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## Marginality, Mattering, and Black Feminism: Moving to Empower Black Women

Jilliene M. Johnson

*In its inception, American higher education exclusively admitted White males, while all other identities were denied access. Currently, admission requirements no longer discriminate on the basis of religion, race, socioeconomic status, or other social markers. With an increase in diverse students comes institutional responsibility to establish safe, inclusive, and supportive collegiate environments. Theories of marginality, mattering, and Black feminist thought are explored as they relate to providing support services for undergraduate African American women at predominantly White institutions (PWIs).*

*“Whether it be my religion, my aesthetic taste, my economic opportunity, my educational desire, whatever the craving is, I find a limitation because I suffer from the greatest known handicap, a Negro woman.”*

Mary McLeod Bethune, “Closed Doors,” 1936

Education, particularly higher education, has always been viewed as an avenue to access knowledge and gain upward mobility in America. Despite this pervasive ideology, higher education in the United States has yet to make this vision a reality for all who attend colleges and universities. American higher education was modeled and organized from the European structure (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). The emergence of the academy began in the 17th century and admitted only White males. It was with this beginning that the American higher education system began to articulate, define, and raise the questions of: Who shall be admitted? Who will attend? What will be taught? And, who will teach it? (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). The complexities in the higher education system continue to be a source of great debate and concern. Higher education professionals, specifically in student affairs, look to provide supportive and inclusive learning environments that engage the whole student in dialogue about issues of diversity, social justice, academics, wellness, and personal and community responsibility.

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ing relationships and support programs that have helped shaped her identity and vocation.*

Many student affairs professionals are knowledgeable about the complexities of the world; this includes, but is not limited to, institutional racism, discrimination, and stigmatization across various identities. As members of the profession we must always seek to make students feel safe, respected, and welcomed in their new environment. As professionals, how do we respond to social pressures that make students feel marginalized or invisible? Examining student development theories of marginality, mattering, and Black feminist thought demonstrates the need for support groups for African American females at predominantly White institutions (PWIs). The Sista's United support group at Midwest College (a pseudonym) serves as a case study to articulate and critique the implications of these programs and offer opportunity to discuss how to develop and implement this service on an institutional level.

Prior to creating and implementing this type of support group at an institution, it is imperative to understand the racial complexities of American history. Race, a social construct, is a defining marker in the lives of many Americans. Steck, Heckert, and Heckert (2003) stated, "Racial and ethnic identity in the United States, then, can only be understood in the context of a history of oppression and a persistent racial inequality" (p. 59). The idea of race, specifically in regards to African Americans, began in 1619 when the first Africans were brought to the Americas. Since the arrival of the first Africans, African Americans have experienced, endured, and persevered through 200 years of slavery, segregation, and discrimination. Many battles were fought on local, state, and federal levels to obtain equal civil rights. The most instrumental case regarding education was *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954). The United States Supreme Court ruled unanimously that racial segregation in public schools was unconstitutional. Despite this, African American students are still underrepresented in higher education. The racial framework and history of African Americans in the United States illuminates why current issues of race continue to permeate all aspects of American society.

Steck et al. (2003) stated that race plays a pivotal role in identity, especially for minority groups. In the United States, individuals construct racial identity in a society that is comprised of non-dominant and dominant identities. When looking at past interactions between Whites and African Americans it is evident that racism and discrimination have played a pivotal role in many aspects of peoples' lives, especially in the educational system. Even 57 years after *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), there are still inequalities in the education African Americans receive compared to their White counterparts. Reynolds and Pope (1994) explained that racism, in many instances, can have a psychological impact on the mental, physical, and psychological health of its victims. Moreover, these inequalities and psychological damages have become more covert over the years. Considering the effects of racially embedded factors in American society provides context for the need to include the following theories at the collegiate level.

## Marginality and Mattering

On a daily basis, people are divided into social schemas according to race, class, religion, and gender, to name a few. The awareness of difference leads to individuals and community members asking questions: Where do I fit in? Am I marginalized because of my identities? Will my group ever be considered equal? These and other questions are pondered and raised because all people want to feel a sense of connection and belonging. Schlossberg (1989) explained that the constructs of marginality and mattering illustrate how college students address issues in their new environments depending on their different identities and the state of their emotional and financial resources. The author further expounds on these constructs as they relate to transitional events and how people in marginalized positions often feel they do not matter. Studies indicate that African American students often feel isolated and alienated at PWIs and feel excluded from the campus community and environment, with adverse results on their matriculation (Lett & Wright, 2003).

Mattering explains how to minimize marginalization. Schlossberg, Lynch, and Chickering (1989) defined mattering as people's belief, whether wrong or right, that someone appreciates and cares for them, and that they are the object of someone's attention. Schlossberg et al. (1989) describe the mattering framework in five dimensions: attention, importance, dependence, ego-extension, and appreciation.

1. *Attention* is viewed as one of the most basic forms of mattering where one can command and receive notice from another individual. An example of this is when people are able to distinguish an individual from others by knowing the person's name.

