people or to educate them (Naughton, 2010). We want to be on the right side of the theory even when it comes to educating individuals. We do not want to be seen as manipulators of the process for the

purposes of getting what we want. It should be used as a tool to help learners advocate for themselves and a better future. We all hope that their aim is to progress as an individual is positive and that they be prepared that it may not always be.

As more researchers continue to study transformative learning there will be discovery of opposing effects on individuals or groups that are less than positive. The findings will expose negative feelings, ill will, or harm producing thoughts in individuals. The outcomes also highlight the importance of further research and discourse that needs to continue regarding the utilization of the Transformational Learning Theory (Naughton, 2010). Previous studies and results may have elicited positive findings. However, a closer look at previous study designs may need to be evaluated for the purpose of uncovering how Dr. Mezirow, the originator of the theory, always managed to conclude his studies with positive outcomes.

The current consensus among researchers of the theory to ignore further introspection of the theory that may be negative is worrisome (Naughton, 2010). We must have more open dialogue and discourse surrounding the theory and its findings (Naughton, 2010). Continued discussion will aid us in future discoveries and signs to look for in those individuals or groups who are out to do harm to humanity.

Chapter 4

Personal Reflections

“Who do I turn to for support?” -Vignette 1



Artifact 1 – Mom’s Comfort Food – Good source of support.

As I have progressed through my academic career I have faced many challenges. During those times I would seek support and guidance from those who I thought would have been a caring ear. These individuals had been employed with the college system several years.

However, I did not get the type of support I thought I would. I recall one conversation where I discussed my frustration with the lack of administrator support with an ongoing situation I was experiencing. This individual’s response to me was “I don’t know why you want to be in a leadership role when you know how they are.” This

response bothered me because as an employee with years of experience their response was condescending and lacked concern. If you are aware of an issue you should want to address, it or make the necessary changes to improve your workplace and those around you. I attribute our college’s having high turnover due to such administrators who go unchecked by those around them and are allowed to get away with their behavior.

“Just tell them what they want to hear” – Vignette 2



Artifact 2 - Feeling Shattered

Another experience involved me working with a program that helped students gain on the job training. The program lead would promote those around them who were not African American. They often would lead you to believe that they would keep you in mind and just say “Just apply for the positions” as they would come open. I never expected to be given a position, but I wanted an opportunity to interview so that I could speak on my behalf for myself. This individual would never allow me the chance to interview for positions that would come open in our division. Finally, I recalled one incident when a position came open that I had applied for and had heard from others that interviews were being conducted even though the position had not yet closed. When this individual was asked about the position, they seemed surprised that I was aware of interviews and claimed that they did not know I had applied even though they were listed as the hiring manager. The very next day I received a call to interview for the position. I was told that it was the first round and that they were moving quickly to fill the position and wanted to know how soon I could interview. Within the next couple of days, I was interviewed by two staff members over Zoom who said that they would be conducting a second round of interviews, and I would be contacted if I was one of the finalists. I never received a call. In another incident within this same division, I was near the end of my fiscal year for my position’s life cycle and was about to be laid off. I once again expressed interest in another position within

the division that had become available. Once again, I was told to apply but did not receive a call to interview. I was told I either could stay in the position I was in, get laid off, or be moved to a lateral position at another campus that served a predominantly black community. It was as if they were getting rid of me in a roundabout way. They even stated that they were “covering their ass” because they knew they had “did me wrong” when it came to the position, due to what they knew I went through with my then immediate supervisor at that time. In a previous incident I had reported to them that my immediate supervisor would call me in the middle of the night rambling, with slurred speech and talking about how they felt the current program lead did not like them and was going to fire them. I told the program lead that I had been documenting what had been taking place and turned it in to them. They then said that it was great and that they would use it to get rid of my immediate supervisor.

