

Promotion of African American Women Scholars After Tenure

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This editorial discusses the systemic challenges African American women scholars face in academia, particularly post-tenure. Despite their significant contributions, these scholars remain underrepresented in senior academic leadership due to intersecting racial and gender biases. The editorial highlights barriers such as implicit bias, disproportionate service responsibilities, and limited mentorship opportunities that impede their advancement. It advocates for institutional reforms, including transparent promotion criteria, equitable mentorship, and fostering inclusive academic cultures, to support African American women scholars beyond tenure and promote diversity in academic leadership.

Keywords: African American women, tenure, promotion, academic leadership, racial and gender bias, academic diversity, mentorship, systemic inequities.

The persistent underrepresentation of African American women in the academy, particularly in tenured and senior leadership positions, underscores a broader systemic inequity present within higher education. Despite their crucial role in enriching academic discourse and diversifying perspectives, African American women constitute less than 3% of tenured faculty across U.S. institutions, with 39% of colleges and universities reporting no tenured Black women faculty (American Association of University Women, 2021). This disparity highlights the barriers these scholars confront, including racialized and gendered biases, microaggressions, and the devaluation of their scholarly and service contributions. The intersectionality of race and gender exacerbates these challenges as African American women navigate an academic milieu that often marginalizes the experiences and contributions of both women and African Americans. The cumulative impact of these systemic injustices stymies their career advancement and undermines the diversity of perspectives within academia. The underrepresentation of African American women in senior academic positions limits the availability of role models for future generations, thereby perpetuating a cycle of exclusion and underrepresentation.

This editorial seeks to illuminate the critical necessity for sustained support and advancement of Black female scholars beyond tenure. While attaining tenure is a notable

accomplishment, it does not signify the cessation of challenges for these academics. African American women frequently encounter persistent barriers to ascending to senior leadership positions, such as implicit biases, disproportionate service expectations, and restricted access to mentorship and professional networks. Addressing these post-tenure challenges is essential for fostering diversity and inclusion in academic leadership. The present editorial will delineate the enduring obstacles faced by Black female academics, including systemic inequities and the compounded effects of intersecting racial and gender biases. It will also propose actionable strategies for institutions to bolster support for African American women post-tenure, including establishing transparent promotion criteria, implementing comprehensive mentorship programs, and cultivating an inclusive academic culture. Through this focus, I advocate for a more equitable academic environment where colleges and universities retain and empower Black female scholars to lead and inspire future generations.

Importance of Addressing Post-Tenure Challenges

Addressing the ongoing underrepresentation of African American women in senior academic leadership requires a dedicated focus on post-tenure promotion. Despite securing tenure, these scholars are still significantly underrepresented in crucial roles such as department chairs, deans, and provosts—positions essential for shaping academic policy and decision-making (Jackson, 2023). Furthermore, African American women are increasingly underrepresented among full and distinguished professors, highlighting the need for deliberate initiatives to promote their advancement beyond tenure (Griffin, 2019). To address these disparities and foster a more inclusive academic environment, it is essential to understand the multifaceted barriers African American women face even after achieving tenure.

The unique challenges African American women face due to the intersection of race and gender are often referred to as the “double bind.” These challenges—such as implicit biases, microaggressions, and systemic inequities—can impede their professional growth post-tenure (Croom, 2017; Tetteh et al., 2023). Effective post-tenure support is crucial to help these scholars navigate the barriers. Support includes providing essential resources, mentorship, and opportunities to overcome obstacles to earn promotion and advancement beyond tenure (Fuller, 2023). While post-tenure support is essential for addressing the immediate barriers faced by African American women, it is equally important to recognize that these challenges are compounded by a broader context of systemic disadvantages throughout their academic careers. The cumulative disadvantages experienced by African American women throughout their academic careers, including unequal access to professional networks, disproportionate service obligations, and academic marginalization, create additional hurdles to promotion (McGee, 2024; Platt, 2022). By concentrating on post-tenure promotion, institutions can address these compounded disadvantages with targeted support that meets the specific needs of African American women (Turner & Stanley, 2023). Promoting African American women to senior academic positions has broader implications for the academic community. Their increased

representation provides visible role models for students and early-career scholars from underrepresented backgrounds, potentially inspiring them to pursue academic careers and leadership roles (Wilkins-Yel et al., 2022). This visibility creates a more diverse and inclusive academic environment (Jackson et al., 2023). Moreover, diversifying academic leadership enriches decision-making processes and institutional culture by incorporating multiple perspectives and experiences. African American women bring valuable insights into equity, inclusion, and social justice, enhancing the broader academic community (McNair et al., 2020). While increasing African American women's representation in senior academic positions has significant benefits for the academic community, addressing the specific challenges they face in advancing beyond tenure is equally crucial.

