

Introduction

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The Climb to the Top

Though countless leadership studies and analyses have been conducted over the years, the manner in which individuals move to the top levels of their units or organizations still cannot be explained in a specific, precise fashion. In institutions of higher education, unlike most business, political, military, or religious institutions, the selection process includes a significant degree of involvement by colleagues in the “search” that is being conducted. For most individuals who hold administrative positions in colleges and universities, particularly at the level of dean or higher, the review of the candidates includes an assessment of their qualifications and accomplishments to determine that they have not only the appropriate academic background and professional preparation, but also the personal style and mannerisms to carry out the designated job responsibilities in an effective manner.

While the personal qualities that help to propel some individuals, but not others, into top administrative positions cannot be easily delineated, there are some immutable characteristics that have been responsible for persons who have the requisite qualifications nevertheless being ruled out of consideration for particular positions in certain types of institutions. The most obvious such characteristic in America’s colleges and universities has been race—the history and legacy of racial discrimination in America has meant that, except in very isolated situations, African Americans have not received equal consideration for positions, especially positions of power and authority, in the predominantly white colleges and universities.

In the three decades during which predominantly white institutions of higher education have been desegregated, some important gains have been made, although in regards to matters of race, serious problems and difficulties continue to exist. One important index of progress is the elevation of African Americans to significant positions within the hierarchy of the administrative structures at predominantly white colleges and universities. These advances, however, must be assessed in relation to the continued prevalence of racism in institutions of higher

education, the significant underrepresentation of African Americans in administrative and faculty positions, and the existence of a foreboding social climate that encourages resistance to efforts and actions that are intended to expand affirmative action and multicultural representation.

In this volume, African Americans who currently hold or have previously held senior-level administrative positions (deans, vice-presidents, and presidents) in predominantly white colleges and universities present their views regarding academic culture and practice. These persons are members of a very small cohort, and even though they have achieved a high level of professional success, none of them has been insulated from the indignities of racism as their careers have unfolded. By sharing information about their career paths and personal experiences, the contributors highlight some of the significant anomalies within the higher education arena, explore patterns of interaction and behavior in the predominantly white colleges and universities, and reveal some of the values and attitudes that manifest themselves in these institutions.

The insights provided by senior African American administrators help to provide greater clarity about ways in which educational, social, and political issues, including race relations, are reflected in predominantly white colleges and universities. By virtue of their exemplary records and accomplishments, the contributors can be said, by any fair and reasonable analysis, to have surmounted successfully the negative stereotypes that are frequently applied to African Americans. These are not the whiny musings of “wannabees” or the self-serving exaggerations of “couldabeens”—they are the poignant reflections of men and women who have climbed their way to the top, but who have not forgotten what it is like to be on the bottom.

The Academic Climate

Observers of the academic environment would likely regard it as a placid, perhaps even serene setting, where the highly educated members of an esteemed profession engage in various activities which lead to the greater enlightenment of the next generation. While some elements of this presentation are accurate, in the predominately white colleges and universities, this general atmosphere of serenity has been less accessible for African Americans than for their white counterparts. The basis for identifying and advancing individuals who carry out administrative responsibilities in institutions of higher education is ostensibly based on intellect, performance, and capability. However, as indicated by the contributions to this volume, racial considerations often emerge as individual actions, institutional policies, or both. Depending on the timing and the callousness of the specific occurrence, African American administrators may be frustrated, discouraged, enraged, or merely

embarrassed by specific situations that occur in the institutions where they carry out their duties and functions.

By and large, the culture of higher education has not been proactive or energetic in terms of identifying, advancing, and supporting African Americans who aspire to positions of leadership. Indeed, protracted resistance to affirmative action policies and practices which promote diversity in higher education has resulted in sparse representation of African Americans at senior administrative levels. Certainly, there is no shortage of willing, well-prepared candidates. The paucity of African Americans and the continued overrepresentation of white males in leadership positions have not diminished the fervor with which opponents of diversity have attacked the existence of programs that are intended to bring about a greater degree of racial balance in predominantly white institutions. In colleges and universities, settings where the celebration of the intellect might suggest that the power of reason would transcend the power of prejudice, the insidious presence of racism and discrimination is felt, just as it is in other social institutions. Thus, the success of African American administrators and their elevation to high-level positions in these settings remain rare occurrences. When such a situation does occur, it can usually be said to have taken place, not because of the system, but in spite of it.

