Make Space, Take Space:
An Exploration of Academic Counter-Spaces for Black Collegiate Women

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter focuses on the impact of a culturally relevant course centering the experiences of Black women attending a Historically White Institution (HWI). This chapter will provide an overview of the course creation, implementation, and positive implications of a gender-specific course steeped in the African Diaspora. Using Black feminist thought, the authors examine how Black female students experience community, self-discovery, and academic success. The chapter highlights student voices and discusses the lasting impact of the case design on the students and collegiate community. In addition, the co-creators share the impact of the course on their own well-being and its larger impact on the collegiate campus.

INTRODUCTION

Even with increased numbers of students of color at Historically White Institutions (HWI) over the last 60 years and the implementation of policies to diversify campuses, these campuses are still replete with racism and discrimination (Lewis et al., 2021). Campus climate for Black students attending HWIs remains an important subject in higher education research as institutions seek to better serve students of

color (McCabe, 2009). Despite efforts to address campus climate concerns through the increasing and pervasive growth of diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, hostile campus climates that subject students to isolation, racial microaggressions, and racial hostility continue to affect the retention of African American[1] students attending HWI's (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Rankin & Reason, 2005; Smedley et al., 1993; Solórzano et al., 2000).

Research in higher education shows that among African American students who withdraw from their institution, many do so because they feel disconnected from the institution, often feeling like they have no support system (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007). In their study on the effects of racial microaggressions, Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2000) found that these frequent, indirect offenses directly impact the academic and social lives of African American students. Research findings indicate that Black students experience racial microaggressions at a significantly greater frequency than Asian, Latinx, or multi-racial students on campus (Lewis et al., 2021). As a result of experiences with microaggressions, students of color created counterspaces that serve as "sites where deficit notions of people of color can be challenged and where a positive collegiate racial climate can be established and maintained" (Solarzano, 2000, p. 70). Brown and Jayakumar (2013) argue that African American students are better equipped for success in schooling when their "racial identities are validated and when striving for success does not require one to undermine or dismiss their cultural or racial history/values'' (p. 175). In these counterspaces, the cultural histories, experiences, and values of African Americans are not dismissed, but are affirmed and validated.

Despite the challenges that arise from creating and maintaining such spaces (Hughes & Howard-Hamilton, 2003), the necessity for doing so exceeds the threats to their existence. Hughes and Howard-Hamilton (2003) also argue that culturally relevant curricula in formal classroom settings are needed to provide further support between Black faculty, staff, and students. Black faculty and staff are uniquely equipped to deliver such pedagogy and can develop a safe space for students through developing trusting relationships grounded in their shared experiences (Hughes & Howard-Hamilton, 2003).

Research centered on Black women on college campuses found that Black women experienced isolation, invisibility, and inadequacy at Historically White Institutions, especially within the learning environment where their ideas and assertions are often dismissed due to their identity as Black women (Fleming, 1984; Jones, 2020; Leath & Chavous, 2018; McCabe, 2009). It is within the classroom space where Black women report they experience the most microaggressions. African American women at HWIs face daily challenges in their attempts to connect with one another, and experience academic and psycho-social challenges at higher rates than their counterparts (Hughes & Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Shahid et al., 2018). In a study focused on the social experiences of African American women at an HWI, Sims (2008) found that many women did not form informal social connections on their campuses and asserts that their needs should be addressed in ways that are tailored to their experiences as Black women (Howard-Hamilton, 2003). Similar to the need for a shared space for African American students as a collective, Black women can benefit from having greater access to peers with shared identities for their persistence on college campuses (Howard-Hamilton, 2003).

As research highlights the need for a shared space for African American students as a collective, Black women can benefit from having greater access to peers with shared identities to positively affect their persistence on college campuses (Howard-Hamilton, 2003). In response to the needs of Black undergraduate women, an undergraduate course, *Sisters' Journey*, was developed to provide a safe space for first year Black women across the Diaspora at a selective HWI on the west coast. *Sisters' Journey* focuses on cultivating the academic, cultural, personal, and interpersonal needs of Black women. This course was founded by four African American women who represented both administrators and doctoral students

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