

I AM! Discovering/Centering Black Women at Historically Black Colleges and Universities

Jennifer M. Johnson
Temple University

Felecia Commodore
University of Illinois, Urbana Champaign

Lori D. Patton
University of California, Los Angeles

“It seems that when there are men around who are flexing their assertive muscles, there is no room for Black women to do the same...if Black women suppress their assertive selves to please men, then we can understand why it’s easier for them to develop their assertive abilities on white campuses [compared to HBCU campuses] (p. 145)” - Jacqueline Fleming (1984) Blacks in College

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) have been celebrated for their nurturing and familial campus environments (Johnson & Jackson, 2024; Mobley, 2017; Smith et al., 2021). These institutions have also been lifted as sites for leadership development, empowerment, and innovation (Lee-Johnson, 2021; Mobley et al., 2025; Winkle-Wagner et al., 2019). Though earlier HBCU research tended to engage in comparative studies in relationship to predominantly white institutions (PWIs), there have been, more contemporarily, studies focusing solely on HBCU campuses and characteristics (e.g., Johnson, 2019; Njoku et al., 2017; Patton et al., 2023; Williams & Taylor, 2022). These studies have pushed prior conversations on leadership, student development, student success, STEM education, and other critical topics.

Similarly, the scholarship on Black women in college has expanded over time. While earlier works often compared Black women to their white counterparts, more recent research has purposefully centered Black women’s college experiences, decoupled from comparisons with their same gender or same race counterparts, and allowing for more nuanced observations and findings. This body of work has addressed areas such as Black women’s identity development, college choice, mental health, engagement in sorority life, and participation in leadership development

(Castelin & White, 2022; Commodore et al., 2018; Domingue, 2015; Ofoegbu, 2023; Patton & Croom, 2017; Porter & Dean, 2015; Q., Williams et al., 2022). Although central to increasing how we understand their experiences, much of this research has been situated within a predominantly white campus setting, though some scholarship has focused on HBCUs (e.g., Cooper et al., 2021; Krebs et al., 2011; Jones, 2020; Njoku & Patton, 2017; Patton & Simmons, 2008; Williams & Johnson, 2019).

As the scholarship within each of these distinct areas (HBCUs and Black women) continues to unfold, much of what we understand regarding HBCUs and Black women's gendered experiences is both limited and insufficient to capture their lived realities in HBCU environments. Moreover, what has been uncovered through research is often siloed into various disciplinary spaces, requiring those conducting studies to cognitively conjure what ecosystems are created by Black women and how these ecosystems are discovered, experienced, and navigated. Though tensions exist when discussing gender issues at HBCUs, these issues and experiences, as several scholars argue, must continue to be explored beyond comparisons to Black men (Commodore, 2019; Johnson & McGowan, 2017; Mobley & Johnson, 2019; Lee, 2021; Njoku et al., 2017). Much more remains to be learned about Black women across the postsecondary landscape, particularly how they experience and navigate HBCUs. This thematic issue centers Black women's experiences and invites authors from various spaces and places on HBCU campuses and in the HBCU community into a collective and necessary conversation.

Overview

With a focus on Spelman College and Bennett College, Dickens, Taylor, and Holly revisit the motivations for attending an HBCU among Black undergraduate women from a Black feminist standpoint. It is one of the few empirical studies designed to assess how the intersection of race and gender identity is associated with reasons for attending HBCUs designed for the education of Black womyn.

Wilkerson, Entress, Walker, and Samuels explore the significance of centering Black women's voices within political messaging at HBCUs. The study focuses on the political socialization of college-aged students, emphasizing Black women voters' historical and contemporary impact. Relatedly, Lee-Johnson, Gaskew, Ray, and Foster-Pierre unpack the leadership experiences of undergraduate Black women. Through critical visual methodology, the study provides space for Black women to define leadership, not just in their own words, but through creative expression. Participants had the opportunity to draw and reflect on pictures created to represent the qualities that make their leadership styles unique.