Addressing post-tenure promotion helps rectify inequities in workload distribution. African American women often face disproportionate service and mentoring responsibilities, which can detract from their research and leadership pursuits (Kerr, 2021; Perry, 2024). Post-tenure support helps balance these demands, allowing these scholars to concentrate on their professional development and leadership goals (Gerke et al., 2023). Enhancing post-tenure promotion efforts is crucial for retaining African American women faculty. The barriers they face can lead to burnout, attrition, and loss of valuable talent and expertise (Johnson, 2022). Institutions can improve retention rates by supporting their career development post-tenure, ensuring these scholars continue contributing to academia and mentoring the next generation of leaders (Cole et al., 2023). Focusing on post-tenure promotion is not only a matter of equity but also essential for fostering a more diverse, inclusive, and vibrant academic community. Addressing the unique challenges and cumulative disadvantages African American women scholars face while providing the support needed for their advancement is vital for their continued presence and leadership in academia.

Purpose of the Editorial

The present editorial aims to shed light on the ongoing challenges that African American women face beyond tenure and promotion to associate professor. I also aim to suggest concrete strategies for their sustained advancement in academia. Despite attaining tenure, these scholars often confront obstacles that hinder their professional growth and visibility. This editorial examines these barriers and proposes actionable recommendations for institutions and peers to cultivate a more inclusive academic environment. By centering the experiences of African American female academics, I aim to help create a more just and thriving academic community where everyone's contributions are fully recognized and valued.

The State of African American Women in Academia

The underrepresentation of African American women in academia, particularly in tenured positions, remains a critical and persistent issue. From 2016-2023, the percentage of African American full professors saw only a marginal increase, rising from 3.3% to 3.5% (Palmer, 2024). Moreover, in the 2022-2023 academic year, African Americans constituted 7.9% of assistant

professors, 5.2% of associate professors, and just 3.5% of full professors (Gayles, 2024). Yet, Black women accounted for a mere 2.1% of tenured associate and full professors at public and private nonprofit four-year colleges in the United States (NBC Washington, 2024). These figures, however, mask the stark disparities across institutions. While Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) maintain higher proportions of tenured Black female faculty, Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) continue to fall significantly short. The significant underrepresentation of Black female tenured faculty not only diminishes the presence of Black women in academia but also stifles the diversity of thought and inclusivity essential for enriching academic research and discourse.

The compounded effects of racial and gender biases often result in a dual burden of discrimination for African American women in academia. For instance, African American female academics frequently face stereotype threat, where their abilities are unjustly questioned based on racial and gendered expectations (Chance, 2022; Meyers, 2002). Intersectionality also impacts career advancement, as Black women may face barriers in networking opportunities and experience scrutiny that their peers do not. Additionally, African American women often take on additional responsibilities, such as serving on diversity committees or mentoring students of color, which, while valuable, can detract from their time and energy dedicated to research and professional development (Harley, 2008; Hirshfield & Joseph, 2011). Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach: institutions must commit to creating inclusive environments that actively dismantle systemic barriers, provide equitable resources for research and professional growth, and recognize the unique contributions of African American women. Promoting policies that support work-life balance, offering robust mentorship programs, and fostering a culture of inclusivity are essential steps toward ensuring that African American women attain tenure and thrive beyond it.

Challenges Faced After Tenure

The challenges faced by Black female academics, even after attaining tenure, highlight the ongoing systemic inequities in academia that hinder their professional growth and overall well-being. Despite the attainment of tenure, Black female academics continue to face profound challenges that underscore the persistence of systemic inequities in academia. One of the most pressing issues is the pervasive sense of isolation, as they often find themselves in environments where mentorship and solidarity from individuals with similar experiences are sparse (Boatswain, 2022; Davis et al., 2021). This lack of relatable guidance hinders their ability to navigate complex academic landscapes and exacerbates feelings of alienation. The lack of mentors who recognize the unique intersectional challenges faced by Black women in academia highlights the pressing need for institutions to establish strong mentorship programs and support networks. Such initiatives should offer meaningful guidance and cultivate a sense of belonging.

In addition to isolation, Black female scholars must contend with institutional biases that persist even after tenure. These biases, often subtle yet deeply impactful, manifest in promotion and evaluation processes, where their contributions may be undervalued and their achievements

overlooked. Such systemic issues not only hinder career advancement but also perpetuate a culture where Black women are less likely to be recognized as leaders or key contributors (Jones et al., 2015). Addressing these biases requires a concerted effort from academic institutions to implement transparent evaluation criteria and provide ongoing training to combat implicit biases. Additionally, Black female academics often bear the brunt of service and diversity-related responsibilities. While these duties are crucial, they often hinder their research productivity (Fink, 2024; Porter et al., 2018). The expectation to engage extensively in service roles, such as mentoring underrepresented students or serving on diversity committees, places an undue strain on their time and resources, further marginalizing their scholarly contributions. To mitigate this imbalance, institutions must ensure that service contributions are equitably recognized and rewarded while providing the necessary support to enable these scholars to maintain a focus on research and professional growth. By addressing the challenges of isolation, institutional biases, and the disproportionate service burden, the academy can create a more equitable and supportive environment that allows Black female scholars to thrive and fully contribute to advancing knowledge and diversity in higher education.