Perseverance and Performance

While African Americans aspire to the highest level administrative positions just as their white counterparts do, placement patterns indicate that the areas in which they tend to find greater representation are also the sectors of the institution that are less often regarded as pathways to the top. For example, within the administrative arena, a greater proportion of African Americans seem to be located within the student affairs, minority affairs, and affirmative action arenas than are found in academic affairs or financial affairs. While there may be deanships and vice-presidencies within these areas that can be accessed by persons who move up through the ranks of these institutional categories, the conventional wisdom regarding movement into presidencies and chancellorships suggests that such actions are much less likely to occur for individuals who are not within the academic or financial affairs areas. There are exceptions to this "rule," even among African American administrators, which could be taken as an indication that extraordinary situations do occasionally occur, and, in rare cases, it is possible to surmount the barriers that are presented, no matter how high or wide they may be. Still, successful African American administrators, even those who reach the highest level at their particular institutions, invariably have to endure and overcome personal slights, insults, aggravations, and annoyances that are directed at them solely because of their color. While it might be presumed that any

dedicated professional who is attempting to advance in his or her field would demonstrate a high level of perseverance, this particular quality would seem to take on special significance when one considers that, whatever the quality of performance that one might deliver, race is likely to be a factor in the way that one is viewed, and perhaps even judged.

How then, do African American administrators make it to the top rungs of predominately white institutions? The individual stories of accomplishment that follow are as different as the persons that they represent. There are some common qualities that can be ascribed to the members of this cohort—outstanding performance and dogged perseverance have already been mentioned, but high self-esteem, vision, leadership, and integrity are among the other very evident characteristics. Even with these qualities, and the inestimable value of a good network of contacts and associates, the intangibles of timing and just plain good luck also factor into the equation. The representations in this volume are instructive because they tell us how far we have come and, equally important, how far we have to go.

Predominantly white colleges and universities frequently describe or present themselves as places that are sensitive to and concerned about affirmative action and diversity. The contributors to this volume describe racist situations that they have faced in various kinds of institutions—large and small, public and private, urban and rural—in locations that range from New England to the heartland of middle America, and from the West Coast to the Southeast. These accounts make it perfectly clear that acts of prejudice and discrimination in America are not bounded by geographical borders, that they are common elements in the academic world, and that those who practice them often pay little or no heed to the intellectual accomplishments or the professional achievements of African Americans.

Though there is variation from one chapter to another in terms of style of presentation, length, and the degree of specificity provided by the author, each contribution offers a personal, sometimes painful, testimony of struggle and achievement, of challenge and success. Remember, however, that these accounts are from survivors—people who were strong enough and lucky enough to overcome the obstacles that were put before them. It is critical to acknowledge that there are other African Americans like them, perhaps equally as talented, who succumbed to the suffocation of racism in the system of higher education, and who thus have never been able to put their skills and abilities to the fullest use in predominantly white colleges and universities.

Motivation and Inspiration

The eminent African American sociologist W. E. B. DuBois speaks about the “twoness” that African Americans feel, the sense of duality in being at the

same time a part of and apart from the American social order. DuBois's salient observations were made at a time when racial segregation was entrenched, either by law or custom, in much of the United States, and the effect was felt as strongly in colleges and universities as in other social institutions. In theory, this circumstance was changed by the civil rights struggle and the move toward desegregation that followed, but the reality is somewhat different. Institutions of higher education continued to follow traditional patterns of appointment, with predominantly white institutions selecting top administrators who were white, and usually male, while talented African American administrators found themselves restricted to the historically black colleges and universities. Michigan State University and later the State University of New York were notable exceptions to this rule as each of these institutions hired Clifton Wharton, an African American, first as president of the former institution, then later as chancellor of the latter.

