

Chapter 2

Lifting as We Climb

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ABSTRACT

This chapter will chart Black women's historical and continued commitment to education and racial uplift by examining 21st century Black women directors of Black cultural centers (BCCs). Their contributions to the education of Black college students on predominantly white campuses as a form of liberation and racial uplift echo the race work undertaken by Black women throughout history. While historical and 21st century Black women educators share a spirit of persistence, resilience, passion, and commitment for racial uplift in the Black community, despite the compounding racism and sexism they face while helping to educate and uplift the next generation of Black students and leaders, 21st century Black women educators are seeking to advance their personal and professional lives as well.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter researches the historical and contemporary perspectives of Black women's professional careers in cultural centers at predominantly White institutions (PWIs). While the chapter provides historical context for Black women in cultural centers and their contributions to higher education, it also incorporates the authors' lived experiences in these roles, and how they came to this research. Dr. Vernese Edghill-Walden, lead author, and Dr. Raja Staggers-Hakim are both former directors of cultural centers at predominately White institutions. Below they share their accounts of their experiences in those roles. Dr. Anne Edwards is currently the director of a Black Cultural Center. She shares her current experience under the section "Black Women and Race-Specific Positions: Transforming the Next Generation" and discusses the implications for next generation cultural center leaders.

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Dr. Vernese Edghill-Walden's Reflection

I started working in higher education in the late 1980s. I was eager to begin my professional career in, what was called at that time, Minority Affairs or Multicultural Affairs. I fell in love with this work as an undergraduate student and knew that my career in higher education would focus on supporting Black students. As a young professional, I was a Black Cultural Center director for twelve years. It was one of the most rewarding professional experiences while also being one of the most complex and challenging. I loved nurturing, advising, and mentoring young Black student leaders. To see their transformation from freshman year to senior year was and still is priceless. However, this transformational work required advocacy, a commitment to uplift the Black community, and a skilled interpreter between the institution and the students. These responsibilities did not come with resources or equitable salary and the position was often marginalized and undervalued. Often this work challenged my work-life balance. Despite the feelings of marginalization, lack of resources and salary inequity, it did not stop my fervent commitment to support and help Black students succeed in these White spaces. Often negotiating from the margins, this role required my knowledge, relationships and understanding of the predominantly White college or university's political landscape. These skills assisted my students in finding their voices of resistance, power and resilience while navigating predominately White spaces. As director, I felt the sense of obligation to nurture and teach my students their own history, identity, culture and to impart a sense of responsibility for giving back to the Black community. This work often felt more like my life's work and passion than a job to me.

After twelve years, I left higher education and pursued other career and educational opportunities and educational advancement. It was at that time I began to reflect on my experience as director. I began to read more about historical Black women race workers and their role in advancing the Black community and promotion of racial uplift and education. Their narratives were powerful and resonated with my own experiences. It became apparent that the parallels of their lived experiences and that of 21st century Black women race workers in Black cultural centers (BCCs) was a generational trend of race work that should not remain at the margins of research. The historical and present day understanding of race work and racial uplift in this chapter provides a window into generations of brilliant Black women who share a common passion for racial uplift throughout history to present day.

This research was birthed out of my own personal experience as a Black Cultural Center Director. The chapter affirms the importance of Black women's professional voices, experiences, and advocacy as Black Cultural Center Directors. Our lived experiences are complex, grounded in historical experience, and remain relevant and vitally important in today's predominantly White spaces. It is clear this common thread was not a coincidence, but rather part of a strong legacy that must be researched and studied. The voices you hear in this chapter honor this legacy.

Dr. Raja Staggers-Hakim's Reflection

My interest in the health and well-being of black women in higher education—of cultural center directors particularly—began over 14 years ago. Then, I became the first permanent director of the women's center at a small public university in Connecticut. I was one of few women of color in the state in that role at the time, and while I was proud of the position I held and excited about the potential of the role, I was limited by administration and the broader campus community. I found that I was constantly required to perform in the capacity of caretaker, a role that I understood was consistent with western notions and

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