“You still work here?” – Vignette 3



Artifact 3 – Unseen and Unheard

In another position I served in I assisted with overseeing items for programs. In this position I was responsible for ensuring that programs ordered items that were vital to their programs being successful to draw in students. It was important that the programs were current and up to date with the latest technology so that they were keeping up with employer standards and training needs. Students were attracted to the programs because we offered the latest in training technology and equipment that employers look for. In the beginning of my role things

started off fine. But as time went on the department experienced some personnel and

reorganization changes. My first immediate supervisor would belittle me in meetings. This individual would make disparaging comments in response to my feedback that I would provide that they would ask for. During one incident we were in a meeting that was taking place over Zoom. We discussed the roles and responsibilities of the team and how information was being disseminated within the department. I mentioned that I had not been made aware of or included in emails about upcoming events that would require our attendance or department support. It was at this time that my immediate supervisor stated that they did not know I was still a part of the department. The comment was rude because they saw me often. Their office was in another building, but they did visit our area often because they were our immediate supervisor. As my immediate supervisor, they would be the first to know if I was no longer an employee. When the meeting ended, my coworkers were upset by their remarks and asked me if I knew what that was all about. My response was that I did not. However, this was just one example of the constant slights I would receive from them. There were many other incidents that occurred while I worked in the department. Some days the whole department would get up and leave. On their way out they would have to pass by my office, and I was quite visible due to my location. But time after time, everyone would just get up and leave. No one would mention where they were going, why, and when they might return. This behavior was rude and not inclusive. I mentioned a few times that the office was not inclusive, and everyone would just stop and stare, but no one would say that they would try to do better or keep me informed. These occurrences were intentional and designed to not be inclusive. They also made me look bad and as if I did not want to participate in the group. If they wanted to include me in the group or make me feel as if I was a part of the team they could have easily done so.

“Hair we go again” – Vignette 4



Artifact 4 – More than Hair

“I don’t like her hair!” said a co-worker. Sometimes we would visit campus events that would take place. One day they noticed a black woman who had long braids with blonde highlights running through. My co-worker commented on how they could not stand her hair. They wanted to know why she did not comb her hair. Why was it like that and that it was messy. I listened to their comments as we continued on our way. A couple of days later we were going to another event and ran into the same woman. Once again, my co-worker begins their rant about the woman’s hair. It was at this moment that I stopped and had to have a conversation with them. I told them that the comments they were making were offensive and

that they did not know what caring for black hair entails. I also told them that black women are held to a different standard when it comes to our hair. Many black women wear their hair straight to “fit in” or be what is considered presentable to the higher ups or promotable. These hair styles although may be considered presentable to the powers that be are harmful to black women. More black women are now opting to wear natural hairstyles due to the harmful chemicals that have been found in many of the products they use on their hair. The natural hairstyles that are preferred by many of us better lends itself to the natural texture of our hair.

“Hair we go again, Pt. 2” – Vignette 5



Artifact 5 – Hair Fixation

I also wore my hair braided. I recall one time when I was wearing my hair in what is called the bohemian box braid style. The style incorporates loose ringlet curls within each braid. I had gotten my hair braided in a different style over that weekend and debuted at work that Monday. When I walked into the office my co-workers commented on my hair. Many mentioned that they thought the style was pretty and that they liked my braids. As I passed by a co-worker’s office, they motioned for me to come into their office. When I went in, they mentioned how they liked my hair and that it “Looked much better” than the previous style. They also made a point to place emphasis on “much better” and wanted to make sure

that I know. I said thanks and walked out. The comment was offensive and caught me off guard. However, I heard them loud and clear. They preferred the new braid style to the old one because the hair was straight and neat in their eyes. It was visually pleasing and comfortable for them to be around and look at.

“No respect” – Vignette 6

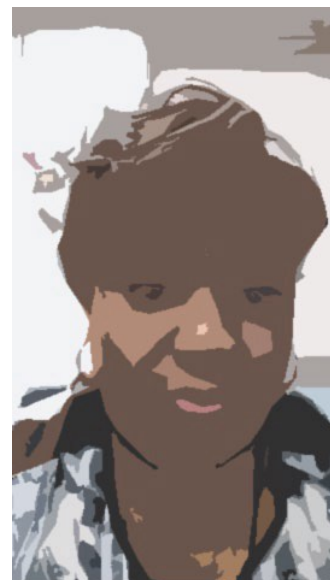


Artifact 6 – No Black girl

I was recently promoted and was working at a new campus. I worked with a team of staff members who I supervise. I had noticed that one member of the team would make faces whenever I spoke or gave a directive. This individual did not want to do anything that I would assign them to do. Finally, this individual became increasingly difficult to work with. I discussed the matter with my immediate supervisor who then set up a meeting with both of us to discuss the issue. After the meeting was over the supervisor looked at me and said, “It clearly shows that the does not want to take direction from you because you are black.” I just smiled and nodded my head. I had already come to that conclusion long before we met to discuss the situation. Not much was done to resolve the issue. I continued to do my job, and they did theirs. I was careful how I approached the individual and documented additional occurrences as they happened.

