

I Be Cookin' Up My Own Recipe: Black Deaf Women Making Their Way through HBCUs

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This study explores the experiences of Black Deaf women on Historically Black College and University (HBCU) campuses, blending narratives of positive engagement with the distinct challenges they face. Using a narrative methodology grounded in the framework of Black Deaf Feminism, this research illuminates an often-overlooked intersection of race, gender, and disability in higher education. While many Black students choose HBCUs to immerse themselves in Black-centered spaces and histories, the experiences of Black Deaf women reveal persistent inequities in accessibility and inclusion. Their stories challenge the assumption that all Black students are able-bodied and hearing, urging a more nuanced approach to institutional support and equity. Ultimately, this study highlights the resilience, agency, and contributions of Black Deaf women as they carve out spaces for themselves and future generations within HBCUs. By centering their voices, this research enriches the broader narrative of Black higher education and advocates for a more inclusive academic landscape.

Keywords: Black Deaf Women, HBCU, Black Deaf Feminist Theory

“I don’t take no
second-handed,
mulatto, prescribed,
whittled-down,
semi-that,
half-here,
part-this
culture,
uh-huh
I be cookin’ up my own recipe,
spicy, like my mama taught me,
no, don’t need your bowl,

thank you very much,
only I be
tellin' me
what a blakdeafemale is.”
-Kristi B. Merriweather

The words in Kristi Merriweather's poem *Be Tellin' Me*, proclaiming Black Deaf women's ability to define themselves, have always been important. Black Deaf women have a history of “cookin' up” their recipes, leaving their marks on the world, and defining Black Deaf womanhood for themselves. Kristi herself is a poet, educator, and member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. Claudia Gordon was the first Black Deaf female attorney in the Obama Administration from 2009 to 2017 (National Council on Disability, n.d.). In the history of Deaf Education, Glennis Matthews is the first Black Deaf woman to become a Superintendent of a Deaf School (The Daily Moth, 2022). These women have more than their accomplishments in common. They are all proud Historically Black College and University (HBCU) graduates.

HBCUs and Black Deaf education have a historical relationship that is often unknown. During segregation, some Black Deaf schools and HBCUs were built near each other and shared land and resources (McCaskill et al., 2011). For example, Louisiana State School for the Negro Deaf was built on Southern University A&M's campus and had joint leadership. These relationships were not perfect or always equitable for Black Deaf students due to hearing privilege and audism, or the discrimination against individuals who are Deaf or hard of hearing that leads to attitudes, beliefs, practices, and policies that favor and privilege hearing individuals (Eckert & Rowley, 2013; McCaskill et al., 2011). This history is important because it challenges essentialist narratives of Black people and who we think are attending HBCUs. This study adds Deaf community narratives to the rich Black experiences at HBCUs. It highlights the gaps of equity within the system against disability that may be overlooked if we assume everyone is non-disabled and hearing. Our goal is to uplift these spaces while also critiquing them.

Using a narrative methodology (Gavidia & Adu, 2022) and a Black Deaf Feminism framework, this paper pulls from an extensive and diverse sample of Black Deaf alumni who attended HBCUs between 1994-2023. Five Black Deaf women who attended four different HBCUs as undergraduate students were pulled out of the larger sample. We had the pleasure of being in community with these Black Deaf women to take in their stories, experience their frustrations, witness their Black Girl Magic, and bring forth critical unknown counternarratives. We begin with a literature review, then outline our research design, present our findings, discuss their implications, and finish with suggestions for future research.

Literature Review

By examining the intersectional challenges of race, gender, and disability, this literature review highlights the multifaceted nature of these women's educational journeys, especially within Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs).

Black Deaf Women and Higher Education

The intersectionality of racial, gender, and Deaf identities presents significant challenges for Black Deaf women in higher education. One of the most pervasive issues is the lack of accessibility. Chapple et al. (2021) and Stapleton (2015) identify critical barriers such as limited access to sign language interpreters, insufficient captioning, and a general lack of awareness about Deaf culture. These barriers collectively hinder academic engagement for Black Deaf women (Chapple et al., 2021; Stapleton & Croom, 2016). This foundational understanding sets the stage for deeper exploration into how societal attitudes and institutional environments compound these challenges.

