Women of Color and the PhD: Experiences in Formal Graduate Support Programs

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Abstract
While there is a great deal of literature examining the experiences of undergraduate students of color in higher education, there is very little which explains the experiences of women of color in doctoral programs. This study aims to fill an empirical void in our understanding about how women of color doctoral students experience their graduate programs and how those experiences are impacted by being enrolled in formal support programs that address issues such as writing dissertations, applying to post-doctoral positions, and applying to faculty positions. We expected to learn which factors both institutional and environmental, are salient to doctoral students of colors’ decision-making process. A qualitative methods and a critical race feminism (CRF) theory was utilized to explore the processes by which women of color doctoral students construct the meaning of discriminating factors that hinder their experiences in graduate programs and the support that counteracts these actions by attending formal support programs geared towards doctoral students of color.

Key words: Women of color, doctoral students, graduate student support.

Introduction

While there is a great deal of literature examining the experiences of undergraduate students of color in higher education, there is very little which explains the experiences of women of color in doctoral programs. The current research relates to retention, recruitment, and campus environments (Astin, 1997; Fleming, 2002). Much of the research speaks to the experiences of one racial or ethnic group; however, very seldom does it separate gender. There is also a body of literature that describes racial and gender identity and its impacts on college socialization (Ellis, 2001; Lopez, 2005; Tierney, 1991). This particular information is beneficial for the background information needed to conduct a baseline analysis of women of color in doctoral programs. By baseline data we mean factors such as gender, race, campus climate, and socialization are all things that should be analyzed in the initial phase of understanding retention for women of color. After the effects of these factors are understood, scholars can begin to identify factors that would assist these women persist in academia. There is a substantial amount
of relational data with regards to women of color in academia, however; there is little research that describes the factors that are missing in these women’s lives (Beilock, Rydell, & McConnell, 2007; Terenzini, Cabrera, Colbeck, Bjorklund, & Parente, 2001). In order to better facilitate the success of women of color on predominantly White campuses, certain resources need to be provided. These resources include mentoring from another woman of color, advising from a person of color, tools on navigating doctoral programs, and resources for finding a career post graduation; all of which can be provided through formal support programs.

This study aims to fill an empirical void in our understanding about how women of color doctoral students experience their graduate programs and how those experiences are impacted by being enrolled in formal support programs that address issues such as writing dissertations, applying to post-doctoral positions, and applying to faculty positions. We expected to learn which factors both institutional and environmental, are salient to doctoral students of colors’ decision-making process. To address these issues, we used qualitative methods and a critical race feminism (CRF) theory to explore the processes by which women of color doctoral students construct the meaning of discriminating factors that hinder their experiences in graduate programs and the support that counteracts these actions by attending formal support programs geared towards doctoral students of color. CRF is a branch of Critical Race Theory (CRT) which was originally founded by legal scholars to bring understanding to issues of race and the judicial system (Ladson-Billings, 1998). CRF, in turn, brings to forth, specifically, issues of marginalization experienced by women of color. It also emphasizes an understanding of intersecting identities and that women of color experience racism and sexism together rather than exclusive of each other (Wing, 2003).

Factors, Resources, and Climate

Campus Climate

Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella, and Hagedorn (1999) have found that campus climate is important for the success and retention of students of color. A poor campus climate affects the ability of students of color to persist at much higher and negative rates than White students. For example, Black students are up to 20% more likely to drop out of college due to a hostile campus climate than are White students. Racism and prejudice experienced among students of color, especially on predominantly White campuses, can lead to a great deal of sociocultural and psychological stress. Cabrera et al., (1999) have found that racism and discrimination are sociocultural stresses that cause psychological stress which leads to maladjustment for many students of color. These stresses are unique to students of color in that White students do not experience the same type of stresses. This discrimination turns into feelings of not belonging on campus, which is then mirrored by poor academic performance. Scholars have found that a combination of mentoring, moral support, validation, and positive peer interactions are all necessary for the retention of students of color (Cabrera et al., 1999). Unlike Tinto’s (1997) theory of student retention, students need to be able to see themselves on campus. Tinto (1997) claims that students of color should leave behind their culture and assimilate into White norms (Tierney, 1999). Other scholars have found that student groups, mentors, and professors who identify as people of color are all crucial components for student retention (Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella, & Hagedorn, 1999).

Among the groups of people who are affected by negative campus climates are women. Drew and Work (1998) have found that women find college campuses to be continuously hostile
and unwelcoming. Women have found that gender discrimination is still alive in the classroom. They have found that the readings, class discussion, and opinions that are valued are often times androcentric. Women find that male students dominate classroom conversations, often times at the cost of other women being silenced. Women graduate students also report discrimination in their interactions with their advisors in comparison to male graduate students. Drew and Work (1998) found that women are not receiving the proper guidance and advice to navigate through graduate school. There are general feelings of gender oppression among women as a whole; however, there is a deeper level of oppression for women of color.

