

Fall 2013

# Climbing the Ladder to Leadership and Other (Un) told Stories of Black Women Administrators in Higher Education

Marian Muldrow

Georgia Southern University, mm09266@georgiasouthern.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/jiasgag>

 Part of the [Disability and Equity in Education Commons](#), [Gender and Sexuality Commons](#), [Higher Education Commons](#), and the [Higher Education Administration Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Muldrow, Marian, "Climbing the Ladder to Leadership and Other (Un) told Stories of Black Women Administrators in Higher Education" (2013). *Journal of the International Association for the Study of the Global Achievement Gap*. 6.  
<https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/jiasgag/6>

This book is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Digital Commons@Georgia Southern. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of the International Association for the Study of the Global Achievement Gap by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@Georgia Southern. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@georgiasouthern.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@georgiasouthern.edu).

**Climbing the Ladder to Leadership and Other (Un) told Stories of  
Black Women Administrators in Higher Education**

**Marian Muldrow**

**Abstract**

*This narrative reflection presented vacillates between an exploration of the historical journey of the Black women and a modern day Black women who is “persisting in the journey toward self-definition...” (Collins, 2000, p. 121). This history eludes to the underrepresentation of Black women that originates in colleges and universities, which results in the underrepresentation in higher education administration. This narrative and interpretative review considers race and highlights factors and barriers that perpetuate the glass ceiling in higher education for Black women.*

**My Current Lens**

*I struggle with writing the why behind the sexism, racism, and classism; the why I cannot meet the standards of a profession for which I have attempted to perfect for the past decade. I struggle with whether or not to straighten my own kinky coils in attempt to set straight the injustice I see in this just world of glass ceilings and white walls. I fear writing a tale of oppression of the black female and how to approach such a topic in a room of white peers as I watch eyes roll. I want to blend in while silently crying out to be seen. My dual identity is fighting against the force of justifying four college degrees and countless mediocre essays that I have graded over the past ten years while being a slave to the students who I cannot fail because they are my clients, my paycheck, my job, my place. At the same time, I have heard a whip crack my future and shatter my hope each time I am told “You look so young” or “You work so well with certain populations... Don’t you want to teach forever?” Forever is almost here.*

*Race slithers into every area of life, so it comes as no surprise to find its cold, bitter fingers tapping its way into the workplace taunting the ideology that skills and experience are enough to climb the ladder of leadership. Michelle Johnson (2011) considers being black a full time job, but I want the intellectual positioning that I have attempted to carve out for my entire career be the full time job. Similar to Pat Mora (1986), I live in a doorway between two rooms - one being settling in where I am and the other being breaking the fragile glass ceiling of barriers in higher education administration. As educators, scholars, and administrators, we must cleanse ourselves of the foul odor ... and inhospitable peers who represent “the other” and embrace Alice Walker's (1983) lavender while we stroll through our mothers gardens....*

## Introduction

Moses (1989) explains how even though Black women have been a part of higher education for more than a century, however, they have not been a very evident part of the research and literature of higher education. As such, racism and sexism in higher education is rarely examined and less so through the lens of a Black woman. Rochelle Brock (2005/2010) eloquently described the plight of Black women's career in higher education as each of us search for a personal place, a personal identity when she stated:

Throughout my teaching career I have agonized over how to better understand myself and use this to more effectively teach my students. And as I work for this understanding, I question, *Where do I begin my journey?* I have been searching for the connection between the personal me as a Black woman and the pedagogical me as a Black woman teacher (p. xv).

We can apply this same ideology to Black women and other diverse ethnic/minority women administrators in higher education. As we continue to search along the fringes and margins, maybe we will end up defining and finding our personal place alongside our replica other, by giving racism, classism, and sexism a place in the understanding. Administrators must let go of the notion that Black men and women have faced the same experiences (Moses, 1989) or that Black women have faced similar experiences as White women who are second in majority for college administrators. Women of diverse ethnic/minority backgrounds in higher education must consider that each of us can “attempt to break that silence and bridge some of those differences between us, for it is not difference which immobilizes us, but silence. And there are so many silences to be broken” (Lorde, 1984/2007, p. 44) in order to retain and promote the best among us. With this analogy, I find that it is often necessary to go back and learn from the past, identify issues, and create roadmaps for the future.