Societal attitudes toward the intersecting identities of Black Deaf women often perpetuate discrimination and exclusion in higher education (Chapple et al., 2021). These attitudes lead to compounded prejudices, where the overlapping effects of racism, ableism, and sexism create a hostile environment that isolates Black Deaf women and hinders their academic and social integration on campus. Chapple et al. (2021) argue that environments lacking diversity further marginalize these students, often silencing their voices and exacerbating their isolation. Stapleton's (2015) study, which examined Deaf women of color in higher education, found that the lack of representation and acknowledgment in these settings exacerbates their challenges, creating complex difficulties beyond physical or resource-based barriers.

Marginalization profoundly impacts Black Deaf women in higher education by exacerbating academic challenges, fostering social isolation, and undermining their psychological well-being. Yin et al. (2022) expose longstanding inequities in vocational rehabilitation (VR) services, revealing that African Americans are disproportionately channeled into training services rather than receiving the educational support provided to their White counterparts. This disparity is further highlighted by Palmer et al. (2020), who report that while 63.7% of white Deaf individuals benefit from VR services, only 14.8% of Black Deaf individuals have access. Furthermore, the gender dimension of these disparities is significant, with 51.7% of Deaf women seeking VR services. Stapleton (2014) adds that Black Deaf students are more likely to be on waitlists, discouraged from attending specific colleges, and urged to change their majors. These findings collectively reinforce a systemic issue in providing equitable support services.

Despite these significant barriers, Black Deaf women are remarkably determined to succeed. Positive trends in educational achievements provide a counternarrative to the challenges. Garberoglio et al. (2019) document an 11% increase in four-year college degree attainment among Black Deaf students over the past decade, with Black Deaf women attending college at higher rates

than their male counterparts. Stapleton (2015) finds that transitioning to college offers Black Deaf women unique opportunities to build community and connect with their identities. College environments provide a supportive space to explore language and form meaningful connections, essential for personal and academic growth. This resilience and ability to thrive despite adversity highlight the importance of supportive educational and social environments.

Disability and HBCUs

While the experiences of Black Deaf women highlight significant issues within higher education, the broader context of disability support at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) reveals additional layers of complexity. Scholars like Gasman et al. (2013) and Gasman & Commodore (2014) have explored student diversity at HBCUs, yet there is a notable gap in research specifically addressing disability support services. Gasman and Commodore's book (2014) found that HBCUs possess significant strengths, including their willingness to educate "at-risk" students, tuition affordability, strong community engagement, leadership training for future generations, and diverse faculty and students. However, there is a lack of research on the added value of disabled students on campus and the need for accommodations, which significantly impact their unique needs. Inadequate support for disabled students can hinder their academic success and overall well-being (Davis, 2011; Stapleton, 2015; Taylor, 2019).

Scholars have started critical disability-focused research at HBCUs exploring attitudes, such as Banks (2019), who provided insight into faculty attitudes towards students with learning disabilities at HBCUs, revealing generally positive attitudes but also a significant need for more comprehensive support and guidance. The need for continuous faculty training to work with students with disability is ongoing research finding across most institutions (Evans et al., 2017). Faculty support looks different depending on the discipline. Qazi et al. (2016) highlight the importance of preparing African American students with disabilities for STEM careers, as these fields offer high-growth, high-paying job opportunities that can significantly improve their economic mobility and quality of life. In a technology-driving world, a lack of digital infrastructure in HBCUs, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, exposed significant shortcomings in website accessibility (Stapleton, 2015; Taylor, 2019). These findings enhanced the necessity for accessible digital resources to support the academic and personal growth of students with disabilities.

Despite diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives in higher education, campuses narrowly focus on being more accessible and miss the mark on being disability friendly and welcoming. Strayhorn's (2023) recent analysis compares the sense of belonging among Black students at HBCUs and predominantly white institutions. The study emphasizes the significance of a sense of belonging and the role of intersectional identity in fostering connections among students and professors (Strayhorn, 2023). Although Chapple's (2019) research was not conducted at an HBCU, her work aligns with Strayhorn's (2023) work. It highlights how Black Deaf women are

underrepresented and face multiple layers of prejudice because of their intersectional identities, which leads to feelings of isolation and a lack of belongingness.

The literature on Black Deaf women in higher education and disability support at HBCUs reveals a complex interplay of challenges and resilience. Accessibility issues, identity complexities, and marginalization within support services are significant barriers. However, the determination of Black Deaf women to succeed and the potential for supportive academic environments highlights areas for improvement and further research. Bridging the gap is crucial to ensuring HBCUs create environments where all Black students can thrive. This literature serves as a call to action for researchers to explore and amplify the voices of Black Deaf women within the unique landscape of HBCUs, and our study is a start to answering that call.