**Intersecting Identities**

Ellis (2001) has found that women of color in doctoral programs not only experience gender oppression but they are even further impacted by racism. Women of color experience negative interactions, such as racism and discrimination, due to their race in the classrooms and on campus. They are not provided research and teaching opportunities that are given to their White counterparts before it is offered, if ever, to them. Ellis (2001) states their interactions with advisors and mentors leave them unsupported and invalidated in that they do not receive proper guidance or are unable to build a support network. They have also found the environment of their departments has been unwelcoming and does not represent or support them by having faculty and staff of color. Finally, they have had poor experiences with peers, which have been shown to be an important factor in retention (Ellis, 2001).

**Availability of Resources**

Bair and Haworth (1999) have found that half of the doctoral students who enter a doctoral program actually complete their degree. There are several factors that lead to this lack of completion. Researchers have found that department culture, dissertation writing, employment, and financial factors are all reasons for doctoral students not completing their programs (Bair & Haworth, 1999).

Bair and Haworth (1999) state that students who had positive interactions and relationships with other students, faculty, and staff within their departments, were more likely to graduate. Furthermore, if the department culture was supportive of students in their research and program goals, students were more likely to persist. Overall satisfaction with courses and programs were beneficial to student success (Bair & Haworth, 1999).

Another factor that contributes to students leaving before graduation is their inability to finance their education. Bair and Haworth (1999) state that students often times work full-time or hold multiple jobs in order to be able to afford their doctoral programs. Being over-worked leads to quicker burn-out and lower retention rates. Departments that are able to provide their students with assistantships, fellowships, and scholarships are more likely to retain their students because students are then able to focus more on their course work, research, and ultimately dissertation (Bair & Haworth, 1999).

Learning to navigate through the dissertation process and completing the dissertation becomes overwhelming for many students; during this time advisors see a great number of students leave the program. The process can often times be tedious, frustrating, and confusing. Bair and Haworth (1999) have found that proper mentoring and support is needed for students to complete their degree. Working very limited hours, if at all, is helpful because it allows students
more time to focus on homework. However, this ties back into the lack of financial support, in that many doctoral students begin working full-time while they write their dissertation in order to make ends meet and burn out due to the demands of writing and working simultaneously (Bair & Haworth, 1999).

University of Denver formal graduate support program

The University of Denver (DU) National Summer Institute: Promoting Excellence in the Academy was founded in 2004 to address the issues of underrepresentation in the arenas of faculty of color and women in the academy. The Institute is hosted by Fernando Guzman and Bushra Aryan and is housed out of the Center for Multicultural Excellence (CME). Guzman invites exceptional doctoral students of color and women from institutions across the country to participate. Institute fellows have joined the program from Harvard, Stanford, Maryland, Arizona, University of Denver, Berkeley, UCLA, Cornell, Michigan, Columbia, Temple, Howard, and the University of Colorado at Boulder. The Institute fellows represent a variety of disciplines such as Engineering, Sociology, Higher Education, Psychology, Spanish, English, German, History, Library Information Science, Modern Thought and Literature, Human Communications, Social Work, Counseling Psychology, Business, and Communications. Upon arrival, the fellows enter a four-day workshop that addresses issues peculiar to doctoral programs, such as dissertation completion, resume and curriculum vitae building, becoming a faculty member, job talks, and salary negotiation strategies, publishing.

The current literature in higher education informs scholars about the possible issues that affect students of color in terms of retention and persistence. However, the literature does not give light to the importance of formal support programs or the experiences of women of color in formal support programs. By utilizing the University of Denver’s National Summer Institute, we were be able to collect data from women of color who were in the advanced stages of their PhD process and be able to determine what factors encouraged or hindered their success. We analyzed how formal support programs, such as the DU National Summer Institute, assisted women of color advance in the academy. Common themes, such as mentoring and advising, were pulled from data and compared to the literature on persistence, retention, and campus climate. These findings will add to the education literature in terms of the experiences of women of color in PhD programs. It will also offer suggestions as to how to create a better climate for women of color in PhD programs so that graduation rates will rise to meet the rates at which White women are graduating. Furthermore, we can determine what impact the absence of factors such as inclusive campus climates, social support, mentoring by another woman of color, and advising have on women of color in doctoral programs and the importance of having support programs to fulfill these needs.