“You don’t need a master’s degree to work here!” – Vignette 7

During this time, I would collaborate with faculty and would keep them abreast of any changes by attending meetings or sending out emails keeping them informed of any changes that would affect how we served students. In my signature line I would include the letters MA for my Master of Art degree. Many were bothered by my level of education. They often told me to my face that it did not take a master’s degree to do my job and that they did not need me to be over them. Majority of the faculty retired from the military. At no



Artifact 7 – You are just a Black woman

point in time was I ever their supervisor. I only oversaw an office that would assist students who wanted to attend classes at the campus. I was often called to the office of a faculty lead who would proceed to yell at me about my education and say “MA, what is that?” “What does it stand for?” “Is it for Medical Assistant?” and I responded “No” “It’s for my Master of Arts degree in Management.” They then yelled, “master’s degree, what do you need that for?” “You don’t need that degree to work out here!” I told them that at the time when I applied for the position, I did. It was a requirement. They then proceeded to say that I was a spy. A plant put at the campus by administration to spy on them and the other faculty members. This occurred quite a few more times with this faculty lead. One day the faculty lead sent out an email which included all the campus administrators and higher ups. In the email they complained that I had stopped communicating with them and had not been to their office to fill them in on upcoming event details. It was at this point where I responded to their email by stating that they were correct that I had not been by their office because there was no need for me to take their continued sexist, racist, and belittling comments. I then hit the REPLY ALL button and waited. It only took a couple of minutes, but I instantly received email responses from VP’s and president. I then received a phone call and was told that three of the higher ups would be out to the campus immediately. I was asked to write up what had been occurring. They were aware of this faculty person’s behavior and were trying to get rid of them but had been unable to successfully do so until what had occurred with me. He did not return the next semester.

“The Holocaust and Slavery never happened” – Vignette 8



Artifact 8 – Say What Now?

While employed in this same position our campus held an event that celebrated Black History Month. My team was working at a table where you would spin a wheel and get a free prize, there was free food and other giveaways. As I was standing and talking with members of my team a supervisor of another area who I often went to lunch with walked up and said, “I don’t understand why we have to do this stuff.”

“The Holocaust and Slavery never happened!”

You could have heard a pin drop. Everyone in

the immediate area overheard them and was stunned by their comment. I responded to them and said, “Yes, it did happen, and your comment is a disgrace to all those people who went through it and or died.” I walked away in shock. I could not believe what I heard, nor did I think that this day in age someone working in education would say something like that. Even today, I still get approached by staff who were left dumb founded by the comment. They stop me and say, “Do you remember the time when X said that The Holocaust and Slavery never happened?” followed by them shaking their heads in disbelief and then saying, “I can’t believe they said that.” I respond, “Me either.”

“Thanks for your support” – Vignette 9



Artifact 9 – Pat on the back?

I often heard and was told by other staff members that I did not know what I was doing. They would question my authority, skills, and ability to do my job. It is sad that I was not given adequate support by my superiors, but I still turned out to be an excellent supervisor and leader. Many of my subordinates who reported to me used me as an example of the type of leader they wanted to be while obtaining their graduate degree. Others also went on to be supervisors themselves. When areas needed someone to fill in,

they always selected from my team. That was the ultimate compliment. No one would tell me to my face, but I knew that I was and am a competent, professional, and fair leader.

“You don’t belong here” – Vignette 10



Artifact 10 – Cracked up

“Do you belong in this building?” “I don’t think you’re in the right building.” “I don’t think you’re in the right place.” “You don’t belong here.” I had just been hired to work in the administrative offices at one of the campuses, which was quite prestigious. During my first week on the job, I encountered this individual on my way to the elevator. I immediately recognized them as being personnel to one of the higher ups. We stepped on to the elevator. They proceeded to press the button to the 2nd floor which was on the same floor as I