Upon my entry into the academic community as a young professional in the early 1970s, I was fortunate to gain faculty and administrative experiences in settings as varied as a community college, an Ivy League university, and a private liberal arts college, and it was certainly striking to me that there was a noticeable absence of African Americans in high-level administrative positions in any of these institutions, or others with which I was familiar. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, I was working at a state-supported research university, and it was there that a series of events occurred that began to focus my interest on this topic. The Black Faculty and Staff Association at the university nominated a candidate for the provost's position at this institution when the new president initiated a search. The strongest candidate by far was an individual who was then serving as dean of the Graduate School of a Big 10 university, but there were two concerns about this person. One was that he shared the same disciplinary background as the president; the other was that he was African American, or in transparent coded terms, the candidate of the BFSA. To the credit of the search committee and the president, this individual was recommended, offered the position, and accepted it, thus becoming one of the very few such individuals to hold such an office. Even now, more than a decade and half later, only about a half-dozen African Americans have held positions of chief academic officer or chief executive officer of research I category universities.

The appointment of this individual to the provost's position led me to realize what the real impact of networking and sponsorship can mean. After he had gone through his period of transition, with his support, I competed in the campus review process to be the institutional nominee for the American Council on Education Fellowship Program in Academic Administration—arguably the higher education community's most selective and well known program for identifying and cultivating future administrative leaders. My application was selected to be forwarded by the campus to the ACE office for

consideration, and I was later notified that I was chosen to be interviewed as a finalist for the program. Shortly before my interview, the provost arranged for me to meet a friend and colleague whom he was hosting for dinner. His guest was at that time the only African American chancellor of a Research I university in the country and has since added another distinction—that of becoming the first African American to be the CEO of both a public and a private predominantly white institutions of higher education. Having dinner and conversation with someone of this stature was an emotional high for me, and I gained some valuable insights as well as a connection that I have valued since that time.

Ultimately, I was awarded the fellowship, and the year of shadowing, meetings, campus visitations, and other professional activities with the other members of the cohort certainly expanded my understanding of the intricacies of the world of higher education and reinforced my perception that African Americans were underrepresented in both the faculty and administrative ranks, and my sense that this situation had less to do with the qualifications and availability of candidates than it did with the ethos of academe, which essentially reflects the values and practices of the larger society. Unlike several of my colleagues in the ACE program, upon completion of the fellowship, I chose to return to the faculty ranks rather than pursue an administrative position, partly because I wanted to explore the individual and institutional considerations that were at play in maintaining the often subtle, but still highly effective, practices of racism that are so clearly evident in colleges and universities.

As the editor of this volume, one feels a sense of collective pride in the accomplishments and achievements of the contributors, along with admiration at their abilities to work around or through personal and organizational roadblocks that were thrust into their paths. At the same time, these presentations elicit feelings of aggravation and bewilderment that this cadre of outstanding individuals had to endure the various challenges, taunts, epithets, and other forms of discourteous, offensive, and unprofessional behavior. At a time when a variety of misguided observations are being made from individuals as diverse in background as university regents to legislative officials to newspaper columnists that the playing field has been leveled for African Americans in higher education and elsewhere, these commentaries offer an insider's sense of what is really happening in the exalted world of academe. They tell us that skin color is still an important factor in terms of how people are treated as they carry out their responsibilities.

Tomorrow and Thereafter

African Americans who are currently making their way up the administrative ladder experience unpleasant encounters that are distressingly similar

to the ones faced by their predecessors. These situations are likely to continue to occur until white academic leaders, administrators, and faculty signal to their colleagues and counterparts, in clear, specific language that racist behavior will not be tolerated and racist attitudes will not be countenanced. This message must come from those persons who are part of the majority and who have earned the confidence, respect, and admiration of their colleagues, because when it is articulated by African Americans, it is dismissed as defensive and paranoid. But when it comes from their friends and associates, their mentors and allies, their golf and bridge partners, then the message of inclusion and opportunity will begin to be considered in a different way than it has been in the past and is in the present.

The American dream has yet to be realized by many of its citizens. In the higher education arena, particularly within predominantly white colleges and universities, African Americans have systematically been denied the same opportunities to serve and lead that have been made available to other citizens. This legacy from the past does not have to continue into the future, and institutions of higher education can and should show the way for other social institutions to be more inclusive of African Americans in leadership positions. The contributors to this volume have sacrificed their privacy so that the indignities that they faced might be eliminated from the academic environment and to help all of us recognize the frightful truth that those who do not understand the past are doomed to repeat it.