Method

The purpose of this study was to describe the experiences of women of color in graduate programs and explore how those experiences are impacted by being enrolled in formal support programs that address issues such as writing dissertations, applying to post-doctoral positions, and applying to faculty positions. By utilizing the University of Denver’s National Summer Institute, we were be able to collect data from six women of color who are in the advanced stages of their PhD process and be able to determine what factors encouraged or hindered their success.
The subject population was women of color from the National Summer Institute. The former participants, known as fellows, of the institute were recruited via e-mail. Qualitative interviewing was used as the method of data collection in this study. The sample of interviewees was found by criterion sampling. Patton (2002) defines criterion sampling as using a sample which meets predetermined criteria characteristics. This particular sampling style was used because the population being studied was women of color, enrolled in doctoral programs, and had attended a formal support program; all predetermined criteria.

One hour long qualitative interviews with questions about their graduate school experiences such as advising, mentoring, peer-interactions, campus climate, program structure, and institution choice were held with each participant. The interview also included questions to gauge what role the DU National Summer Institute played in their graduate school success.

Prior to arrival to the Institute, fellows are asked to respond to a series of six questions. The data from these questions, the transcribed interviews, and the literature on student persistence, was used to examine the factors that have helped or hindered the success of women of color. The data provided by Institute fellows is particularly valuable because students must be in the second year of their doctoral program or in the dissertation-writing phase to be invited; therefore, the information they share is rich in data because their progress and time in the program has given them insight into what makes programs successful.

We were able to explore how formal support programs, such as the DU National Summer Institute, assist women of color advance in the academy. Common themes, such as mentoring and advising, were pulled from data and compared to the literature on persistence, retention, and campus climate. By only observing one formal support program, we are limited to the methods used at the Institute as a means of measuring factors that assist women of color in PhD programs. There are programs that use different types of workshops and resources to help their students and by only looking at the Institute; I am gauging beneficial factors only of one program, which is limiting.

Results

The qualitative analysis yielded two major themes that encompassed multiple sub-themes. The two themes were: 1) professional growth and capital; 2) changes brought forth by formal support programs. Within the first theme are the sub-categories: professional gains; and benefits of formal graduate support programs. Within the second theme are the sub-categories: personal and emotional support; lack of nurturing and supportive graduate school environments; and missing factors in PhD programs for women of color. The findings are delineated further below.

The first theme, professional growth and capital, resulted from women of color discussing what had changed in their life as a student as a result of attending the Institute. Two sub-categories were collapsed into this theme and both yielded answers from participants that shared both what they were missing within their program and what the Institute gave them to be able to grow both as a PhD student as well as a future professional in the academy. Professional growth and capital can be defined through several things within the data. In terms of professional gains, participants identified skills, tools, and other resources that contributed to their professional self-efficacy. Furthermore, the format of the question also exposes that these are resources that were missing from the participant’s graduate program; asking what has changed, what was missing, and what did you take away that you did not previously have. Examples of
these professional gains are mentorship, learning how to publish, networking, and learning how to negotiate a salary. The following quotes are examples of professional gains: “I learned that I have bargaining power and it’s important to prepare a job talk” and “I learned the importance of networking. Importance of how to selflessly promote—the art of promoting yourself. The negotiation of salary when your job searching. And I learned that you don’t settle, do your homework and know your worth.” These quotes also make apparent the benefits of attending a formal graduate support program.

The second theme, changes brought forth by formal support programs, encompasses several sub-categories. Those are personal and emotional support; lack of nurturing and supportive graduate school environments; and missing factors in PhD programs for women of color. Participants stated that there were supports that they needed in their graduate life to feel personally and emotionally supported such as mentorship, guidance, feeling welcome, being in a positive environment, and networking. The following quotes are representative of these women having gained personal and emotional support as a result of attending the Institute: “The biggest factor was that students all over the country are isolated. I learned that I am not the only one who is struggling”; “I have made a lot of friends and colleagues. I feel like I have a community of people of color pursuing PhD’s now”; and “It was empowering because I know I am not alone.”

The following factors were listed by the participants as relational factors that are needed for them to feel supported and nurtured in their graduate environments: welcoming atmosphere, mentorship, positive and supportive experiences. Many women stated that they did not feel they were provided these supports until they attended the Institute. The following quotes are examples: “I would say it was unpleasant. The academy isn’t designed to make women of color feel comfortable and safe. The courses, classrooms, professors, administrators, and campus doesn’t meet our needs and wasn’t designed with our needs in mind” and “The Institute introduced me to other students of color. It helped me to hear different perspectives from students in other disciplines and schools. It gave me and open-door, open-hearted welcome, support, connections. My program never gave me that!”

The final sub-category in the second theme brought forth the idea of motivational tools that were missing from the participants PhD programs and were given to them as a result of attending the Institute. Some of these tools included network community, possibilities to collaborate on work and publish, empowerment, positivity, support, feeling heard, feeling their work is valuable and important. The subsequent quotes represent this sub-category: “Institute was a gap filler. It was more than a supplement to my grad program. It actually taught me things that were missing from my program”; “It made me realize who I am as a person, my power and worth and that I don’t need to settle, ever”; and “It taught me how to get through it and be sane.”

