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Victoria Duran
University of San Francisco

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Mentorship and Women of Color in Higher Education: The Stronger Our Voice, the Greater Impact We Might Forge

Victoria Duran

Abstract

This essay examines the experience of women faculty of color in institutions of higher education, specifically focusing on the lived experiences of Latinas and the role of mentorship. Mentorship for women of color in higher education is essential to increasing tenure rates, overall success in academia, and the retention and recruitment of Latina and African American female students, particularly in predominately White institutions, to break through the glass ceiling. This essay explores historical accounts of the formation of the education system, the history of mentorship, and the different forms of mentorship for Latinas.

Introduction

With the development of the United States came the creation of “a new system of higher education that was exclusively for the benefit of White males. No Blacks or women needed to apply because none would be admitted” (Jenifer, 2005, p. 4). The context in which college and university systems were developed in the United States, had lasting implications on the individuals who were excluded. Researchers have shown that women of color have been excluded and underrepresented as tenured professors and presidents of institutions of higher education. Investigations also reveal the vital function of mentorship and support networks for women of color as they navigate the ladder of academia.

This research includes selected focuses on the experiences of Latinas in higher education as they are underrepresented in tenured

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positions, mentorship, and historically in education. Challenges Latinas encounter include having to be “twice as good to get half the recognition” (Evans, 2007, pp. 133–134). In addition, women of color must combat institutionalized and covert racism in a field where there is limited or no “mirroring” of other Latinas in higher education. As women of color encounter such setbacks, the need for support and mentorship is vital to sustaining their presence in colleges and universities. The development of mentorship programs for people of color stems from the mission of historically Black colleges in supporting students who were the first generation to navigate through institutions of higher education (Jenifer, 2005, p. 9). Latina graduate students established support and mentorship programs in community circles to share personal *testimonios* as a means to give voice to lived experiences of women of color navigating predominately White institutions (Flores & Garcia, 2009, p. 155). The following research demonstrates the importance of challenging the historical functions of the higher education system to provide access to women of color, particularly Latinas, and suggests ways they can develop mentors and support systems to achieve tenured positions and access the office of presidency of colleges and universities.

History of Women in Education

As the new system of education was established in the United States, the mission was to educate White males for their advancement. The institutions were not inclusive of women and African Americans (Jenifer, 2005, p. 4). “The history of African-Americans and women in higher education is one of our nation’s most shameful stories. It is a story of a nation’s struggle to overcome overt and institutional racism and sexism” (Jenifer, 2005, p. 5). The institution of education opened its doors to women for its economic interest, as women were admitted to fill the shortage of men during the Civil War (Jenifer, 2005, p. 6). In 1844, Oberlin College became the first coeducational school, and in 1862, Patterson became the first African American woman to receive a college bachelor’s degree from the institution (Jenifer,

2005, p. 4). Jenifer described the founding of the first institution for African American women, Spellman College in 1881 (2005, p. 7).

The development of historically Black colleges played a significant role in the mentorship and support of African American students; however resources and the prestige of Black institutions were not held at a “collegiate level” or funded to the same standard as White institutions (Jenifer, 2005, p. 8). Historically Black colleges, however, did “mirror” and model success to assist educated African Americans in academia, thereby creating aspirational capital, an ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future. Historically Black colleges assumed the role of introducing African American students to the college experience, providing understanding about how to develop skills, social behaviors, and cultural norms in education and employment. Mentorships offered through historically Black colleges “prepared them to compete in a world where, because of their race, they did not have the luxury of being just as good as their White counterparts but that they had to be better” (Jenifer, 2005, p. 9).

Jenifer (2005) described a significant turning point in the enrollment of women and people of color with the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which “required schools to affirmatively recruit women and minorities to all schools receiving public assistance” (p. 7). During the course of the 1970s, the representation of African Americans and Latinos in predominately White institutions began to increase as a result of the pressure from affirmative-action programs until the attacks on those programs during President Clinton’s tenure. Policies of “mend it, don’t end it” caused more difficulty for women and minorities accessing higher education (Jenifer, 2005, pp. 10–12). Jenifer (2005) suggested the United States must recognize that without education and proper skills to navigate society, people will be “disenfranchised” in the ability to “participate fully in national life.” Therefore, minority and women faculty, staff, and students must be included in the communities of credible institutions of higher education, particularly in the fields of mathematics, science, medicine, business, and engineering (p. 12).

Mentoring

Traditional mentoring is defined as “a person in a position of power that can teach, encourage, and facilitate the advancement of a protégé” (Mendez-Morse, 2004, pp. 562–563). Mendez-Morse (2004) explained that mentorship programs can be formally sanctioned by institutions or can be informal relationships mentees have made through casual connections (pp. 562–563). Jenifer (2005) suggested that in successful mentorship for women and minorities, both groups need to be reflected as mentors and mentees (p. 28). Women have a more successful experience with mentors in supporting the “early stages of their professional careers and continued to assist them in obtaining their current position” (Jenifer, 2005, p. 28).

