Project Title: Racialized Equity Labor: The Role of Black Women Student Leaders and Black Student Unions at Predominately White Institutions (PWI)

Project Recipient: Juana D. Hollingsworth, Morgan State University, juhol10@morgan.edu

Project Year: 2023-2024

Research Context: This study investigates the leadership experiences of Black women in Black Student Union (BSU) organizations at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). Black Student Unions serve as vital spaces fostering belonging, cultural affirmation, and advocacy for Black students. However, the unique racialized and gendered labor of Black women leading these spaces often remains underexplored.

Summary of Literature Review: The literature draws from key works such as Collins (2000) on Black Feminist Thought and Lerma et al. (2020) on Racialized Equity Labor, which provides a theoretical foundation for understanding the unique challenges Black women face in leadership roles. Black Student Unions are highlighted as critical counter spaces that provide emotional support, cultural affirmation, and opportunities for leadership development, particularly at PWIs where Black students often face systemic barriers such as racial microaggressions and institutional neglect (Allen, 2017; Kendi, 2012; Rogers, 2012).

Research by Strayhorn (2018) underscores the importance of a sense of belonging in higher education, which is often fostered within BSUs. However, Black women leaders in these spaces frequently navigate intersectional oppressions tied to race and gender, as documented by Harper

and Quaye (2007) and Domingue (2015). These leaders often bear the brunt of labor associated with maintaining culturally affirming spaces, including advocacy, event planning, and mentorship, often without adequate institutional recognition or support.

Further studies reveal that such racialized and gendered labor contributes to emotional exhaustion, academic challenges, and mental health struggles (Hamilton & Nielsen, 2021). The literature also critiques institutions for co-opting the successes of BSUs to enhance diversity metrics while failing to invest in the resources necessary to sustain them (Patton, 2006; Tichavakunda, 2021). This systemic imbalance underscores the need for structural interventions to support Black women leaders in higher education.

Significance of the Study: This research underscores the vital role of BSUs in enhancing the campus experience for Black students and the disproportionate labor Black women leaders undertake to sustain these spaces. The study seeks to provide actionable insights for higher education practitioners to support Black student leaders effectively, ensuring their contributions are recognized and supported while addressing the systemic inequities that necessitate their efforts.

Research Methods: This study employed a qualitative research design, using critical narrative inquiry to explore the lived experiences of Black women leaders in BSUs at four-year PWIs. The methodology centered on understanding how participants navigate leadership through the intersecting lenses of race and gender. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews lasting approximately 60 minutes were conducted with eight participants. These interviews focused on exploring pathways to leadership, the impact of their identities on their roles, and the labor involved in sustaining BSUs. Below is a descriptive table of the participants of this study:

Table 2

Overview of Study Narrators

Pseudonym	Institution Location	Private or Public	Major	Current or Past Student	Leadership Year & Position
Carla	Iowa, USA	Public	Communication	Current	Multi-Position, Multi-Year
Mildred	Pennsylvania, USA	Public	Communication	Current	Multi-Position, Multi-Year
Taresha	Pennsylvania, USA	Private	Education	Current	Multi-Position, Multi-Year
Karlene	Ohio, USA	Public	Communication	Current	Multi-Position, Multi-Year
Tanya	Indiana, USA	Public	Veterinary Sciences	Current	Multi-Position, Multi-Year
Karen	Iowa, USA	Private	Criminal Justice	Past	President, 2020
Hazel	Missouri, USA	Public	Health Science	Past	Multi-Position, Multi-Year
Felecia	Iowa, USA	Public	Psychology	Past	Multi-Position, Multi-Year

Data were analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns, themes, and insights. The analysis was grounded in Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2000) and Racialized Equity Labor (Lerma et al., 2020) to ensure an intersectional lens was applied throughout. Strategies such as member-checking and iterative coding enhanced the reliability and validity of the findings. This approach allowed for a robust exploration of the systemic inequities faced by participants and how these influence their leadership experiences.