2. *Importance* is the ability to perceive that another person cares about what the individual wants, thinks, and does. Importance is felt when a professor notices that a student is missing classes.

3. *Dependence* simply states that a person depends on others and that others depend on that individual. An example is when a student knows that an organization cannot function without their membership.

4. *Ego-extension* is the belief that others will relish in the individual's accomplishments and be disappointed in their failures. An example of this is when an administrator is interested in a student's progress, even after graduating.

5. *Appreciation* is when an individual feels thankful for who they are and what they do.

The five dimensions of mattering play a pivotal role in adult learners as they approach relationship transitions (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995). The framework of mattering is essential when assessing how to ensure that African American women feel appreciated, validated, and supported when attending a PWI. These concepts incorporate the psychological and student development

theories needed to understand the experiences of our students. An additional theory to consider when working with this demographic is black feminist thought.

### Black Feminist Thought

Marginality and mattering are fundamental theories in explaining what may hinder or promote a community's development, yet due to their generalizability, they do not specifically discuss how the transition relates to specific identity groups. To better understand the complex experiences of African American women at PWIs it is essential to examine Black feminist thought. Collins (2000) explained that oppression formed due to the impact of slavery, which served as the catalyst for Black feminist thought. The convergence of race, gender, and class oppression shapes and affects the relationships that African American women have on communal, professional, and intellectual levels.

As a critical social theory, Black feminist thought aims to empower African-American women within the context of societal injustice sustained by intersecting oppressions. Since Black women cannot be fully empowered unless intersecting oppressions themselves are eliminated, Black feminist thought supports broad principles of social justice that transcend U.S. Black women's particular needs. (p. 22)

Another function of creating support services for African American women at PWIs is providing a space where their experiences are shared, accepted, and validated. Under Black feminist thought, Collins explained the need to create spaces for Black women to self-disclose as a vital condition to resist societal oppression. Historically, survival was dependent on the ability to stick together, and currently, this can still be observed as Black women continue to evolve and pursue new areas in educational and professional endeavors. Collins (2000) stated, "By advancing Black women's empowerment through self-definition, these safe spaces help Black women resist the dominant ideology promulgated not only outside Black civil society but within African American institutions" (p. 101).

As scholar-practitioners, it is critical to examine marginality, mattering, and Black feminist thought as the underpinning literature to advocate for support programs for African American women. Midwest College's Sista's United program serves as a worthy case study on how a program can empower, support, and engage Black women at PWIs.

### Case Study

Midwest College is a small, private, liberal arts school primarily known for developing independent minds and preparing students to be future leaders in an interdependent global society. The college is comprised of 54% women, 46%

men, 12% domestic multi-ethnic students, and 5% international students, with 2,000 students overall. In the past few years, the college has recommitted itself to diversity. However, as a PWI the college still continues to struggle with the recruitment and retention of domestic students of Color. Despite the increase of students of Color, the college acknowledges the need to be more inclusive and supportive of this student population. Two ways the college supports these students are through the Office of Multi-Ethnic Student Affairs and multi-ethnic student organizations.

Sista's United is one organization that has served as a pillar in the Black community at Midwest College since the late 1980s. Similar to other schools at the time, students of Color protested about the lack of racial diversity in the classroom and co-curricular activities. After taking over the administration building, the students' demands were met, resulting in Sista's United and several other organizations being created. Currently, the organization serves as a significant resource to women from the African Diaspora. The members of the organization's racial/ethnic identities range from Multiracial to Caribbean to African, while also providing space for allies. Nevertheless, the group is largely comprised of African American women.

Sista's United is a student organization that is self-governed with an executive board, general body, and individuals who live in the program house on campus. Each year elections are held to determine who will serve in the leadership role for the organization. The executive board's most unique positions are the Sister-to-Sister Contacts. These two individuals' task is to pair first-year women with upper class Sista's members. Mentorship is one of the most instrumental components of the support group. Even after graduating from the college, many women continue to utilize their mentor as a resource. The matching process is reciprocal in that women can suggest who they want to work with and are matched based on personal and academic information. To obtain funding, the treasurer requests financial assistance from the school's Student Government Association (typically around \$4,000 each year).

Over time the organization has developed staple programs such as Open House, Soul Food Dinner, Sadie Hawkins Dance, Apollo, and Women's Recognition. In particular, the Sadie Hawkins Dance benefits the current students and serves as a program to supplement the Office of Admissions' annual scholarship weekend for students of Color. Overall, the Black female leaders in this organization serve many constituents. First, they serve through their residential space, offering students and allies a safe space to cook, socialize, study, and be themselves without judgment from the dominant culture. Second, the organization educates the institution about issues affecting the larger Black community, especially Black women in the global context. Third, the organization serves Midwest College by providing mentors that assist with peer-to-peer academic, personal, and profes-

sional support during the rigorous four-year journey of college. One student who graduated in 2009 said this about her experience:

