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# Editors' Introduction: Exploring Doctoral Student Socialization and the African American Experience

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The 2014 Survey of Earned Doctorates reports the highest number (54,070) of doctoral degrees conferred by US institutions (from 1957 to 2014) (National Science Foundation, 2014). Within this period, doctoral degrees awarded to underrepresented students increased. In particular, doctorates earned by Blacks and/or African Americans increased by 70% between 1994-2014. This growth underscores what Willie, Grady, and Hope (1991) assert in their work, *African Americans and the Doctoral Experience: Implications for Policy and Practice*, that the opportunities for Blacks to obtain doctoral degrees was limited largely to the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. In the case of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, doctoral degree production for Blacks appears to be steadily increasing. While these numbers seem promising in terms of the pathways available to pursue doctoral education for Blacks/African Americans, who have been historically marginalized and excluded from educational spaces, it's important to reflect upon why opportunities did not always exist to understand the historical and current trends of participation affecting the doctoral student experience for Blacks/African Americans today.

Prior to the 1970's some of the only opportunities for Blacks/African Americans available to pursue doc-

toral education existed at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). These institutions are credited for supporting the academic excellence and success of this student population and have been touted as the primary producers of their graduate and professional degrees. These institutions are resourceful in addressing the psychological effects of racism, discrimination, and inequity in our society that have served to exclude students from doctoral education at predominately White institutions. These effects have been long-standing and there are numerous implications regarding their influence on the doctoral experience today. Given the scope and expansion of doctoral degree attainment beyond HBCUs, this volume of *Western Journal of Black Studies* focuses on the psychosocial issues influencing the experiences of Black/African Americans and the ways they shape doctoral student socialization. The psychosocial experience in this work is shaped by literature on racial ideology, centrality, and socialization concepts (Felder, Gasman, Stevenson, 2014). The authors in this volume considers the ways race influences aspects of the doctoral experience including (but not limited to): the student-faculty relationship, academic advisement, the role of social networks, the influence of prior academic and social experience, the impact of mentorship,



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the value of programmatic support in building cultural wealth, and understanding the transitions towards the professoriate. The psychosocial issues addressed in the volume only scratch the surface in examining the effects of exclusion on doctoral degree completion.

The psychosocial issues influencing doctoral student socialization for historically marginalized students are numerous and have far-reaching effects on our system of education. Critically examining literature related to these issues is essential to constructing dialogues that interrogate systemic barriers of injustice and inequity that influence transitions towards doctoral degree completion. These barriers serve to hinder the academic socialization within the experiences of historically marginalized doctoral students; thus, creating and sustaining vulnerabilities in our national system of graduate education. As such, this volume supports findings in seminal research reports like *The Path Forward: The Future of Graduate Education in the United States* (2010) by highlighting why Black/African American doctoral students and degree completers are important national assets. And, identifying aspects of the socialization experience that hinder success and promote attrition. Furthermore, this volume emphasizes aspects of doctoral student socialization that are supportive of transitions towards degree completion and transitions into the academy including: strategies to attract and retain Black/African American doctoral students; advisement and mentoring; developing supportive programmatic efforts, and building social networks that allow students to positively engage (and participate) in their communities.

Doctoral student socialization is a major area of doctoral education research and has been written about extensively (Gardner, 2008; 2009; Weidman, Twale, & Stein, 2001; Weidman & Stein, 2003; Tierney, 1997). While there has been some attention to the racial and cultural experiences of historically marginalized students (Ellis, 2001; Felder, Gasman, Stevenson, 2014; Taylor and Antony, 2000) there continues to be a dearth of empirical research on these specific areas. This volume addresses this gap with contributions like the one from Weidman, Twale, and Bethea who conceptualize socialization for students by expanding Weidman, Twale and Stein's seminal work on the topic. These scholars rethink earlier notions of socialization to draw on more recent literature about the value of individual and institutional characteristics influencing the Black/African American doctoral experience. They present practical strategies that minimize isolation and social distance from peers and faculty and emphasize how these strate-

gies strengthen the socialization process. Their work presents a different approach to examining the literature compared to the contribution by Blockett, Felder, Parrish & Collier who consider research of doctoral student socialization using Yosso's (2005) framework of cultural wealth as a lens for examining the pathway towards to the professoriate for Black/African Americans. They present several themes considered essential to building cultural wealth through the development of institutional/organizational programmatic efforts.

One of the hallmarks of the socialization experience is the student-faculty exchange. The interaction between students and faculty impact the doctoral experience in deep pervasive ways that shape an emerging scholar's identity, research agenda, and experiences towards and beyond degree completion. Therefore understanding the socialization processes of a student prior to matriculation with doctoral programs is essential to supporting academic success and degree completion.

Phelps and DeAngelo discuss the ways mentoring students of color at the undergraduate level shapes socialization experiences to support transition into doctoral programs and preparation to become future faculty. Their work demonstrates what a recent Council of Graduate Schools report on the attrition of minority doctoral students (Okahana, Allum, Felder and Tull and 2016) has called for, an increase of qualitative research to increase our awareness of the cultural nuances involved with supporting students of color. Using phenomenological methods, Phelps-Ward and DeAngelo carve a space in this work that emphasizes how this approach facilitates deeper understanding of the student-faculty dynamic.

While Phelps-Ward and DeAngelo discuss the pathway to the doctoral experience, Barker's work guides readers through the practice of academic advisement by White faculty members from the perspective of Black/African American doctoral students. Barker's use of critical race theory (CRT) provides a framework for interrogating legacies of exclusionary belief systems about cross-race student faculty-interactions. Again, the use of qualitative methods allows for emphasis on the student experience through counter-narrative; an opportunity to challenge oppressive practices that have typically hindered academic success and a sense of thriving within the culture of doctoral student development.

A discussion of social networking among Black male doctoral students by McGaskey, Freeman, Guyton, Richmond, Guyton, Cooper and McCloud, affirm the value of processes conducive to creating environments

where historically marginalized doctoral students thrive. Using social network theory through comparative case study, these authors delve into the emotional, instrumental, informational, and affirmational aspects of peer interaction and engagement that support doctoral student development.

To support the interdisciplinary vision of the *The Western Journal Black Studies*, the findings in this volume are specific to the Black/African American doctoral experience and are not discipline-specific but speak to this student experience across disciplines. It is our belief that this volume only scratches the surface on the research needed to further examine the impact of oppression on the experiences of his-

torically marginalized doctoral students. Overall, the authors in this volume offer unique perspectives based in a philosophical commitment to strengthening an understanding of the doctoral process for this student population. All of the authors have published research guiding our understanding of doctoral education and have practical experience in supporting, mentoring, and/or developing policies related to supporting the Black/African American doctoral experience. In addition to contributing seminal scholarship to the field, many of the publications were written collaboratively with doctoral students and/or were carefully attuned to the specific nuances of race and its impact on academic success and degree completion.

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