was going to. They then turned to me and asked, “Where are you going?” I responded to the “To the 2nd floor.” They then responded “Oh no, you must be mistaken. You have the wrong building. You don’t belong here.” I replied “No, I don’t think so. I work here and I report to X’s office.” The person then looked me up and down and said “Hmmm, ok.” I was clearly wearing my employee ID which was in plain sight for them to see. This behavior went on for weeks. You would have thought they would have gotten used to seeing me EVERYDAY after the first week or two. Fast forward to the COVID 19 outbreak and the Black Lives Matter movement. I was still employed at this same campus. It was during the peak of COVID 19 and George Floyd had been murdered. People across the United States had begun to protest the treatment of minorities by police along with women’s rights which started the Me Too movement. The upper management had directed our management to reach out to staff members to see how we were doing and especially the black staff. I received a call from my supervisor, and they explained that they wanted to check in on me and see how I was doing considering recent events that had occurred. I told them about my experience with the person on the elevator and they were in total shock. My supervisor was upset that I had not told them sooner and that they would address the matter. They then apologized and said that it was unacceptable that I had been treated that way.

“The jokes on you” – Vignette 11

In another incident that occurred while I was working in this same office I often helped with events. I did everything from contracts and ensured the talent arrived on time and was comfortable. It was during one of these events that I made a comment about something that had occurred which was affecting the black community. My co-worker then turned to me and said “Wow, you



Artifact 11 – Wow, really?

all (as in black people) can never get a break!” And busted out in laughter. These are the slights that black women must deal with daily when working with their co-workers. There is a lack of concern or empathy from others at times that rears its ugly head. People think that what we are experiencing or going through daily is funny. They are not realizing that this is why there is higher incidence in the black community of diabetes, high blood pressure, and other diseases which are greatly affected by stress. The situations that we encounter daily in our community can also lead to post traumatic stress disorder and anxiety. Harassment by the police in our own communities, health care disparities, unfair housing and lending practices on top of mistreatment on the job does not make being black in America a simple life.

“Who Do You Think You are?” – Vignette 12



Artifact 12 – Walking on eggshells

In yet another incident my co-worker was angered that I was “talking” to a friend of theirs one day. X wanted to know why I was talking to their friend and what we were talking about. I thought X was kidding, but I quickly found out when X said the following: The supervisor and I are good friends. P and I go out for drinks quite often and we talk about things. I understood exactly what X meant and stopped “talking” to their friend. It also helped to create a divide between my supervisor and I because I wasn’t sure if I could trust them.

While working in this same office I was not given badge access. The claim was because I was part-time. I could not come through the front door. I had to enter through the back door. I was then closed off from the office on the other side. I had to knock to gain entrance. The office provided free coffee and snacks to the public and staff however, whenever I reached for a

creamer or snack item I would be scolded or hollered at. One day things finally came to a head, and I had a talk with my immediate supervisor who claimed they didn't know all of this was going on in the office. I finally received electronic badge access into the office and was allowed to enter the office through the front door. In addition, I was allowed to "eat" any of the snacks because I was staff. By then it was too late. The damage was done. For a long time, I refrained from eating anything in the office. I always made sure I had my own food and snacks. Even after all that the team was still very cliquish and would all get up to go to lunch together leaving me in the office alone. What they failed to understand was that I didn't mind that they were going to lunch together. I was made aware that we were not friends. The issue was being in an office alone that had three points of entry. That is a safety issue when being left alone. I began locking two of the doors, which was one in my area behind me. People would step off the elevator and walk straight into the office where I was located. Many times, these individuals were men. I would then have to escort them out and around to the front of the office to assist them. When my co-workers return from lunch, they would find the back-office door where I sat locked. They would get angry with me and say I was locking them out of the office. I would explain to them that this was not the case. For me it was a safety issue because I had several people walk in on me and that the front door and the main entrance were unlocked. It helped me control the point of entry for my safety and security.

Rationale and Significance

Due to the lack of responses for my case study method I then decided to go with Autoethnography. My rationale for choosing the Autoethnography method is to show how I have dealt with racism while working in higher education. My experiences are unique to myself and do not reflect the experiences of all African American women working in higher education, nor do I speak for them all. My autoethnography was written to offer perspective on how I have been treated and reflect upon my journey in this career field.

Role of the Researcher

As the researcher I have brought a unique perspective on this issue by providing a firsthand account of what happened to me. While employed in education I have served in many positions. All these positions have provided me with a unique set of experiences and interactions that are unparalleled. I have witnessed and experienced the unfiltered verbal assault by the public, staff, faculty, and administrators who thought no one was watching and or listening and that no one would dare speak on their behavior.