I joined SU because of the women and the purpose of the organization. I was welcomed with open arms when I came as a prospective student. By this action I took it upon myself to learn more about the organization and its purpose. In learning about the mentorship of first-year minority women, it gave me a sense of belonging. Belonging to an organization that will help me have a smooth transition through my college years and beyond. Allowing me now to give back to the organization which once gave to me. (A. Blackwell, personal communication, February, 5, 2010)

It is evident from this student's testimony that the Sista's United program provided her with a supportive environment throughout her undergraduate collegiate experience. This model is student-centered but as practitioners, we must be mindful that every campus culture is disparate and will require various frameworks to be successful. Other institutions utilize models that are peer-to-peer, facilitator-student, or a mixture of the two. Nonetheless, it is critical that these programs provide the opportunity and safe space for African American women to embrace each other and share their narratives as a means for a supportive community.

### Implementation Strategies

The concept of support groups for women of Color is not an innovative idea. Many universities, regardless of classification, offer some type of programming for this population. Few have written on this topic specifically utilizing marginality, mattering, and Black feminist thought to provide a holistic approach to this population and their needs. As students continue to grow and develop they yearn for opportunities to engage each other in dialogue about their shared and differing experiences. Their sense of isolation can be viewed in the classroom, athletic teams, residence halls, social settings, and may even be reflected in the lack of racial diversity in the faculty and administration. While many see the value of these programs, there are some in the academy who question these programs' purpose.

As previously stated, each institution will need to create a model that represents their student body's needs and desires. Colleges and universities will have varied ideas about criteria and requirements for the group, but there is the ability to offer some generalizable thoughts for creating, developing, and implementing a support group for African American women at PWIs. The framework for implementation consists of four scopes: (a) application, (b) fiscal structure, (c) longevity, and (d) assessment and evaluation.

### Application

Application describes the initial scope to assess student's interests and desires to establish the group. During this phase it is critical to research and observe other institutions to examine their programmatic model and adapt it according to the needs of the developing program. An additional component is establishing a group identity. As a collective whole, interested members and/or advisors can develop an organization name, craft a logo, mission, and set objectives and goals for how the group will function. The last phase is finding and securing an adequate time and location for meetings. Often on campuses it can be difficult to negotiate the use of space, especially if your program is newly created or seen as illegitimate by the dominant structure. As practitioners, we understand that the key to a successful program is booking the venue early. For the Sista's United, this booking was established in the 1980s when the president signed legislation designating the group a house on campus annually. In particular, with these support groups it is imperative to pick locations that promote security, inclusion, and privacy, allowing for optimal participation.

### Fiscal Structure

To be an effective and successful organization there must be financial support. Ideally, this would come from the student government body, but if not, the organization could look into acquiring funds from an academic or administrative department (e.g. Multicultural Affairs, Dean of Students, Provost, Women Studies, or Africana Studies) on campus or external sources of funding. Additionally, after the program is established and members have graduated, the group can look to alumnae for donations.

### Longevity

Typically, one of the most efficient ways to establish a group on campus is to become a recognized student organization. During this stage the group will need to decide whom the advisor(s) will be and define the role. If the group decides not to utilize campus programming, they will need to secure support from an office or department. Additionally, the group should develop a constitution and create a marketing plan to achieve short and long term success for group recognition and membership.

### Assessment and Evaluation

The final scope is to create an instrument to measure the individuals' and group's success. The instrument can be an evaluation form, questionnaire, self-reflection paper, individual meeting set with the advisor, or whatever fits the needs of the



organization. If and when the program's validity is questioned, the fourth phase will provide the organization with the quantitative and qualitative data needed to show the legitimacy and effectiveness of the program.

Unfortunately, even with these four scopes, the student organization may still face issues surrounding purpose and validity. These comments and questions will often come from the dominant group but are not exclusive to them. As a practitioner I have found that the most frequently asked question is around self-segregation. Generally, when this comment is brought to light, I recommend that the individual read Beverly Daniel Tatum's (1997) book, *Why are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*. Tatum provides great examples of how issues of race, prejudice, internalized racism, and identity shape students during their developmental years and how that informs their identities as they move into adulthood.

### Conclusion

As clearly defined in the work of Schlossberg (1989) and Collins (2000), the use of support systems for African American women is vital to creating an inclusive environment at PWIs. Often, we as practitioners work closely with students as educators, advisors, and mentors, and we begin to notice their struggles and need to feel connected. If practitioners find themselves in this position, they should assess the need for implementing a support program. Based on the early years of higher education we understand that the original questions surrounding the academy did not include the voices of individuals from oppressed and marginalized groups. Yet, as scholars and practitioners in higher education, we continue to adhere to the ethical principal of "do no harm" (ACPA Ethical Principles & Standards, 2006). Remaining committed to the field of student affairs can only be accomplished by creating opportunities where all voices are heard and students feel empowered. Support groups and organizations for African American women at PWIs will continue to create opportunities for meaningful dialogue, collaboration, and growth for the students and the institutions we serve.

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