## Looking Back

Not just women, but all Black people were excluded from higher education institutions prior to the Civil War (Chamberlain, 1998). However, after the Civil War, the Morrill Act of 1862 and the Supplementary Act of 1890 included a clause that allowed Black people to receive some form of education. These two laws also permitted Black women to gain employment. As employment opportunities and educational gains improved, Oberlin College admitted women for the first; this was 200 years after the men became college educated (Chamberlain, 1988). Although White women were the first to attend Oberlin, Black women were admitted shortly afterwards and were allowed to graduate with degrees. Even though these women had to wait to explore learning in an higher educational setting, their empty places could be filled through learning; the incomplete place could be made whole (Brock, 2005/2010). Now, even another 200 plus years later, I too, have a problem with finding a place in higher education, that happy medium (Brock, 2005/2010) between where I am and where I want to be and where I am allowed.

Lucy Session was one of the first Black women to earn a degree from Oberlin College, which occurred in 1850. Twelve years later, Mary Jane Patterson earned a B. A. degree, which made her the first Black woman to hold a bachelor's degree in the United States of America (Littlefield, 1997). The influx of Black women in higher education did not simply end with obtaining degrees, but these Black women also became administrators. Black women have been administrators, but the numbers have risen ever so slowly over the past 150 years.

In 1869, Fanny Jackson Coppin was appointed the principal of the Institute for Colored youth in Philadelphia; she was the first Black woman to undertake such a task at any U.S. institution (Littlefield, 1997). Three years later, Josephine A. Silone Yates headed the Natural Sciences Department at Lincoln University in Jefferson City, Missouri (1997). This momentum, however, did not last.

The Black, educated woman became “the exception of the exceptions in that neither black nor white colleges wanted her” (Solomon, 1985, p. 76). This meant that not only was she marginalized, she was doubly so. As Zora Neale Hurston put it, “She had glossy leaves and bursting buds and she wanted to struggle with life but it seemed to elude her” (Hurston, 1937, p. 11). The Black woman didn't want to avoid the fight, start a fight, or fight a fight; she simply wanted to educate and be a positive agent of change for students. There came a point when the Black woman no longer wanted to use the basin to scrub the floors; instead, she wanted to wash her hands of the injustice of her former days and focus on the possibility of her latter. The misfortunes that were sent her way were a product of society, the environment, and factors beyond her control.

## **The Twentieth Century**

A rebirth of the quest of knowledge and advancement for Blacks resurfaced at the beginning of the twentieth century, which was credited to the Harlem Renaissance. Shortly before the Renaissance, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was organized in 1909 (NAACP, 2002). As a result of the NAACP and the Renaissance, Blacks moved to the north where they felt they would thrive and make gains in the arts, education, and employment. By 1920, Black women began to establish institutions as well as organizations solely for Black women and to promote gains in higher education. Bennett College, founded in 1926, became known as an institution for women (Littlefield, 1997) where Lucy Diggs Slowe held the first annual conference of deans and advisors to girls in Black schools; which led to the development of the Association of Deans of Women and Advisors to Girls in Negro Schools (1997).

With more Black women now obtaining advanced degrees from colleges, the number of Black women obtaining degrees outnumbered that of men (Noble, 1998). The academy that was once confining and led to feelings of isolation (Braxton 1989) was becoming more obtainable; however, it was not easy. In 1943, Mamie Phipps Clark became the first Black woman to earn a Ph. D. in Psychology from Columbia University (Littlefield, 1997). Five years later, Ada Louis had a case go to the Supreme Court, *Louis Sipuel v. Board of Regents*, in which the Supreme Court ordered the University of Oklahoma School of Law to admit Sipuel on the premise that the school could not withhold admission until a Black graduate school was created.