Turning our attention to campus environments, Hall, Jones, and Dickens take an important look at intimate partner violence among young Black women attending HBCUs. Their work highlights the importance of exploring how gendered norms and campus social pressures influence why Black women may justify experiences with intimate partner violence. We also call attention to the need for the expansion of critical disability-focused research at HBCUs. Ramirez-Stapleton and Porter-Vaugh describe the ways Black Deaf women desire to thrive in Black educational spaces and how to make HBCUs more accessible and inclusive for Deaf students.

This issue also unpacks the methodological challenges associated with centering Black women in HBCU scholarship. Leggett-Robinson and Pearson embrace the epistemological ambiguity of “objectivity,” reflecting on the concerns, biases, and freedom associated with engaging in STEM educational research with Black women as Black women by “holding space for our participants and ourselves.” Similarly, through phenomenological reflection, Gamble-Lomax takes us into the world of a Black woman professor in a Teacher Education program. Through “genuine connection to self,” she reflects on the beauty of the HBCU space, the need for Black educators, and the historical and contemporary impact Black colleges have within the community.

We bring these scholarly, practical, conceptual, theoretical, and philosophical explorations together to (re)discover, center, and (re)define Black women's experiences, sensemaking, and world-making practices within the HBCU context. Through this collective conversation, this issue contributes to the advancement of scholarship, practice, and policies regarding Black women of diverse HBCU stakeholder identities.

References

- Castelin, S., & White, G. (2022). “I’m a strong independent Black woman”: The strong Black woman schema and mental health in college-aged Black women. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 46(2), 196-208. <https://doi.org/10.1177/03616843211067501>
- Commodore, F. (2019). Losing herself to save herself: Perspectives on conservatism and concepts of self for Black women aspiring to the HBCU presidency. *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy*, 34(3), 441-463. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45153764>
- Commodore, F., Baker, D. J., & Arroyo, A. (2018). *Black women college students: A guide to student success in higher education*. Routledge.
- Commodore, F., Lockett, A. W., Johnson, A. C., Googe, C., & Covington, M. (2020). Controlling images, comments, and online communities: A critical discourse analysis of conversations about Black Women HBCU presidents. *Women’s Studies International Forum*, 78(12330), 1-8. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2019.102330>
- Cooper, J. N., & Newton, A. (2021). Black female college athletes’ sense of belonging at a Historically Black College and University (HBCU). *Journal of Negro Education*, 90(1), 71-83. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/820505>
- Domingue, A. D. (2015). “Our leaders are just we ourselves”: Black women college student leaders’ experiences with oppression and sources of nourishment on a predominantly White college campus. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 48(3), 454-472. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10665684.2015.1056713>
- Fleming, J. (1984). *Blacks in college. A comparative study of students’ success in Black and in White Institutions*. Jossey-Bass Inc., Publishers.
- Hardy, K. L., Williams, M. R., Bullington, K. E., & Commodore, F. (2021). Preparing to fill the leadership gap: The challenges facing women leaders in mid-level positions at urban community colleges. *Journal of Women in Educational Leadership*, 278, 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.32873/unl.dc.jwel.202>
- Johnson, J. M. (2019). Pride or prejudice? Motivations for choosing Black colleges. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, 56(4), 409-422. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19496591.2019.1614936>