Research Design

We share our positionalities as they influence how we relate to the participants, analyze the Black Deaf women's narratives, and make meaning of their educational experiences. Ramirez-Stapleton identifies as Black hearing cis women whose second language is American Sign Language. As a Black Deaf Studies and Higher Education scholar, she is deeply committed to creating a more complex and anti-essentialist understanding of Black people and education. Porter-Vaughn identifies as a Black female scholar with hearing challenges. In her family, the enduring challenges of hearing loss span generations, from her great-grandmother to her father, grandmother, and great-aunt. She is passionate about exploring the experiences of Black, Deaf, and hard-of-hearing students to enhance their success. Neither of us attended an HBCU, but both value amplifying the experiences of overlooked Black students in these culturally rich educational spaces. This section focuses on the importance of Deaf and Black Feminist epistemology, why we used narrative methodology, and an overview of the participants, our methods, and limitations.

Epistemology

To capture how these Black Deaf women made meaning of their educational experiences and navigated majority Black hearing spaces, we used Deaf Epistemology and Black Feminist Thought (BFT) as our foundations. BFT (Collins, 2000) allows us to honor that Black women's experiences are not monolithic and the "need to feel heard and understood within the totality of their experiences and intersections of identities" (Porter et al., 2020, p. 263). Deaf Epistemology allows us to understand that being Deaf is not a disability that only needs accommodations but encompasses culture, language, a way of being in the world, community, and history that actively informs their lives and education (Brown et al., 2019; Parasnis, 2012).

Theoretical Framework

Black Deaf Feminism (Chapple, 2019; BDF) gave us a framework to understand the commonalities among the women's HBCU experiences and the richness in their differences. Chapple (2019), a mother of a Black Deaf child, conceived BDF after interviewing Black Deaf women at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf about their college experiences (Chapple et al., 2021). Chapple (2019) stated, "The basis for a Black deaf feminist framework is not to negate existing social theories but rather to build an intersectional approach that includes marginalized groups previously absent and invisible in mainstream scholarship" (p. 194). BDF consists of five tenets:

1. Interrogate marginalized intersectional oppression and the impact that these identities have on the lived experiences of being Black, deaf, and female.
2. Show interest in how structural inequalities and political spheres impact intersectional identities and a Black Deaf feminist standpoint at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels.
3. Highlight the intersectional lived experiences of Black Deaf women in the context of social research.
4. Acknowledge social constructions of race, gender, and deafness and resist the normalization of whiteness, maleness, and ableism, including speaking ability.
5. Recognize the compounding effects of intersecting identities while recognizing the positionality that one aspect of identity may be more central than others at any moment in space, place, and time.

The metaphor of "flashcards or flashing" has been given as an example of what it is like to juggle three identities (Mitchell, 2006). When using flashcards, the answer and the question can never be seen at the same time, yet they go together; the same is true for Black Deaf women's identities- "visibility or invisibility of one of these identities [race, gender, and ability] usually incites the visibility or invisibility of the others" (Mitchell, 2006, p. 137). This framework recognizes how the women's multiple identities inform each other and are impacted by social, situational, and societal conditions (Mitchell, 2006).

Methodology

This study used narrative methodology (Gavidia & Adu, 2022) to more deeply understand the stories, experiences, and impact of these Black Deaf women choosing an HBCU for this undergraduate experience. The women attended four different institutions at different times (graduating between 1994 - 2023), and each HBCU is in a different location with a unique culture and history that could impact their experiences (Gavidia & Adu, 2022). Narrative methodology is "suited to addressing the complexities and subtleties of human experience," allowing the women to interpret their HBCU experience (Mertova & Webster, 2019, p.1). Their individual stories can

be emphasized while honoring, making sense of, and finding connection among their collective experiences as Black Deaf women in these spaces. The following research questions guided our research journey with these women:

- What factors motivated Black Deaf women to select Historically Black Colleges and Universities for their undergraduate studies?
- What are some distinctive experiences encountered by Black Deaf women at Historically Black Colleges and Universities?