Key Findings:

1. **BSUs as Essential Counterspaces:**

   ○ Black women leaders perceive BSUs as safe havens that counteract the racialized hostility of PWI environments. These spaces foster emotional and social support, contributing to participants' persistence in college.

   ○ Leaders highlighted that without BSU involvement, their retention and overall college experience would have been negatively impacted.

2. **Intersectional Challenges in Leadership:**

   ○ The dual identities of race and gender shape the leadership experiences of Black women in BSUs. Participants often face heightened visibility and responsibility, with expectations to represent their entire community.

   ○ Leaders reported frequent microaggressions, institutional marginalization, and a lack of recognition for their unpaid labor.

3. **Emotional and Physical Toll of Racialized Equity Labor:**

   ○ Black women leaders frequently engage in Racialized Equity Labor (REL), performing tasks such as advocacy, mentorship, and programming without institutional support or compensation.

   ○ This labor significantly impacts their mental health, academic performance, and personal time, as it requires balancing these responsibilities with academic and social demands.

4. **Lack of Institutional Support:**

- Participants noted a lack of financial resources and administrative support for BSUs. They often had to navigate bureaucratic barriers and advocate for recognition and funding on their own.
- Despite the importance of BSUs in fostering diversity, institutions often co-opt these student-led initiatives without adequately supporting them.

Implications: This study suggests that institutions should focus on creating more effective support structures to enhance campus activities and leadership experiences. Beyond DEI initiatives, specific operational and logistical improvements are needed to empower student leaders. For example, institutions should establish clear pathways for student organizations to access financial support, dedicated mentorship, and infrastructure for leadership development. Recognizing the contributions of Black women leaders in BSUs as integral to campus life can catalyze a broader culture of inclusion and support.

Institutions should invest in streamlining the administrative processes for campus activities, reducing bureaucratic obstacles that often fall disproportionately on student leaders. Additionally, creating mechanisms for regular feedback and collaboration between student organizations and university administrators can ensure that programming and activities are responsive to student needs. Expanding the scope of campus activities to promote cross-cultural engagement and collaboration will further strengthen the campus community and reduce the reliance on affinity-based organizations to fill institutional gaps.

Ensuring that these measures are sustainable and well-integrated into campus operations will alleviate the emotional and logistical burden placed on Black women leaders while fostering a more equitable and engaging environment for all students.

2. **For Practice:**

   ○ Campus administrators should provide consistent funding and dedicated advisors for BSUs to alleviate the resource burdens on student leaders.

   ○ Institutions must cultivate environments that proactively address racism and sexism, reducing the need for Black women leaders to shoulder the burden of advocacy and inclusivity.

3. **For Future Research:**

   ○ Further studies should explore sustainable leadership models that prevent burnout among Black student leaders.

   ○ Research should examine innovative campus activity models that integrate BSU programming into broader campus life to enhance inclusivity and engagement for all students.

   ○ Investigate the role of campus activities in fostering cross-cultural collaborations and reducing the burden on affinity-based organizations like BSUs.

Recommendations:

1. **Enhanced Financial Support:**

   ● Allocate consistent budgets for BSUs, ensuring they have access to venues, programming funds, and professional development opportunities for leaders.

   ● Introduce stipends or scholarships for BSU leaders to recognize their labor and alleviate financial stress. These stipends could be incorporated as part of the university's student leadership programs, ensuring equitable distribution across all student organizations. Institutions can tie stipends to specific leadership roles, such as president or treasurer, or offer need-based grants to low-income leaders

who often participate at lower levels than their more affluent peers to ensure transparency and fairness.

- Partner with external organizations or alumni networks to fund these stipends, thereby building stronger relationships between the university and external stakeholders while alleviating the financial burden on the institution.

- Develop criteria for stipend allocation that reflect both the time commitment and the emotional labor involved in maintaining and growing BSU chapters. This approach will ensure that stipends are meaningful and proportional to the leaders' contributions.