- Johnson, J. M., & Jackson, E. R. (2024). The HBCU advantage: Reimagining social capital among students attending Black colleges. *Frontiers in Education*, 9(1344073). <https://doi.org/10.3389/educ.2024.1344073>
- Johnson, J. M., & McGowan, B. L. (2017). Untold stories: The gendered experiences of high-achieving African American alumni of historically Black Colleges and Universities. *Journal of African American Males in Higher Education*, 8(1), 23–44.
- Jones, L. V., Ahn, S., Quezada, N. M., & Chakravarty, S. (2020). Enhancing counseling services for Black college women attending HBCUs. *Journal of Ethnic & Cultural Diversity in Social Work*, 29(4), 325-340. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1531324.2018.1449689>
- Kennedy, J. L. (2012). The HBCU experience: Liberating or not? *The Urban Review*, 44(3), 358-377. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-012-0200-y>
- Krebs, C. P., Barrick, K., Lindquist, C. H., Crosby, C. M., Boyd, C., & Bogan, Y. (2011). The sexual assault of undergraduate women at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 26(18), 3640-3666. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260511403759>
- Lee-Johnson, J. L. (2021). Authentically LEADing: Supporting undergraduate Black women leaders at HBCUs to authentically be themselves. *About Campus*, 26(3), 29-33. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1086482221994123>
- Mobley Jr., S. D. (2017). Seeking sanctuary: (Re)claiming the power of historically Black colleges and universities as places of Black refuge. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 30(10), 1036-1041. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2017.1312593>
- Mobley Jr., S. D., & Johnson, J. M. (2019). No pumps allowed: The “problem” with gender expression and the Morehouse College Appropriate Attire Policy. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 66(7), 867-895. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2018.1486063>
- Mobley Jr., S. D., Njoku, N. R., Johnson, J. M., & Patton, L. D. (2025). *Embracing queer students' diverse identities at historically black colleges and universities: A primer for presidents, administrators, and faculty*. Rutgers University Press.
- Njoku, N. R., Butler, M., & Beatty, C. C. (2017). Reimagining the historically Black college and university (HBCU) environment: Exposing race secrets and the binding chains of respectability and othermothering. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 30(8), 783-799. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2017.1350297>
- Njoku, N. R., & Patton, L. D. (2017). Explorations of respectability and resistance in constructions of Black womanhood at HBCUs. In L. D. Patton & N. Croom (Eds.), *Critical Perspectives on Black Women and College Success* (pp. 157-171). Routledge.
- Ofoegbu, E. D. (2025). “Aren't you here to help me?”: Examining the role of identity as Black women athletes navigate relationships and create community at predominantly White institutions. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 18(2), 131-141. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000493>
- Patton, L. D., & Simmons, S. L. (2008). Exploring complexities of multiple identities of lesbians in a Black college environment. *The Negro Educational Review*, 59(3-4), 197-215.
- Patton, L. D., Blockett, R. A., & McGowan, B. L. (2023). Complexities and contradictions: Black lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer students' lived realities across three urban HBCU contexts. *Urban Education*, 58(6), 1355-1382. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085920959128>

- Patton, L. D., & Croom, N. N. (2017). *Critical perspectives on Black women and college success*. Taylor & Francis.
- Porter, C. J., & Dean, L. A. (2015). Making meaning: Identity development of Black undergraduate women. *NASPA Journal About Women in Higher Education*, 8(2), 125-139. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19407882.2015.1057164>
- Smith, T. C, Israel, A., Ford, J. R., & McDonald, A. (2021). I too dream: Using appreciative advising to combat student retention challenges at HBCUs. *About Campus*, 26(5), 14-18. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10864822211058244>
- Williams, K. L., Mobley Jr., S. D., Campbell, E., & Jowers, R. (2022). Meeting at the margins: Culturally affirming practices at HBCUs for underserved populations. *Higher Education*, 84, 1067-1087. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-022-00816-w>
- Williams, K. L., & Taylor, L. D. (2022). The Black cultural student STEM success model: A framework for Black students' STEM success informed by HBCU environments and Black educational logics. *Journal of Women and Minorities in Science and Engineering*, 28(6), 81-108.
- Williams, M. S., & Johnson, J. M. (2019). Predicting the quality of Black women collegian's relationships with faculty at a public historically Black university. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 12(2), 115-125. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000077>
- Williams, Q. A., Williams, B. M., & Brown, L. C. (2022). Exploring Black girl magic: Identity development of Black first-gen college women. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 15(4), 466. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000294>
- Winkle-Wagner, R., Forbes, J., Rogers, S., & Reavis, T. B. (2019). A culture of success: Black alumnae discussions of the assets-based approach at Spelman College. *Journal of Higher Education*, 91(5), 653-573. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2019.1654965>