My role as the researcher is also to play as an initiator of open dialogue and continued discussion on the topic. It is an issue that is very prevalent yet spoken of in low voices and whispers. Many African Americans are still afraid to speak about it because of fear of retaliation or even being fired.

Limitations of the Study

This research study is limited due to it being from one person's perspective which is mine. The research study does not involve the collection of numerical data, but it does contain first-hand accounts and experiences. The first-hand accounts and experiences which involve the

collection of vignettes or personal reflections based on my life experiences will serve as the primary source of data. Photos taken by me will be placed within the vignettes to serve as Artifacts.

Definitions of Key Terminology

Autoethnography – is qualitative research method in which the researcher uses their own experiences and self-reflection to explore a cultural or social phenomenon (simplypsychology.com).

Black/African American – A person having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa (US Census Bureau, 2024).

DEI (Diversity Equity and Inclusion) - Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) refers to the principles aimed at fostering diverse environments, ensuring equitable treatment, and creating an inclusive culture within organizations and groups.

Intersectionality- in social theory, the interaction and cumulative effects of multiple forms of discrimination affecting the daily lives of individuals, particularly women of color. The term also refers more broadly to an intellectual framework for understanding how various aspects of individual identity, including race, gender, social class, and sexuality interact to create unique experiences of privilege or oppression (Kimberle Crenshaw on Intersectionality, More than Two Decades Later, 2017, June 8).

Racism – a belief or doctrine that inherent differences among the various human racial groups determine cultural or individual achievement, usually involving the idea that one's own race is superior and has the right to dominate others or that a particular racial group is inferior to the others (Adams et al., 2022).

Microaggressions – The everyday subtle intentional and often unintentional interactions or behaviors that communicate some sort of bias toward historically marginalized groups (Limbong, 2020).

Transformative Learning Theory – (TLT) Jack Mezirow, Founder, and American Sociologist. Best known for work in Adult Education. Transformative learning is the learning that takes place as a person forms and reforms this meaning. It has become a hot topic in adult education due to its involvement more than classroom learning and connects learning to the learner's own life. Mezirow believes that in today's world people must learn to make their own interpretations as opposed to listening to and acting on the beliefs and explanations of others. The goal of adult education is to facilitate this understanding rather than to provide it. The goal of transformative learning is to develop "autonomous thinking" (Mezirow, 1997).

For whom do I advocate?

I advocate for underserved, marginalized people denied access to basic services and protection or lack the know how to advocate for themselves such as the elderly, children, poor, and marginalized people of color. I am also an advocate for all who have experienced unjust treatment, or any sort of wrongful harm done to them based on race, sex, gender, and socio-economic background.

How does this relate to transformative education?

This research project relates to transformative education in many ways. Teaching the public along with colleges and universities how African American women are experiencing racism while working in higher education and its effects can be transformative. The issues addressed in this research paper open the topic up for discussion. The extra attention given to the topic and exposure will inspire individuals to want to learn more. Those who are interested in the topic will gain further knowledge through research. The additional knowledge will transform their world view of how African American woman are being treated (Naughton, 2010). We can begin first by showing what is occurring and hopefully creating changes in basic assumptions within, thus changing people's minds. Projects are created where both college administrators, faculty, and staff are allowed to participate with one another, sharing ideas and viewpoints. During their sharing of ideas, they are exposed to and learn about one another and hear from African American women and what they have experienced. Finally, both colleges and universities can hear about various ways on how to become more welcoming and diverse through presentations and seminars highlighting creating a more diverse and inclusive working environment for African American women.

There are additional areas of focus where a more transformative educational experience can occur. They are:

- Colleges and universities are divided on how to combat racism on their campuses. Polls and questionnaires could be utilized to gather information from college faculty and staff towards African American women.

- Another exercise or study could be developed where faculty and staff from varying backgrounds are grouped together and discuss the assumptions and stereotypes of one another. What is fact? What is fiction?
- Have faculty and staff participate in focus groups that look at the problems of racism towards African American women and how to begin reframing their view or perceptions of what that is.
- Open dialogue and discussion to understand the social and economic views that are hindering change and attitudes on college campuses.
- Make African American women aware of support groups that are actively engaged around the world trying hard to bring about change on campus.
- What steps can be taken to build trust on college campuses for African American women with administrators, faculty, and staff? Focus Group, what would it look like?

