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“From Whence Cometh My Help?”:

Exploring Black Doctoral Student Persistence



Melanie M. Acosta, PhD, is an Assistant Professor of Elementary Education and Literacy at the University of Alabama. The aims of her scholarship are to improve the teaching and learning experiences of African American students and teachers through improved teaching and teacher education. Her work is featured in such journals as *Urban Education*, *The Urban Review*, and *African American Learners*. Prior to her work in higher education, Melanie was an elementary school teacher and a community organizer for a grassroots parent empowerment group.



Shaunté Duggins is an instructional designer for the Early Learning Florida Project with the Lastinger Center in the University of Florida's College of Education. Her research includes early literacy, teacher education, and professional development, particularly in high-poverty schools. She received her bachelor's in Early Childhood Education and taught in an inclusive high-poverty elementary school. Shaunté later earned a master's in Curriculum and Instruction and doctorate in Special Education with an emphasis on early literacy and teacher education from the University of Florida.



Thomas E. Moore, PhD, is a Manager for City Year Inc., in Dallas, Texas. City Year is an educational nonprofit organization designed to provide students in under performing schools with academic, behavioral and social-emotional support. In this capacity, he works with teachers, instructional coaches and administrators to create and implement classroom, grade-level and school wide interventions. His research objective is to improve educational experiences for African American students through the continued development of culturally relevant administrative practices.



Thomasenia Lott Adams, PhD, is the Associate Dean for Research and Faculty Development and professor of mathematics education in the College of Education at the University of Florida (UF). She is a member of the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics and engages in many professional activities in service to mathematics education. Dr. Adams is an accomplished conference presenter and facilitator of mathematics professional development and has an extensive list of book and journal publications. Dr. Adams received a bachelor of science in mathematics from South Carolina State College, a master of education and doctorate of philosophy from UF.



Bridgette G. Johnson is currently a doctoral candidate in the School of Special Education, School Psychology, and Early Childhood Studies at the University of Florida. Prior to entering her doctoral program at UF, she was an early childhood educator for seven years in Paterson, NJ, formerly an Abbott school district. Her interests include teacher efficacy, pertaining to teachers of students in the low-incidence population, inclusive education, assistive technology, and social justice in education. Currently, her research is focused on teacher self-efficacy as it pertains to teachers serving students with disabilities.

Melanie M. Acosta, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor, University of Alabama

Shaunté Duggins

Instructional Designer, University of Florida

Thomas E. Moore, Ph.D.

Manager, City Year Inc.

Thomasenia Lott Adams, Ph.D.

Associate Dean, University of Florida

Bridgette G. Johnson

Doctoral Candidate, University of Florida



The Highly Racialized Context of Higher Education Creates A Distinctive Doctoral Experience for Black Doctoral Students

The recent protest by Black students, student-athletes, and faculty at the University of Missouri is a blaring indicator of the tenuous state of race relations on college campuses nationwide. Students and faculty protested the university's lack of consideration and treatment of racial issues on campus, and they are not alone in their fight. Many Black students have similarly protested the lack of culturally diverse presence and voice in the daily happenings of college life, as well as race-related hate crimes and microaggressions on their respective college campuses. This is particularly the case for Black students attending predominantly White colleges (PWI) and is true for Black students pursuing doctoral degrees. Researchers found that Black doctoral students preparing for careers in higher education endure a particularized doctoral socialization experience based on their racial and cultural identification. Students reported difficulties in establishing mentoring relationships, securing adequate funding to support doctoral studies, frustrations with faculty who provided a lack of academic support related to research and academic writing, and feeling like an outsider. Black doctoral students also reported dealing with institutional and individual racism, such as cultural isolation and tokenism. This was manifested in experiences such as the expectation that students be the representative for their entire race or cultural group, lack of mentoring, and lack of diverse perspectives in the curriculum.

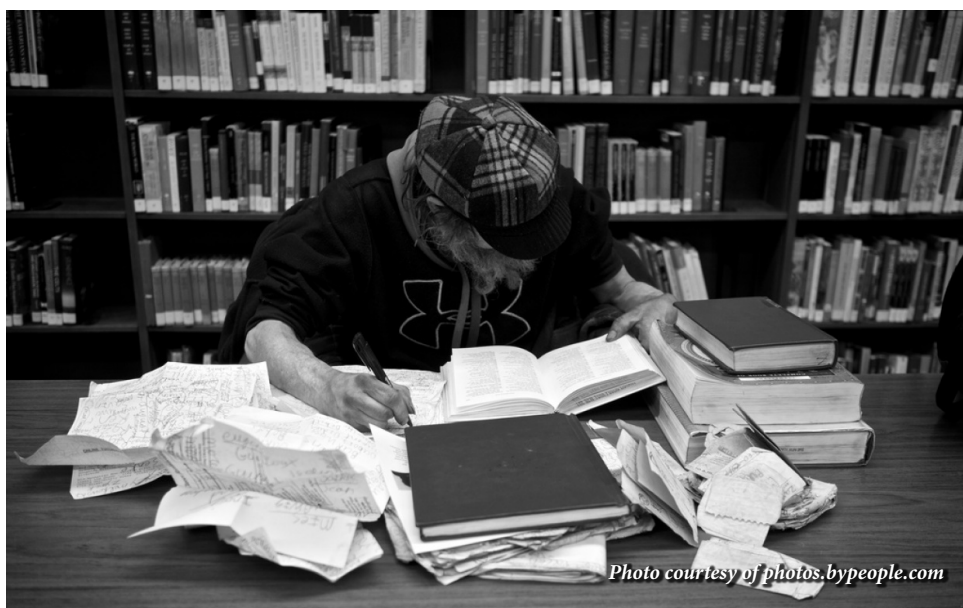
Black Doctoral Student Persistence: An Understudied, Yet Promising Approach to Providing Support