Participants

The Black Deaf community is small, so intentional and focused recruitment efforts were made to connect with participants. Flyers were posted on Deaf and Black Deaf social media outlets, snowball sampling (Tracy, 2010), community connections were used, and a collaboration with the National Deaf Center on Postsecondary Outcomes (NDC) was forged to support nationwide recruitment efforts. Participants received a Black Lives Matter American Sign Language (ASL) shirt and or a trip to the National Black Deaf Advocates 2023 conference in Alabama sponsored by the NDC for participating. A chart of the participants is provided to give a sense of who these women are, but specific institutions are not listed to honor confidentiality.

Participants	Deaf Identity	Communication Modality	Major	Year Graduated
Kacee	Deaf	ASL	Psychology	1994
Tasha	Deaf	English and lip reading	Psychology	1995
Faith	Deaf	ASL	Psychology	1997
Sasha	Deaf	ASL	Education	2002
Jolene	Deaf and disabled	ASL	English	2023

Method

Before the interview, Ramirez-Stapleton scheduled virtual meetings with each participant to review the informed consent (in ASL or English with captions), shared the study’s purpose, confirmed the interview’s language modality, and scheduled two one-hour interviews. Participants were then given a demographic survey to collect information about their K-12 schooling experience, HBCU institution name, major, campus involvement, language preferences, and salient social identities. Ramirez-Stapleton conducted two one-hour Zoom recorded interviews

with each participant in their requested language, including American Sign Language (ASL) for four participants and English with captions for one participant between 2020- 2023. There were four categories of questions: 1). Family history and K-12 education; 2). HBCU exposure and college selection process; 3.) HBCU college life and experiences; 4). Post-graduation life/plans. A certified American Sign Language interpreter translated the recorded ASL, and Otter transcribed the English interview.

Participants did member checks to ensure goodness (Tracy, 2010). Their recorded interview links and written transcripts were emailed, and participants checked for translation and cultural accuracy. Once transcripts were approved, we used narrative analysis (Mertova & Webster, 2019). Narrative analysis allows us to explore subjective experiences, cultural perspectives, and the construction of meaning in individuals' and communities' stories (Mertova & Webster, 2019). We wanted to keep their stories intact but better understand them from the inside out. We each conducted open coding on the transcripts and then assigned descriptive codes to short phrases, events, or moments that answered our research questions more specifically. Lastly, we collaborated to discuss, compare, and make deeper connections across the women's narratives to identify themes and outlying experiences.

Limitations

We have two limitations. First, Ramirez-Stapleton is a signing-hearing person. It is ideal to have a heritage (native) language user to conduct interviews. We addressed this by having certified hearing interpreters and heritage signers translate and transcribe the videos and conducting member checks. Second, the participants have wide and varying graduation dates. Our theoretical frameworks help us account for and honor this diversity while acknowledging its impact on findings and the ever-changing realities of Deaf students at HBCUs today.

Findings: Telling the Stories

The women had a variety of positive and challenging experiences on campus. They were involved in campus clubs, participated in Sorority life, lived on campus, and engaged in campus rituals and traditions. To organize our findings, we focused on the two research questions. Under research question one, why the women chose an HBCU, there are two themes: *Family and Community Influence* and *Black Cultural Affirmation and Learning*. Research question number two explored distinctive experiences encountered by the women at their HBCUs unique to their intersectional racialized, gendered, and Deaf identities. There are three themes: *I'm the Same, but Not, Communication Access Challenges*, and *Developing Advocacy Skills*.

Research Question One: Motivation for Attending HBCUs

Two themes captured the women's reasons for attending an HBCU- *Family and Community Influence* and *Black Cultural Affirmation and Learning*.

Family & Community Influence

Family, peer, and community support played an essential role in the women's learning about HBCUs. Deep-rooted family and community legacies associated with HBCUs influenced their decision to attend an HBCU later in life. Sharing stories, repeated exposure to campuses at an early age, attending HBCU reunions, and gentle suggestions that HBCUs would suit them made a difference. Kacee had been at [HBCU Institution] most of her childhood, but it was not until high school that she knew it was an HBCU. She said, "It was just where I went to learn to dance, swim, or whatever class I took. Mom didn't even say, oh, someday you're going to be a college student on this campus. It was just part of life." Kacee was also involved in outreach programs that [HBCU Institution] offered, so she had a high level of comfort when it came time to apply for college her senior year, stating, "I was familiar with [HBCU Institution] as a university. I was used to the campus; it wasn't anything weird for me."