The Road to College Presidency

Academia has been and remains a predominantly white male space (Crooks, 2024). In addition, most college presidents are still older white males (CCD, 2023). It was not created for people of color or African American women. Higher education was meant for white people (Crooks, 2024). Most institutions of higher education have systems and practices in place that need to be updated. African American women are employed in systems that were not designed for their success (Crooks, 2024). Even though African Americans make up 13.4% of the U.S. population, they only represent 6% of faculty at public and private institutions (Crooks, 2024).

Often university faculty and administrators offer attractive incentives in the beginning to lure African American women to work at their institutions. They often present themselves as being aligned with diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives that attract African American women in the beginning only to discover that they themselves have become entangled in institutionalize practices that are difficult to change (Crooks, 2024).

Many times, African American women are the first or the “only” one in their work environment (Crooks, 2024). The support for them is limited if any at all (Crooks, 2024). They are left with no existing foundation or guidance that would explain to them how to navigate and prosper in their challenging work environment (Crooks, 2024). It is imperative for institutions of higher education to employ African American women. Having African American women as members of the leadership team brings additional points of view creating a more inclusive work environment and work dynamic open to change (Crooks, 2024).

African American women also contribute another layer or perspective to the academic landscape. The United States is now in a period where complex issues such as recovery from

COVID-19, social justice challenges, changing trends in demographics, and a lack of public trust in Higher ed institutions require examination from a new set of eyes (Dembicki, 2023).

Universities would benefit from having the experiences and knowledge of African American women administrators to access and provide a voice for those from diverse or marginalized backgrounds (Crooks, 2024). Diverse leadership will be key to addressing ongoing challenges and new opportunities colleges and universities will face (Dembicki, 2023).

For those African American women who aspire to be college presidents, the ACE (American Council on Education) survey findings indicated that there are many roads that can be taken instead of the more traditional routes. The ACE survey stated that both white and African American women took their path to presidency by going the faculty or academic career route (Dembicki, 2023). The ACE (American Council on Education) survey findings also indicated that other routes were taken to the top spot which could possibly aid in diversity (Dembicki, 2023).

A college president's study conducted by ACE states that the average college president age now is 60 compared to 61.7 in 2016 (Dembicki, 2023). Compared to previous surveys, the age has gotten younger. In addition, the amount of time being reported for serving in their role as president had decreased 2.6 years from 2016 to an average of 5.9 years and 5.3 years for those serving as president at a junior college (Dembicki, 2023). The survey also shows that African American women are newer to their positions as president with having only 4.4 years on the job while national average for women in general is 5.4 years even though it is down from 5.8 years in 2016 (Dembicki, 2023). Of those surveyed, many plan to retire within the next 5 years and do not plan to seek another position. Women planning to step down from their president positions

will create opportunity for advancement for some African American women and have an impact on diversity at college campuses around the country (Dembicki, 2023).

African American women are also held to higher expectations whether it's based on race, service, or being the first for their community (Crooks, 2024). They are often the sole mentor knowledge base for all things black or students of color in need of a role model (Crooks, 2024).

African American women are up against unique challenges that may impede their ability to advance. There are barriers in place due to systems and policies that already exist (Crooks, 2024). In addition, each college or university has its own campus politics at play. African American women are not included which hinders their chances to advance. Even though African American women are seen as strong they are also portrayed as angry or weak which are stereotypes that can have damaging implications. Quite commonly the implication is that of being labeled an angry black woman (Crooks, 2024).

There are many obligations that African American women working in higher education are up against. Issues with mental health and imposter syndrome are often topics of discussion on social media and community sites. Some African American women working in higher education have been drawn to suicide due to unfair expectations and demands (Crooks, 2024).

The hostility that African American women face while working in higher education can cause irreparable damage. Many face isolation and miss opportunities for advancement of funding for projects (Aya, 2024) Struggles with depression, thoughts of suicide or just feeling physically ill are all attributed to having to report to hostile work environments (Aya, 2024). African American women being seen as strong and resilient often had the adverse effect on their

mental and physical health (Aya, 2024). All these negative experiences create dire consequences such as poor mental health, cancer, shorter life expectancy and other health impairing symptoms (Aya, 2024).

