Chapter 2

Architects of Change in the Ivory Tower:
Recasting the Role of Black Women Engaged in Higher Education Professional Counterspaces

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ABSTRACT

Although it is critical to foreground discussions about the historical vestiges of racist and sexist ideologies that are embedded in the experiences of contemporary Black women in the academy, it is equally important to highlight the role these women are playing in challenging the existence of these structures. There are a growing number of Black women student affairs administrators and faculty engaging in professional counterspaces as a strategy to re-architect the reality of their lives in the academy. Two such programs in the U.S., the African American Women’s Summit (AAWS) and the Sisters of the Academy Research BootCamp (RBC), were created by, for, and about Black women employed in higher education to redress the problematic environments these women encounter in academia. In this chapter, the authors explore how tenets of Black feminist thought (BFT) and collective movement activism are integral to the AAWS and RBC and clarify the role Black women student affairs administrators and faculty engaged in these professional counterspaces are playing as architects of change in the ivory tower.

INTRODUCTION

The vast majority of existing literature about Black women employed in higher education focuses on the micro-aggressive conditions that characterize their experiences in academia. Much of the existing evidence concludes that the underrepresentation of Black women administrators and faculty is to blame for their significantly diminished access to mentoring relationships; stifled tenure, promotion, and advancement rates; and contributes to an overall sense of marginalization, isolation, and overwork. Discussions of this research often lead to broadly conceptualized implications for practice that are overly simplistic and unrealistic, given the systemic nature of the oppression Black women in higher education face. Although it is critical to foreground discussions about the historical vestiges of racist and sexist ideologies that are embedded in the experiences of contemporary Black women in the academy, it is equally important to highlight the role these women are playing in challenging the existence of these structures.

A growing number of Black women administrators and faculty are engaging in professional counterspaces as a strategy to re-architect their experiences in the academy. Two professional development programs in the U.S., the African American Women’s Summit (AAWS or the “Summit”) and the Sisters of the Academy (SOTA) Research BootCamp (RBC or the “BootCamp”), were created by, for, and about Black women employed in higher education to redress the problematic environments these women encounter in academia. Both of these professional counterspaces are contemporary applications of Patricia Hill Collins’ (1990) Black feminist thought (BFT). Although BFT has been cited as a powerful framework to contextualize the experiences and contributions of Black women in higher education, the potential of this theoretical perspective as an action-oriented site of resistance for contemporary Black women student affairs administrators and faculty has not been fully explored.

Current leadership education literature focused on sociopolitical change decenters individual-leader development, and rather emphasizes the criticality of developing and acknowledging the collective leadership capacity of groups (Dugan, Turman, & Torrez, 2015). Identifying the hallmarks of collective movement activism and recasting individual heroized leaders as key movement architects provides a framework that can be used to recognize and leverage the potential of marginalized groups’ power to resist oppression and impact systemic change. Situating this emphasis on collective movement activism in the context of BFT, we propose the professional counterspaces discussed in this chapter represent an opportunity to recast the role Black women are playing in redressing the problematic environment that exists in the ivory tower.
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