Despite this often racially hostile context, scores of Black graduate students are persisting and earning their PhDs. Researchers have identified factors such as intrinsic motivation, self-determination, and inner strength as contributing to Black doctoral students' persistence in their programs. However, the scope of these factors were unexplored in ways that connect the racialized context of the institution to culture-specific attributes like motivation and inner strength. Such an underemphasis heightens the seductive tendency to homogenize Black doctoral student persistence within a universal doctoral socialization context. This colorblind approach fuels the assumption that race and racism are not influential factors in the experiences of Black doctoral students. Therefore, we argue that racial and ethnic neutrality in understanding Black doctoral student experiences perpetuates institutional inequity and ignores the authentic needs of Black doctoral students, thus contributing to the limited presence of Blacks in the professoriate. Higher education ad-

ministrators and faculty must challenge the colorblind perspective that perpetuates racial inequity and center the experiential knowledge of Black doctoral students in their support initiatives.

In this article, researchers take a critical look at the question of how to support Black graduate students at the doctoral level. The goal of this article is to explore the framework of Black doctoral student persistence in ways that recognize race and the power of culture (defined here as socially transmitted ways of thinking, behavior patterns, perceptions, and beliefs) to help Black students demonstrate educational excellence. The researchers spent time talking to one Black male and two Black females in a group setting on four different occasions. The researchers specifically sought students who (1) identified as Black under the Census categorization and (2) were actively enrolled (i.e., currently taking courses, doing research, taking their comprehensive exams, or writing their dissertations) in a doctoral program in a college of education at a PWI. Participants were enrolled across three schools within the college and represented differences in age and prior experience in education. The study provided a backdrop for policies and practices related to the engagement of Black doctoral students to be attentive to factors that either support or hinder the persistence of Black doctoral students in academia.

We argue that racial and ethnic neutrality in understanding Black doctoral student experiences perpetuates institutional inequity and ignores the authentic needs of Black doctoral students, thus contributing to the limited presence of Blacks in the professoriate.”



persistence. Liberatory consciousness relates to a state of mind that is focused on freedom and democracy, that considers the larger socio-political impact of behaviors, events, actions, and is an ideology that maintains a vision of democracy and equity as a central purpose for education. In this study, a liberatory ideology for these students seemed to provide the mental fortitude to survive on a daily basis, and it fueled their persistence. Listening to the voices of three Black doctoral students revealed that their persistence was supported by a distinctive cultural consciousness connected to their ethnic origins and shaped by their racialized identities.

Black Doctoral Student Persistence Factors Emphasize Race and Culture Consciousness

Findings from this study show three major themes that highlight the factors Black doctoral students believed contribute to their persistence: *authenticity in student-faculty relationships*, *systemic institutional support*, and *psychocultural tools*.

The Black doctoral students we interviewed perceived the kind of mentoring relationships that contributed to their persistence were those based on authenticity. They agreed that the kind of authenticity in relationships with faculty that was a positive contributor to their persistence occurred when faculty had a critical understanding of the racialized context of the “ivory tower” as well as how Blacks were positioned therein. This can be characterized as *sociopolitical authenticity* in the mentorship. They also perceived that academic authenticity was an important factor that contributed to persistence in their doctoral program. The definition of authenticity in this context can be described as a critical assessment of skills in terms of ways to improve, or *academic authenticity*. Black doctoral students also expressed a desire to be systemically integrated into their institution because the lack of such integration in their respective departments played a major factor in their ability to persist in their programs. They conveyed that they wanted to be taken seriously as prospective scholars, which meant that administrators and faculty needed to be proactive and thoughtful in providing them with support.

Finally, the data showed that the existence and prominence of liberatory consciousness within the participants themselves greatly contributed to their

Moving Towards Action: What Administrators and Faculty Must Do

Faculty and administrators in schools and colleges of education must create space and opportunities for race work within the department. Explicit attention to racial issues on the part of institutions can be a significant support mechanism for Black doctoral students. In addition, faculty and higher education administrators must seek to understand how racial domination in higher education (i.e., prevalence of an ethnocentric curriculum, limited presence of faculty of color, allocation of funds for research and programs, etc.) impacts programs designed to support Black doctoral students. Finally, administrators should rethink the interpersonal supports they offer Black doctoral students. Academic mentoring is paramount to a student’s educational success, especially at the doctoral level (e.g., publication, research, funding, and graduation). Faculty and administrators must create college-wide initiatives and incentives to promote faculty mentoring for Black doctoral students, and professional development activities must be created to help faculty develop mentoring expertise.

Promoting racial and cultural diversity on college campuses includes cultivating a cultural and racially diverse faculty and administration. This means that supporting the professional development of culturally and racially diverse doctoral students, who will one day become college faculty and administrators, is of great importance. For institutions of higher education, the persistence of students is critical to the mission of the institution. Specifically, for Black doctoral students, persistence is a key element that supports these students to excel in higher education.