Sasha is from a multigenerational Deaf family, and her mother went to the segregated Black Deaf school founded on Southern University A & M's campus [not the institution she attended]. She shared this experience, "I always heard about HBCUs when I was a little girl. I would go with [my mom] to school reunions, you know, and meet people who graduated, and the reunions would often be on Southern University's campus." For Sasha and Jolene, family connections were strongly influenced by the educational backgrounds of relatives who graduated from HBCUs. Jolene came from a family where both of her parents graduated from HBCUs. She said, "I was lucky to have access. To have my parents tell me about HBCUs since I was seven." Regarding family and friends, Sasha said, "They all graduated from HBCUs: Dillard, Xavier in New Orleans, so I always heard about HBCUs from when since I was a little girl." Sasha's sister was also persistent. She shared, "Then my sister was like, 'Girl,' listen to me. Don't listen to them; look at me. I have many job connections because of all the people I know because I went to an HBCU, and I loved it." Jolene's parents painted a picture of a future college experience that she deeply desired, sharing, "[My parents] said it was an enriching experience to attend a school where you feel represented. That it kinda feels like home. I wanted to have that feeling, too."

Black Cultural Affirmation and Learning

All the women mentioned a desire to be in Black spaces with Black people. Deaf education can be a very white-centric experience, with most Deaf educators being white women and curriculums lacking cultural diversity. Tasha shared,

I only applied to HBCUs because I didn't want to go somewhere I was the only one. Okay, like the only one in terms of color. At that time, at 18 years old, when I was a senior in high school, I had never seen a Black Deaf adult.

Faith's comments echoed the desire to be connected to more Black women: "I wanted to be surrounded by Black women because that's who I was really going to learn from in an organic sense. And so that's why I had my heart and mind set on an HBCU from the beginning." Black cultural identity development and history exploration drove some to attend an HBCU. Kacee shared,

I had already [in high school] become more immersed in Black history and identity issues. I started looking at the autobiography of Malcolm X in my junior year, and it was so eye-opening for me. It was more about being Black.

Tasha stated, "I wanted to know more about Black people. I learned about Martin Luther King Jr., and I heard about Rosa Parks, but I wanted to know beyond that. And I felt like if I went there [an HBCU], I would learn that." Jolene shared similar sentiments, "I wanted to attend an HBCU so I could learn about my culture." Faith spoke from the heart, saying, "Listen, if I wanted anything more than street knowledge. I knew that that would only happen at an HBCU because I couldn't fathom going to a white university to learn how to be a Black person." The women saw Black brilliance on campuses, making them believe they could succeed. HBCUs offered them a different type of experience, Tasha shared,

I remember pulling up and walking on campus. And just taking it all in. I felt like everything was different in the air. [HBCU institution] really had a genuine desire to see people come in, be successful, and leave with a degree. You [could] tap into something within you that you didn't know was there."

Jolene shared, "There is something unique and special about HBCUs' campuses." She had many college options but felt she would be treated better at an HBCU in Black space, stating,

I ruled out Gallaudet because of my experiences with Deaf people [in high school]. I realized I did not want to attend a Deaf school because Deaf people can be mean. I come from a hearing family, and I have a disability; those factors helped me rule out Gallaudet.

Whether influenced by family members and peers or seeking Black spaces to learn about themselves, these women said, "Why not me?" and found a home at their HBCU.

Research Question Two: Black Deaf Women’s Experiences at HBCU

Three themes are unique to Black Deaf women’s experiences: Deaf Life at an HBCU, Communication Access Challenges, and Developing Advocacy Skills.

Deaf Life at an HBCU

Early into their college journey, the women quickly realized they were Black women, but they were still Deaf, which impacted their experience in unique ways. Jolene shared, “On campus, I felt alone because I was the only Deaf student there surrounded by hearing peers, that was tough.” Tasha admitted, “My main drive to attend an HBCU was thinking I would be the same once I arrived. I won’t be different, but that was my ignorance and an illusion.” Tasha explains a moment where being Deaf made a huge difference.

During my very first weekend on campus, my hearing aid went out. I didn’t know what to do. On an HBCU campus, everybody was getting together, and I was in my very first crisis. It was Labor Day weekend, and I was new to [HBCU city] Everybody was talking. I couldn’t hear. I kept leaning in. I would avoid the big group, you know cuz, I didn’t understand them. And so that was a rude awakening for me.