2. **Operational Improvements:**
   - Develop streamlined processes for funding requests and event planning to minimize administrative burdens on student leaders.
   - Create a centralized support system where student organizations can access resources, guidance, and training for effective campus programming that is also culturally responsive.

3. **Leadership Development:**
   - Implement workshops and training programs focusing on leadership skills, strategic planning, and conflict resolution tailored for student leaders.
   - Facilitate mentorship programs connecting current leaders with alumni and professional networks to provide guidance and career insights.
   - Create an emerging leadership program to cultivate and prepare upcoming leaders aspiring to be the president or vice president of an organization.
   - Consider offering academic credit for leadership experiences

4. **Cross-Cultural Engagement:**

   ○ Encourage collaboration between affinity-based organizations and broader student groups to create more inclusive campus events that also alleviate the burden of robust events, such as Black History Month for many BSUs.

   ○ Promote initiatives that highlight diverse cultural contributions to campus life, fostering understanding and mutual respect.

5. **Mental Health, Wellness, and Support Services:**

   ○ Establish wellness initiatives specifically tailored for Black student leaders to address stress, the emotional labor of equity work, and mental health needs as they navigate hostile campus environments, encounter layered oppression, and face increased mental health concerns.

   ○ Provide access to culturally competent counseling services and peer support networks, ensuring that student leaders have the resources to manage their well-being.

6. **Capacity Building for Inclusive Leadership:**

   ○ Provide ongoing training for campus staff and administration to address intersectional challenges and support Black student leaders effectively.

   ○ Implement workshops focused on allyship and anti-racism for the broader campus community to reduce microaggressions and create an inclusive environment.

7. **Collaborative Partnerships:**

   ○ Foster stronger relationships between BSUs and university departments to create institutional allies for programming, mentorship, and advocacy.

○   Partner with alumni and external organizations to create mentorship pipelines and networking opportunities for Black women leaders.

Conclusion: The leadership roles that Black women occupy in BSUs are crucial for the success and belonging of Black students at PWIs. However, these roles come with significant challenges that require systemic and institutional interventions. By recognizing and addressing the unique labor of Black women leaders, institutions can foster a more inclusive, supportive, and equitable campus climate that benefits the entire student body.

References

Allen, B. (2017, Jul 26). *3 meaningful lessons I learned from being in a Black student union*. Huffington Post. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/lessons-from-being-in-Black-student-union_b_5978a16f e4b0940189700e0e

Collins P. H. (2000). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.

Domingue, A.D. (2015) "Our leaders are just we ourself": Black women college student leaders' experiences with oppression and sources of nourishment on a predominantly white college campus. *Equity & Excellence in Education, 48*(3), 454-472. doi.org/10.1080/10665684.2015.1056713

Hamilton, L. T., Nielsen, K., & Lerma, V. (2023). "Diversity is a corporate plan": racialized equity labor among university employees. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, *46*(6), 1204-1226.

Kendi, I. X. (2012). The Black campus movement: Black students and the racial reconstitution of higher education, 1965–1972. Springer.

Lerma, V., L. T. Hamilton, and K. Nielsen. (2020). Racialized equity labor: University

    appropriation, and student resistance. Social Problems, 67(2), 286–303.

Patton, L. D. (2006). The voice of reason: A qualitative examination of Black student

    perceptions of Black culture centers. *Journal of College Student Development, 47*(6),

    628-646.

Quaye, S. J., Harper, S. R., & Pendakur, S. L. (Eds.). (2020). Student engagement in higher

    education: theoretical perspectives and practical approaches for diverse populations

    (Third). Routledge

Rogers, I. (2008). The Marginalization of the Black Campus Movement. Journal of Social

    History, 42 (1), 175–82. http://www.jstor.org/stable/25096603.

Strayhorn, T. (2018). College students' sense of belonging: A key to educational success for all

    (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.

Tichavakunda, A.A. (2021). Black campus life: The worlds Black students make at a historically

    white institution. Albany: State University of New York (SUNY) Press.