Jenifer (2005) described this mentoring selection of protégés as “thoughtful, formal, intentional, and often intensive,” and a process in which “responsibilities in the training of the next generation of leaders-men and women” includes a commitment to diversity and “extraordinary competence” (Jenifer, 2005, p. 35). Although there are options for protégés to be selected by mentors, there are also many instances in which protégés select their own mentors. Mendez-Morse (2004) described the multiple mentors Latinas have sought support from; mothers, school leaders, and influential women in “college and career experiences” (p. 582). The experience in mentorship differs from that of White women because there are few sponsored mentors of color; those who do exist are faculty in “predominately White institutions” and carry a “double burden of ethnic or racial and gender stereotyping” (Mendez-Morse, 2004, p. 562). For Latinas, mentorship includes communal methods of support through *testimonios*, or testimonies that recognize “the power and empowerment of sharing our *papelitos guardados* [literally, guarded papers] in and out of academia with others” (Flores & Garcia, 2009, p. 161).

Testimonios and Voice

Through the use of *testimonios*, Latinas were able to establish a sense of community on predominately White campuses where they experienced alienation and lacked a sense of belonging. Graduate

students have established a system of sharing their stories through the use of *papelitos guardados* (tucked away pieces of paper) that are the memories and lived experiences through which Latinas shared their personal voice with others (Flores & Garcia, 2009, p. 157). This was also done in an attempt to *desahogarse*, “to let out a painful experience, to no longer suffocate” from the institutional constraints of predominately White institutions of higher education (Flores & Garcia, 2009, p. 168). This formation of mentorship and support was developed to “take a holistic approach to self that includes spirit and emotion, and recognizes our individual/communal struggles and efforts to name ourselves, record our history and choose our own destiny” (Flores & Garcia, 2009, p. 156). The formation of *testimonios* is empowering for women as they declared, “we become the subjects and objects of our own inquiry and voice” (Flores & Garcia, 2009, p. 156). Issues that surfaced with developing a space for support included not criticizing, testing, or evaluating another Latina’s authenticity based on her Spanish abilities, place of birth, citizenship, or overall identity. Latinas should not have to “legitimize themselves as belonging in and among the Latino diaspora” (Flores & Garcia, 2009, p. 156).

Theoretical Approaches

Flores and Garcia (2009) explored the impact of a “Latina space” in predominately White institutions through Latinas giving *testimonios*, spaces where Latinas were able to develop discourse and support systems. Women of color suffer a vast range of subordination and need complex narratives to bring voice to their experiences. In the course of study, researchers used critical-race feminism, Latina/o critical theory, and U.S. third-world feminism as frameworks to explore “Latina space.” The function of critical-race feminism is to resist essentialism. Racial essentialism aims to support “the belief that there is a monolithic Latina experience” (Flores & Garcia, 2009, p. 162). The notion of racial essentialism minimizes the ways diversity and complexities of Latina identities are perceived by the greater society (Flores & Garcia, 2009).

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Latina/o critical theory, a cousin to critical-race theory, explores how “oppression affects Latinos and the intersectionality across race, class, gender and other forms of subordination” (Flores & Garcia, 2009, p. 162). Latina/o critical theory also distinguishes the “multiple diversities of Latinos,” which include the differences in nationality, race, immigration experience, class, sexual orientation, and many other aspects of Latino identity.

An additional framework is U.S. third-world feminism. This theory gives political, social, racial, and transnational voice to feminists in developing countries (Flores & Garcia, 2009, p. 163). U.S. third-world feminism rejects a “unified, essentialist definition of women” set by White middle-class Western feminists (Flores & Garcia, 2009, p. 162). This framework developed as an attempt to initiate solidarity and bonds with women, despite national borders and politics. This additional dimension of Latinas telling *testimonios* made the process more complex (Flores & Garcia, 2009, p. 163). Challenges arose as the notion of what defines Latina/o varies across regions, languages, nationalities, ethnicities, and racial identities.

Conclusion

Have You Experienced This, by Torres (2010), calls for a united effort to combat racism and stereotypes by joining forces in the name of justice.

Whether you have or you haven't experienced this
You need to become aware of how often it happens
This call is to denounce it
And unite in the struggle
For just and equal treatment
Regardless of, race, ethnicity
First language, and country of origin
The stronger our voice
The greater impact we might forge
And assure that justice we'll eventually enjoy.

Torres (2010) identified the need for inclusivity to challenge the status quo.

If we wish to create a truly excellent system of higher education in this nation, it must be inclusive. To accomplish this, colleges and universities must recruit diverse students and faculty members to advance scholarship, that employs a range of experiences, theories, frameworks and epistemologies. (Evans, 2007, p. 136)

Institutions that have integrated and developed fields of studies and programs of diversity, and reflect a campus community and culture of diversity, are enhancing “intellectual quality for everyone” (Evans, 2007, pp. 136).

Flores and Garcia (2009) suggested that in the application of the theoretical frameworks, the diversity of Latino/a identities must be considered and factored to combat the notion of the “essentialized” Latina and what it means to belong (p. 169). With such efforts, students encounter support networks on predominately White institutions and eliminate the measuring of what it means to be Latina in a predominately White space. In sharing narratives and voicing experiences, students will be an instrument of support and mentorship.

Mentorship is imperative to the success of women faculty of color and the access to tenure-track positions women seek to acquire. The process of supporting women of color in higher education does not end in women filling positions. To move institutions into spaces that value and support the advancement of women faculty of color, colleges and universities must implement resources and support systems such as mentorship, and spaces that validate voice and experiences of women of color. As Torres (2010) proclaimed, “the stronger our voice, the greater impact we might forge and assure that justice we’ll eventually enjoy” (p. 2).

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