These early moments of frustration and loneliness were also met with support from peers, student affairs staff, and the surrounding Black Deaf community. Jolene shared a moment when a staff member met her needs.

I remember moving into the dorms when I first got there. I dropped off my stuff and met a good, good, one of the best dorm directors. They met with me and my parents to try to figure out how to work with me as a Deaf person. They had never met a Deaf person before. My parents explained to the dorm director to talk to me directly. The dorm director took in their insights and learned some ASL from me.

Peers and friendship groups played a significant role in the women finding their place on campus. After Tasha’s hearing aid broke, she had an unfortunate interaction with a student during [HBCU festival] on campus who did not know she was Deaf; from then on, her peers had her back. She shared, “Early on, I developed relationships with friends. And so, they would be the people I would go out with, and they acted like a protective shield.” Sasha had a similar experience sharing a conversation with a friend,

People were fighting over you on the yard. And I was like, Wait, what? ‘Yeah, a guy was yelling, trying to get your attention.’ And apparently, he called you a bitch because you

didn't answer...And so one of the girls who knew you responded to him, 'You dumb ass. She's deaf.' And they really got into it.

Some of these friendships inspired hearing peers to learn more about Deaf culture and sign language. Tasha shared, "As a result of meeting me [my friend] learned sign language. And so, she would be the one that would be interpreting [for me]." Jolene was also grateful to have peer support. Sharing,

I met a student who was fluent in ASL; I will never forget it. I was trying to communicate with someone and was in the middle of saying: "What?" When this person walked up and, like magic... They started signing, and my jaw dropped; I felt like, wow, how did you magically appear? I was so grateful.

Most women were the first or only Deaf women on the campus when they attended. Many campuses had not or did not know how to support a Deaf student fully, so a few women relied on off-campus support from the Black Deaf community. Kacee shared, "Probably one of the things that helped me do so well at [HBCU Institution] was that I found out that there was an Atlanta area Black Deaf Advocates group. I got that aspect of community connection there." Sasha counted on Black Deaf friends to support her, stating, "The cool thing was a lot of my Deaf friends in {HBCU city} were around. I was always inviting them to events on campus and parties and whatnot. So, I still had some Deaf people." Tasha reflected on when her campus newspaper did an article about her being the first Deaf student at [HBCU institution], and the story got picked up by the local community paper. This support and exposure changed a lot for her.

I always say the article did things; it allowed people to find out about me to kind of break the barrier. People automatically assume a lot when they see an interpreter with you. They assume that they can't communicate with you directly, so the article kind of allowed people to see me, who I was, and how they could interact with me.

Access Challenges

Being the "first or only" came with the challenge of seeking accommodations never met, navigating faculty, and educating many. Some women attended their HBCUs as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) regulations were implemented and disability service offices were new. In contrast, others arrived at their campuses 20-plus years after the law passed. Regardless, the lack of accommodations was more than problematic at orientation, in the classroom, and after hours. Jolene shares, "My breaking point [was when] my mental health was tanking due to not having full accommodations." It is exhausting to fight a system not set up for you. Kacee's struggled with orientation sharing,

So, when I got to campus, on the application, I notified them that I was Deaf, and I would require an interpreter. The ADA had just passed, but [HBCU institution] was unprepared for a Deaf person using an interpreter. They assumed that I would fall into the same template as the previous Deaf student who really functioned more like a hard-of-hearing person, and that person didn't utilize interpreters.

Resources, accommodations, and support in class were areas of struggle. Jolene shared, "I had to memorize everything for every single class... I'd be so worn out when I returned to the dorms. The professors provided notes, but I felt like they were insufficient, but [HBCU institution] refused to provide them." Jolene continues, "The professors didn't know how to deal with a Deaf student. I had to educate them on working with a Deaf student and about what needs Deaf students may have." Other women also felt challenged by professors. Tasha felt the faculty didn't understand how to work with her, stating,

I told the professor; I just need you to look at me when you're talking. So, they would say okay, then they'd start walking all around the classroom. So, I was sitting there with no interpreter because, again, I thought they would support me better.

As the only Deaf woman on campus, Sasha had a good reputation with faculty as a hard-working student, but the barriers to getting a notetaker in class were frustrating. She shared, I noticed that no one took it seriously, particularly the professors. They basically blew it off and would say half-heartedly, 'Who wants to take notes?' nobody wanted to. So, I often resorted to asking the professor to give me their prep notes. The onus was upon me to ensure that I had accessible education. So, I regularly had to do the work to justify my place in the class to the professors.