As the twentieth century progressed, Willa Player became the president of Bennett College in 1955, which made her the first Black college president while Autherine Lucy continued to fight to desegregate colleges (1997). The right for all students, regardless of race, to receive an education in public institutions occurred with the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954, which led to desegregated schools (Green, 1998). In addition, the Civil Right Movement of the 1960s resulted in more Black students and Black faculty (Green, 1998), both at slow and low numbers. The Equal Pay Act of 1963 was the first act that dealt with sex discrimination, which meant that men and women could not receive less pay for working the same job at the same institution; however, research suggests that, on average, men in Georgia, for example, make at least \$4,000 more than women within the same institutions. Titles VI and VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was enacted to end discrimination based on race, color, religion, national origin and sex, which meant the possibility of new opportunities for Black women in higher education (Noble, 1988). In the next decade, Elaine Jones became the first Black woman to graduate from the University of Virginia's School of Law and in the late 1970s Mary Francis Berry moved up the ranks until she become the chancellor of the University of Colorado in 1976 (Littlefield, 1997). The 1980s continued with an increase of Black women in higher education with Johnette Cole serving at Spelman University, Marian Wright Edelman was a member of the Spelman College Board of Trustees, and Niara Sudarkasa became the first Black woman administrator at Lincoln University (1997).

Though Black women made marks in higher education from the 1800s to the twentieth century, they were few in numbers but their impact was great. When looking at the overall structure of a college that serves thousands of students, the underrepresentation still exists. The lack of identity for the Black woman that began to develop during pre-Civil War America has birthed an almost invisible presence for Black women in higher education. The Invisible (Black) Woman: before she is completely gone, will the twenty-first century save her (Brock, 2005/2010)?

### **Looking Forward**

With the 21<sup>st</sup> century, many colleges and universities are predominately composed of women. White women are receiving the majority of degrees conferred, receiving the majority of undergraduate and graduate degrees awarded in the United States and closing in on men for the number of professional degrees earned each year. McCandless (2009) supports the notion that Black colleges and universities are the best option for Black women to advance in higher education. Ehrenberg (2004) suggests that having a mentor of a different gender or race can lead to opportunities that might not have be possible otherwise, on campus and after graduation.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Becks-Moody (2004) completed a study where she shadowed and interviewed ten Black women leaders in higher education to determine their experiences in higher education as leaders and the coping strategies they suggested. In her work, Becks-Moody suggests that further exploration of the south needs to occur to continue bringing the role

of Black women leaders to the attention of higher education. Such research would allow Black women to openly discuss their fears, challenges, and successes in the academic world. Becks-Moody insists that recruitment, retention, and promotion merits further exploration, *which I plan to do*. And lastly, the notion of professional development programs designed specifically with Black women in mind is needed.

*I sometimes want to cry when I think about how I am 31 years old and still trying to come to terms with who I am and what I want out of life. I hope, as I embark on my own doctoral degree, that being an administrator in higher education is my final stop or at least the capstone to some great pinnacle for my career. I have a desire to direct students down sound paths in their educational pursuits, develop programs that will benefit them, advise them, and just provide the best services possible for them. I want what I didn't receive, and maybe I have to travel my path alone in order to save thousands of other students.*

## References

- Becks-Moody, G. M. (2004). *African American women administrators in higher education: Exploring the challenges and experiences at Louisiana public colleges and Universities* (Doctoral dissertation, Louisiana State University).
- Braxton, J.M. (1989). *Black women writing autobiography: A tradition within a tradition*. Temple University Press: Philadelphia.
- Brock, R. (2005/2010). *Sista talk: The personal and the pedagogical*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Chamberlain, M. K. (1988). *Women in academe: Progress and prospects*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Cobb-Roberts, D., & Agosto, V. (2011). Underrepresented women in higher education: An overview. *Negro Educational Review*, 62/63(1-4), 7-11.
- Coleman, J. (1998, April 17-18). Barriers to career mobility/advancement by African-American and Caucasian female administrators in Minnesota organizations: A perception or reality? In *Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association*. Retrieved October 17, 2013.
- Concluding Remarks Regarding the Importance of a Racially Diverse Administrative Workforce. (2009). *ASHE Higher Education Report*, 35(3), 65.
- De Wet, C. B. (2010). Reaching critical mass: Women in faculty and administrative roles. *Forum on Public Policy: A Journal of the Oxford Round Table*, 6(2), 1.