**Discussion**

This study aimed to explore the experiences of women of color in doctoral programs and how these experiences are changed, enhanced, and informed through participation in formal graduate support programs. Throughout the interviews there were several isolating and marginalizing experiences that were shared from women of color as well as the feeling that accompanied these situations. Among these experiences and feelings were frustration, anger, isolation, lack of mentorship, and lack of advising. These experiences can be generalized within the population, across populations, as well as within the literature on women of color in academe.
It was apparent that all of these women shared feelings of frustration and anger with their experiences in graduate school. Their anger stemmed from feeling the weight of institutional racism and sexism. For example, a sign of racism is when these women feel that students of color are treated differently than White students. The repercussion of this type of experience is profound to the institution and the student because it is setting forth an image of how students will be treated when they graduate and enter the academy as professionals. Unfortunately, this can be a demoralizing experience and one that was countered by attending the Institute. These women come from different schools and different programs of study, one could generalize these feelings to the larger population of women of color in PhD programs that have not been to the Institute, they are feeling isolated as well and just as one woman said, “For me it was not having people I could talk to that were going through these same experiences”, their stories just have not been told yet. Ellis (2001) found that women of color within the academy experience both gender and race marginalization. Their experiences with sexism due to gender intersect with their experiences of racism due to their race (Wing, 2003). These interactions or microaggressions, daily subtle insults towards marginalized groups (Guzman, Trevino, Lubuguin, Aryan, 2010; Sue et. al, 2007), leave them unsupported and invalidated within the dominant discourse (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001).

The next feeling that surfaced across several of the interviews were those of isolation and being misunderstood. It appears that education becomes an isolating factor in multiple facets of the lives of women of color. In the academy these women are viewed as outsiders, therefore, they become isolated and alone on campus. Several of the women mentioned that when they are with their families they are also an outsider; as educated woman of color. In their home life there are no academic peers and scholars. However, on campus these same peers can be the cause of isolation. It is an isolation that is caused by the very individuals who should be in a supportive role in these women’s lives. They end up in constant negotiation in terms of managing isolation. One woman stated, “It has been very overwhelming, demanding, and lonely. It’s lonely even when there are people and support because you are the one going through it. Other people don’t understand what it is like or what it really feels like. I have sleepless nights, stress, and headaches.”

Finally, all of the women shared the need for positive advising and mentoring experiences. Each of the interviewees expressed a great deal of concern about their advisors, or lack thereof. It appears that some did not have a connection with an advisor at the beginning of their program and then grew relationships and others have known their advisors but did not feel they were receiving a beneficial amount of support or attention. The questions surrounding advising also triggered a great deal of conversation about mentoring. Several of the women expressed that they did not have a mentor and could not find any women of color to mentor them. A few of the women stated that they found advisors and mentors at the Institute. Clearly, there is a strong level of importance surrounding relationships. Relationships both in their programs and in their personal lives are valuable for their success within the academy.

Experiences within graduate programs are leaving women of color feeling unsupported, invalidated, and without guidance (Ellis, 2001; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001; Turner, 2002). Their poor relationships with advisors and mentors leave them behind academically as their White counterparts are invited to publish and pursue other professional opportunities. Furthermore, their lack of advisors and mentors of color not only lead to isolation, but also further away from opportunities to advance professionally (Ellis, 2001). Scholars (Bair & Haworth, 1999; Turner &
Thompson, 1993) found that students who have positive relationships with faculty, administrators, and peers are more likely to persist and graduate.

Ultimately, there are oppressive systems built into the academy and by attending formal support programs, such as the Institute, can provide navigational capital and overpower the daily microaggressions (Yosso, 2005). Navigational capital is defined by Yosso (2005) as the tools needed to navigate a system that has not been created with people of color in mind, in this case doctoral programs which have not been constructed with women of color in its framework. The Institute provides opportunities for women of color to connect with advisors or mentors that are unavailable within their programs, hence, helping them to deal with daily injustices through their newly obtained navigational capital.

Conclusion

The participants will benefit from the research because they will be able to share their experiences and their story. This can be a healing process and an empowering process to be heard and to have their accounts portrayed in the literature. Society will benefit from having this research when it is published and added to the literature in education. College administrators and professors will benefit from having information regarding the experiences of women of color in academe because it will support them in their pedagogical practices as well as their student support services. In addition, practitioners will be able to assess the importance and need of formal support programs for doctoral women of color. Value, depth, and much needed information will be provided to the academic community about these students. Further research is needed on the benefits of formal support programs and how these programs can be implemented on other campuses. Also, more research is needed on how to recruit and retain professional staff of color so that women of color can have mentors and advisors that support and understand them. This last set of research can provide guidelines for fixing the leaky pipeline and hopefully create a space for women of color in the academy.

References