Their academics were impacted by needing access to accommodations after hours. Sasha shared,

I was that lone Deaf girl. I told the professor nobody wanted to work with me; I was just gonna work alone. How would I communicate with them [my group] because the university didn't provide me access to work with students after class?

It was clear that their campuses did not have a robust support system for students with disabilities. Jolene stated, "The one thing missing from an HBCU is disability. There were very few people with disabilities." Perhaps this lack of presence impacted awareness of access issues such as the need for automatic doors, interpreters, and a disability-friendly campus climate. Even as the women struggled to get their needs met, some let it go to be in spaces that offered other advantages. Sasha said, "Honestly, I don't want to harm the Black community, so I opted not to sue."

Advocacy Skills Developed

The leap from high school to college can be challenging for students because disability laws and support are navigated differently, mostly with parents. Developing strong advocacy skills can make a difference in a Deaf student successfully navigating college or not. Despite the challenges, these women quickly learned how to resist. For Kacee, that started early with her VR counselor,

She [the VR counselor] told me that the state's VR policy was for Deaf students to go either to Gallaudet or to NTID [National Technical Institute for the Deaf] for the state to pay in full. But because I wanted to go to [HBCU institution], they wouldn't pay for my books, for example, and I was like, sure, fine.

Kacee refused to let state policy deter her from attending an HBCU—Jolene and others' advocacy skills developed on campus. Jolene shared, “Coming into an HBCU, I increased my advocacy efforts; I do CP [Cerebral Palsy] awareness sessions, too. I also don't only advocate for myself; I advocate for other people plus myself.” Other women became more assertive; Faith proudly said, “I would say I learned to speak up. I learned to say my piece and speak up with confidence. Because no matter where you are or your situation, you can speak confidently as a Black woman.” Tasha exclaimed, “I had to be assertive like I would tell them I'm Deaf. It helped people understand why I kept asking them to repeat themselves.”

Sometimes, self-advocacy required them to navigate other HBCU systems, pay for their interpreter, and not give up. Kacee shared a frustrating experience with a faculty member while trying to take a summer class at a different HBCU.

The professor preferred that the interpreter move over to the corner because he noticed some students were looking at the interpreter instead of him. I was not pleased. It's not my problem. If they [students] look at the interpreter, they can still hear him talk. He wanted all the hearing students' eyes on him, and I said absolutely not.

Kacee attempted to handle this situation by writing the professor a letter. However, once the professor read her letter out loud during class, her parents were forced to get involved and work with campus administrators.

Discussion: Unpacking Unique Lived Experiences of Black Deaf Women

We integrate all five tenets of Black Deaf Feminism into our work to organize and make sense of the women's narratives. Tenet one serves as a foundational guide, ensuring we acknowledge the complex identities of Black Deaf women, even within predominantly Black or

Black female spaces. Our research project embodies the essence of the third tenet by recognizing and celebrating the significance of Black Deaf women's experiences in college.

Tenet 2: Structural Inequalities

Several micro, mezzo, and macro structural inequalities influenced the women's HBCU experience. Regardless of whether the women started college a year after the passing of the ADA or 20-plus years, most of them struggled to get access to necessary accommodations. Kacee's struggle to negotiate where her interpreter could sit in the room and the faculty member prioritizing his needs to be centered over her need for access to information is an example of a mezzo structural inequality in the classroom. Jolene's feelings of loneliness and mental health challenges were directly connected to the struggle to navigate Hampton's political structures and culture of what a reasonable accommodation meant to them versus what she needed to succeed. Concerning structural inequalities around their Deaf identity, the women's experiences are directly aligned with the research done with Black Deaf women at Predominately White Institutions (Chapple et al., 2012; Stapleton & Croom, 2016), and these barriers make academic achievement and retention harder. Learning to self-advocate was a skill they all had to learn. Kacee insisted that Spelman was the only school she attended enrolling, even when her VR counselor said Georgie would only pay for Gallaudet University. Faith had to learn to speak up confidently regardless of the structural barriers she faced. Developing advocacy skills is also aligned with disability and higher education literature (Stapleton & Croom, 2016).