- Dindoffer, T., Reid, B., & Freed, S. (2011). Women administrators in christian universities: Making family and career co-central. *Journal of Research on Christian Education*, 20(3), 281-308.
- Ehrenberg, R. G. (2004). The underrepresentation of minority faculty in higher education: Panel Discussion. *American Economic Review*, 94(2), 302-304. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1257/0002828041301470>
- Green, M. (1998). *Leaders for a new era: Strategies for higher education*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company.
- Hensel, N., (1991). *Realizing gender equality in higher education: The need to integrate work/family issues*. Association for the Study of Higher, E. n., ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education, W. C., & George Washington Univ., W. t. *1991 ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report 2*.
- Hurston, Z.N. (1937). *Their eyes were watching God*. New York, NY: Harper Perennial Modern Classics.
- Johnson, M. T. (2011). *Working while black: The black person's guide to success in the white workplace*. Chicago, IL: Lawrence Hill Books.
- Kamassah, S. (2010). Factors that enable women of south Asian and African descent to succeed in leadership positions in higher education. *College Quarterly*, 13(3), 1.
- Littlefield, V. (1997) Chronology. In Hine, D. C. (1997). *Facts of file encyclopedia of Black women in America: Education* (pp. 164-172). New York: Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data.
- McCandless, A. (2009). Stopping the "Flow of co-eds and other female spieces": A historical perspective on gender discrimination at southern (U.S.) colleges and universities. *Forum On Public Policy Online*, 2009(2).
- Meuth, J. A. (2009). An examination of the underrepresentation of African American faculty in Illinois institutions of higher education. Retrieved from <http://proquest.umi.com>.
- Monaghan, P. (2013). Her 2nd Bid to Be College's President Succeeds--10 Years Later. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 60(4), A21.
- Mora, P. (1986). *Borders*. Houston: Arte Público Press.
- Moses, Y. T. (1989). *Black women in academe: Issues and strategies*. Project on the Status and Education of Women. Association of American Colleges and Universities, Washington, D. C.

Murray-Johnson, K. K. (2013). Cultural (De)Coding and Racial Identity among Women of the African Diaspora in U.S. Adult Higher Education. *Adult Learning*, 24(2), 55-62.

NAACP (2002). NAACP timeline. Retrieved from:  
[http://www.naacp.org/past\\_future/naacptimeline.shtml](http://www.naacp.org/past_future/naacptimeline.shtml)

Patton, S. (2013). At the Ivies, It's still white at the top. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 59(39), A4-A12.

Sanders, C. J. (Ed.). (1995). *Living the intersection: Womanism and Afrocentrism in theology*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.

Sharpe, R., & Swinton, O. (2012). Beyond Anecdotes: A Quantitative Examination of Black Women in Academe. *Review of Black Political Economy*, 39(3), 341-352. doi:10.1007/s12114-012-9134-6

Turner, C. S. (2013). Advancing diversity in higher education. *Journal of Diversity In Higher Education*, 6(3), 155-157. doi:10.1037/a0034356

Walker, A. (1983). *In search of our mother's gardens: Womanist prose*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt Books.

Watkins, W. H. (2005). *Black protest thought and education*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.

*Marian Muldrow is an EdD student in Leadership, Technology, and Human Development in Higher Education at Georgia Southern University. She has worked as an English instructor for the past nine years. She also currently works at Chattahoochee Technical College where she serves on the Service Learning, Academic Affairs, and Student Academic Progress Appeals committees. Her work as an educator and creator of learning communities for African American women is featured in the Chronicle of Higher Education, and she has three published poems: "If Then," "Lipstick Jungle," and "Imitation of Allison Joseph." Muldrow has a published writing guide, A Quick Guide to Writing Essays and is editor of several publications including A Girl's Guide to Becoming Great by Rhonda Mincey and 30 Days to Change by Lacreasha Williams. Her research interests include examining barriers that limit Black women from advancement in higher education administration positions as well as the lack of preparation for instructors to teach fully online courses at the higher education level.*