The ACE (American Council on Education) Survey of College Presidents took a closer look at their family responsibilities. They did a more in-depth study of women presidents. The study revealed that many of them have Family Responsibilities in addition to being a college president (Dembicki, 2025). 29% of African American women compared to Hispanic at 21%, or white women at 22%, were more than likely to have that responsibility. Others are caring for aging parents (Dembicki, 2025).

The Dismantling of DEI

On June 25, 2021, President Joe Biden issued Executive Order 14035 which was created to aide in advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion which included accessibility within the federal government. The order focused on federal employment discrimination, systemic bias, and combating of gender inequality (*More to the Movement | Explore | Shall Not Be Denied: Women Fight for the Vote | Exhibitions at the Library of Congress | Library of Congress, n.d.*) The Executive Order required the Office of Personnel Management to immediately create a Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Accessibility plan. Executive offices in the government were also required to create a DEIA plan and designate a Diversity and Inclusion Officer or DIO (*More to the Movement | Explore | Shall Not Be Denied: Women Fight for the Vote | Exhibitions at the Library of Congress | Library of Congress, n.d.*).

On January 20, 2025, newly elected United States President, Donald J. Trump, not long after assuming office began dismantling all programs that were associated with or had anything to do with DEI, also known as Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (The White House, 2025).

Government websites, college programs, K-12 school systems along with countless educational

programs were put on notice. Strict instructions were given to all businesses and educational entities to get rid of all DEI or diversity, equity, and inclusion hiring practices or programs if they wanted to continue to receive federal dollars under the Trump administration (Wilson, 2025).

The DEI Executive Order issued by President Trump is titled “Ending Radical and Wasteful Government DEI Programs and Preferences.” President Trump and his administration have made it clear. He does not like anything about DEI. President Trump has gone on to label former President Biden’s DEI programs as public waste and shameful discrimination (Wilson, 2025). Detractors of DEI call the programs discriminatory against white people, specifically white men, and does not mention what the true meaning is behind DEI and why it was developed (Wilson, 2025).

Dismantling DEI comes with consequences and weakens Civil Rights Protections. The order issued by President Trump has had a sweeping effect on minority women especially African American women. It also has had a profound effect on members of the LGBTQIA community (Wilson, 2025). In the wake of these recent changes and those unforeseen and yet to come, what should be done to secure the advancements made by these communities. African American women working in higher education is another group that has fallen victim to these new restrictions put in place by the federal government. How do they now maneuver in an environment where they may no longer be accepted or allowed in? These restrictions now create another hurdle for African American women to go through in the workplace.

Summary

Enrollment numbers for African American women is higher than other ethnic groups (Chavda, 2024). Representation is needed now to make sure to keep the enrollment numbers up

and reflective of college students enrolled on college campuses. 6% of all faculty in colleges and universities are African American (Bloomberg, 2024). However, of that 6% total of full time African American faculty, only 4% are African American women (Attridge, 2025).

Overall, enrollment numbers have gradually decreased for the past ten years nationwide. There are one million fewer young men in college today compared to only two hundred thousand women. Census data shows that men who in the past represented 47% of enrollment back in 2011 were now down to 44% in 2023 (Fry, 2023). The decline in enrollment of young males 18 to 24 years of age is due to male high school graduates not enrolling. Numbers for both young men and women are down. When you factor in race and ethnicity there is an increase by gender that becomes more apparent (Fry, 2023).

Young women are more likely to be enrolled in college than young men (Parker, 2021). While those women 25 and older are more likely than men to have a four-year degree (Parker, 2021). As the economy and labor force has grown, so has the educational attainment of women (Parker, 2021). African American women earn nearly two-thirds of all bachelor's degrees awarded to African Americans. They earn 10 percent of all master's degrees and 60 percent of doctorates (Black Women Students Far Outnumber Black Men – Proquest, n. d.). Department of Education data shows African American women making up 63.6 percent of all enrollments for African Americans (Black Women Students Far Outnumber Black Men – Proquest, n. d.).

The gender gap between African American men and women may present cause for concern in the future. African American women are outnumbering African American males at colleges and universities (Black Women Students Far Outnumber Black Men – Proquest, n. d.). This increase in enrollment will affect all aspects of education ranging from graduate schools,

professional positions and leadership positions (Black Women Students Far Outnumber Black Men – Proquest, n. d.).