Tenet 4: Acknowledge social constructions of race, gender, and deafness

HBCUs have a history of normalizing and celebrating the Black experience, culture, and life. Spaces like Spelman and Bennett College have also held space for Black women to be seen, centered, and honored. However, what is evident in the women's narrative is that HBCUs also normalize hearing-centric and able-bodiedness. The women and their families had to educate people on campus on the best ways to communicate with them and what accommodations they needed. Some of those learning moments were transformational, with friends learning ASL, friendship circles advocating for them, and staff going the extra mile to support them. Other moments were met with distance and disregard from faculty and some peers. Mitchell's (2006) metaphor of "flashing" is apparent in these moments. The women's race and gender often took a back seat to their Deaf identity, which was invisible until Tasha's hearing aid broke or a guy tried to get Sasha's attention across the yard. Tasha's desire to "be the same" in hopes of finding a sense of belonging, which Strayhorn's (2023) work emphasizes, could be quickly undone by the assumption of hearingness. The flashing of their Deaf identity also directly impacted their gender as moments of misunderstanding quickly turned hostile against these women by hearing men calling them "out of their name," showing the impact of marginalized intersectional oppression (tenet number one) on the Black Deaf women's experiences.

Tenet 5: Recognize the compounding effects of intersecting identities

The impact of intersectionality was shared throughout all the women's stories. Chapple (2019) explicitly states the importance of "recognizing the positionality that one aspect of identity may be more central than others at any moment in space, place, and time." (p. 194). For most of the women, their Black and gender identities were not questioned and fully embraced at their HBCUs. However, their Deaf and disabled identities played a central role in their experience, especially when it came to communication access in the classroom and co-curricular life. The compounding impact of audism was still present in a supportive Black but majority hearing space. The implications of unexamined hearing privilege created an isolating, exhausting, and frustrating experience. Sasha worked on a group project alone, Jolene could not secure classmates to take notes for her, and Kacee struggled during orientation. Merriweather's poem stanza, "Cookin' up their own recipe," has meant making a way out of no way, working three times as hard, educating those who are supposed to support them, and creating the experiences they want as Black Deaf women when the world around them does not know how.

Implications and Future Research

The Black Deaf women in this study have shown that success is possible at HBCUs, and their desire to thrive in Black educational spaces is strong. However, there is still much progress in making HBCUs more accessible and inclusive for Deaf students. While HBCUs face significant challenges due to systemic racism, this does not absolve them of the responsibility to recognize and address other forms of privilege and oppression on their campuses. HBCUs cannot claim to support all Black students while perpetuating and ignoring issues of ableism and audism within their campus cultures. There must be institutional commitments to supporting disabled students beyond the efforts of Disability Service Offices. Supporting their access and cultural needs is essential to fulfilling the institution's academic mission. Faculty require ongoing, formal training on how to work with students with disabilities in the classroom effectively (Evans et al., 2017). The cost of neglecting these issues is too high for students, leading to significant challenges such as educating faculty, finding their own interpreters, and engaging in self-advocacy. These efforts are time-consuming and can result in mental health issues, physical exhaustion, and feelings of isolation.

This research calls on educators, policymakers, and the broader community to recognize and address the unique needs and contributions of Black, Deaf, and disabled individuals within the HBCU landscape. Future research should deepen our understanding and promote more inclusive practices. It is essential to continue exploring the experiences of diverse disabled communities at HBCUs and to examine the structure and operation of Disability Service offices on these campuses. Do Black individuals staff these offices? Do they adhere to White disabled and Deaf ideologies and cultures, or have they evolved to reflect their predominantly Black campus environments? Based on the women's experiences, it is crucial to investigate issues of ableism and

audism within Black educational spaces and understand how Black essentialism affects our critique and acknowledgment of these issues.

Conclusion

The women's experiences on HBCU campuses blended positive engagement and unique challenges. Through the lens of a narrative methodology and the framework of Black Deaf Feminism, this research illuminates the often-overlooked experience of Black Deaf women attending HBCUs. Like many Black students who chose an HBCU, being in Black space was a significant motivator, as these women sought spaces where they could learn about Black history and identity beyond mainstream narratives. However, their stories also highlight the gaps of inequity within the educational system concerning disability, urging us not to assume a one-size-fits-all perspective in thinking everyone is able-bodied and hearing. This study is a testament to the strength, resilience, and richness of Black Deaf women's experiences at HBCUs, contributing to a more inclusive narrative of Black higher education. Indeed, these women cooked up their own recipe and made space for themselves and future Black Deaf women to experience the richness of our HBCU institutions.

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