The Importance of Promoting African American Women Scholars

Promoting African American women to senior academic positions is crucial for enhancing diversity in leadership, enriching the decision-making process, and fostering inclusivity within academia. Leadership roles such as department chairs, deans, and university presidents allow African American women to introduce varied perspectives and address a broader range of issues that better cater to the needs of diverse students and faculty (Cole, 2021). Their presence challenges systemic biases, driving much-needed institutional change. In addition to their leadership contributions, African American women are powerful role models for aspiring scholars, breaking down stereotypes and inspiring students of color to pursue academic careers (Collins, 2020). Their visibility is instrumental in motivating early-career researchers and creating pathways for mentorship, which are essential for career advancement. This mentorship fosters professional development and strengthens the academic community's commitment to equity.

Furthermore, African American women contribute unique perspectives to academic research, often exploring overlooked or underexplored areas such as health disparities, social justice, and educational equity (Beall-Davis, 2017). Their innovative methodologies and approaches lead to groundbreaking insights that benefit academia and society. Therefore, incorporating diverse cultural perspectives of African American women into research promotes a deeper understanding of critical issues (Weibel, 2024). Advancing African American women in academia enhances leadership diversity, provides essential mentorship, and encourages innovative research, all crucial for fostering a more inclusive future in education and research.

Strategies for Supporting Promotion After Tenure

Supporting African American female academics beyond tenure ensures their continued academic success and growth. The post-tenure phase presents opportunities and challenges, requiring tailored strategies to help these scholars navigate this critical career stage. This discussion outlines key approaches to supporting African American female academics after tenure. First, institutions must advocate for and implement policies that address systemic biases and promote career advancement for African American female scholars. Recognizing barriers within academic institutions, such as implicit bias in promotion practices and unequal access to resources, is crucial (Podreka et al., 2024). Policies should ensure equitable opportunities for all faculty, including transparent promotion criteria recognizing African American female scholars' diverse contributions (Turner, 2015). Additionally, professional development programs should be designed to meet the specific needs of these scholars, creating environments where they can thrive and make significant contributions to their disciplines.

Formal mentorship and sponsorship programs are critical for guiding African American female scholars through post-tenure complexities. Mentors offer advice and support in navigating academic politics, securing funding, and pursuing leadership roles (Griffin et al., 2013). However, mentorship alone is insufficient; sponsorship is equally essential, where sponsors actively advocate for their protégés and open doors to new opportunities (Patton, 2009). Institutions should establish structured programs connecting African American female academics with experienced professionals who can offer guidance and advocacy; however, it is crucial to ensure that the responsibility of mentoring does not disproportionately fall on a small number of successful Black female faculty, as this could lead to burnout and diminish their academic pursuits. To address this concern, institutions can create collaborative mentorship networks that distribute mentoring responsibilities among a diverse group of faculty and professionals, providing resources and support for mentors and mentees to foster a more sustainable mentoring environment.

Service responsibilities disproportionately burden African American female academics, often detracting from their research and professional development. To alleviate this, institutions should implement policies that ensure an equitable distribution of service tasks, provide administrative support, and appropriately recognize service contributions (Joseph & Hirshfield, 2011). Reducing these demands allows scholars to focus on their research and career advancement.

Finally, promoting an inclusive academic culture is fundamental. Institutions must create welcoming environments and address microaggressions and systemic biases (Williams et al., 2020). Investing in training programs that raise awareness about inclusivity and equip faculty with tools to address microaggressions is vital. Furthermore, fostering open dialogue about diversity and inclusion helps create supportive academic communities where African American female scholars feel valued. Supporting African American female academics beyond tenure requires a multifaceted approach involving institutional support, mentorship, balanced service loads, and promoting inclusive cultures. By adopting these strategies, institutions can help ensure that African American female scholars continue to excel and contribute significantly to their fields.

Conclusion

The journey of African American women in academia, while marked by resilience and significant contributions, remains laden with challenges that persist even after achieving tenure. Although tenure should signify a supportive and equitable environment, these scholars face underrepresentation in leadership roles, limited access to resources, and persistent biases that hinder their academic and professional growth. Addressing these issues is not just a matter of justice but a crucial step toward fostering a more inclusive and innovative academic community. Addressing these persistent challenges requires a multifaceted approach that recognizes the obstacles African American women face and actively works toward creating systemic change.

Institutions, colleagues, and policymakers must proactively support African American women post-tenure. Academic institutions should offer comprehensive mentorship programs, equitable funding opportunities, and professional development initiatives tailored to these scholars' unique needs. Moreover, colleagues play a role in cultivating an inclusive culture that values and amplifies their voices. Policymakers must advocate for policies that promote diversity and dismantle systemic inequalities within academia. By combining institutional support, allyship from colleagues, and policy advocacy, we can begin to dismantle the barriers faced by African American women in academia and foster a more inclusive environment.

With these efforts, I envision a future where systemic challenges are effectively addressed and diversity is acknowledged and woven into the fabric of academic institutions. This future promises a dynamic scholarly community where African American women are empowered to thrive and lead. Now is the time for action—let us commit to creating a more equitable environment where every scholar can achieve their full potential.

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