College campuses administrative leaders should reflect this incoming dynamic by employing more African American women. The increased enrollment numbers of African American women in higher ed also highlights the importance of education being realized.

Colleges and universities can institute changes on their perspective campus. Steps can be gradual or incremental and or sweeping if they know how to incorporate changes without any push back. Instilling change must also be deliberate and intentional (Bloomberg, 2024). Faculty, staff and the student body must see that the institution is willing to put forth an effort to bring about serious change (Bloomberg, 2024).

Institutions of higher ed can improve their treatment of African American women by incorporating the following and creating a more inclusive work environment (Jackson, 2019). Provide encouragement and professional support by showing as an institution that you believe in your African American women staff and administrators. Make sure that they are aware of how you value them, the work that they do, and their contributions to the institution. Allow them opportunities to complete career development and skills enhancing training. Investing in them as individuals shows that you believe in them as future leaders of the institution (Jackson, 2019).

Create connections to mentorship. Aid African American women who are wanting to advance with other higher ed administrative professionals (Jackson, 2019). Introduce them to administrators who can expose them to campus culture and advancement opportunities (Jackson, 2019).

Be intentional with actions that deconstruct good old boy systemic policies and practices designed to create barriers to advancement (Jackson, 2019). Also, when an issue has been identified, take the necessary steps to address it and then put it to rest immediately to show the institution's seriousness about changing past practices (Jackson, 2019). Create and incorporate opportunities and career pathways to advancement by creating mentoring programs and cross training employees, which builds skills and networking opportunities (Wingfield, 2024).

There is a current belief or myth in the country that portrays DEI as a handout for unworthy individuals (James, 2025). Many DEI initiatives are designed to create a fairer process for hiring candidates (ACLU, 2025). They are not discriminatory but serve as an integral part to creating environments where all have a chance to be successful while barriers to that success get addressed allowing opportunities for advancement (ACLU, 2025). However, the truth about DEI is that it has been beneficial to the bottom line of businesses and institutions of higher education (James, 2025). The murder of George Floyd in 2020 temporarily created a cultural shift towards creating more inclusive environments on the job and college campuses across the country. DEI initiatives came out of a necessity to quell the anger of people of color in the wake of George Floyd's murder (James, 2025).

Between 2020 – 2024 the world went through the COVID pandemic, the murder of George Floyd, social movements such as Me Too, and Black Lives Matter including civil unrest nationwide (James, 2025). The momentum for DEI initiatives was short lived. Slowly companies and education institutions began to slowly pull back on restructuring programs and their funding (James, 2025).

Programs that supported DEI initiatives had been performing under the guise of budget cuts and program restructuring (James, 2025). Businesses are being forced to re-evaluate their

roles in the commitment to diversity. They are looking to colleges and universities to partner with and develop new ways to recruit diverse talent (Branch, 2024). Colleges and universities will play a key role in educating and mentoring those future students who will become members of the workforce, and configuration of new workplace expectations (Branch, 2024).

Organizations who relied on DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) practices in the past are currently redesigning and rebranding them so that they are more on topic of being the Diversity of thought, region or opinion to avoid any backlash on the topic (Wingfield, 2024). They are accomplishing this by relying on mandatory practices on diversity or the offering of workshops presented by consultants. African Americans and their co-workers of color who serve in leadership roles find these workshops and trainings uneventful (Wingfield, 2024). It appears that now institutions have gone to offering them as a way of showing that they offered the service and not as something that would be impactful or beneficial to their employees (Wingfield, 2024). Proponents against DEI say that it gives African Americans an unfair advantage who are unqualified.

DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) practices have not been that impactful where they have influenced an unproportionate number of people from becoming employed (Wingfield, 2024). Researchers are aware of how African Americans still face hiring discrimination, wage inequality, hostile organizational cultures, and blocked routes to advancement for motivated, skilled, and qualified African Americans (Wingfield, 2024).

Statistics show that diversity benefits organizations who choose to use it. It increases profits and innovation, recruitment, and employee satisfaction. The data also shows very clearly how diversity benefits organizations. When there is more racial and gender diversity among leaders there is more success and innovation (Wingfield, 2024). DEI is seen as a threat because

there is the potential to affect business earning potential and make an economic impact (James, 2025).

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MS Word was utilized for spelling and grammar check.

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