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## Two Centuries of Defining Moments for Black Women Higher Education Leaders in the United States

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## **Two Centuries of Defining Moments for Black Women Higher Education Leaders in the United States**

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### **Abstract**

Black women have made significant strides in their representation in higher education leadership in the United States over the past two centuries. They have faced barriers, yet they have also made substantial contributions to the field. Historically, Black women remain at the forefront of the struggle for equal access to education, with many earning degrees, becoming educators, and founding higher education institutions. However, their leadership roles have often been marginalized and overlooked. Despite this, Black women have persevered and made advancements in higher education administration, but they continue to face obstacles in their career paths and leadership progression. The experiences of Black women higher education leaders, including the challenges they encounter and the strategies they employ to overcome them, can provide valuable insights for improving the retention and advancement of Black women leaders. Achieving gender equality in leadership positions in higher education is a matter of fairness, and it is essential to advancing the evolving higher education landscape.

**Keywords:** Black Women Educational Leaders; Black Women Educational Leadership; Black Women Higher Education; Black Women Higher Education Leaders; US Higher Education; Women Education Leadership; Women Higher Education Leaders

## **Two Centuries of Defining Moments for Black<sup>1</sup> Women Higher Education Leaders in the United States**

### **Introduction**

*“I want history to remember me... not as the first Black woman to have made a bid for the presidency of the United States, but as a Black woman who lived in the 20th century and who dared to be herself. I want to be remembered as a catalyst for change in America.”<sup>2</sup> – Shirley Anita St. Hill Chisholm, the first African American woman in US Congress (1968).*

The journey of Black women in higher education leadership in the United States spans over two centuries, marked by considerable milestones and persistent challenges. Their dynamic roles and contributions were often marginalized in public Black colleges, where state educational administration was one of the few areas in which Black men could exert political influence, thus overshadowing the leadership roles of Black women. Theoretical lenses and historical advancements reveal that Black women in higher education leadership have faced critical barriers, including systemic racism and gender bias, which have hindered their career progression. In specific disciplines like engineering education, Black women leaders encounter unique challenges such as performance reviews, ethical decision-making, and the necessity of code-switching, highlighting the intersectionality of their experiences. Despite the increasing number of female students and novice faculty, the attainment of leadership positions by women, particularly Black women, remains limited due to hegemonic leadership practices that favor White men's and women's experiences, thus excluding them from mainstream leadership rhetoric and practice. This historical and ongoing struggle underscores the urgent need for more inclusive leadership theories and forums that support the advancement of Black women in higher education, ensuring their perspectives and contributions are recognized and valued.

Black women have made substantial strides in their career progression and representation in higher education leadership in the United States over the past two centuries (Johnson, 2023; Porter et al., 2022). They have faced challenges and barriers, yet they have also made significant contributions to the field. Despite the increasing number of female students and faculty in academia, there are still too few female leaders to promote and inspire diversity (Soares, 2023). Historically, Black women have been at the forefront of the struggle for equal access to education, with many earning degrees and becoming educators and founders of higher education institutions (Evans, 2016). However, their leadership roles have often been marginalized and overlooked (Walser-Smith, 2019). Despite this, Black women have persevered and made advancements in higher education administration. Their progress, though not without obstacles, is a testament to their resilience and the potential for further advancement. The experiences of Black women leaders in higher education, including the challenges they encounter and the strategies they use to overcome them, can provide valuable insights for improving the retention and advancement of Black women leaders (Gamble & Turner, 2015). Achieving gender equality

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<sup>1</sup> To maintain continuity and consistency, the constructs “Black” and “African American” are used interchangeably throughout this chapter.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.brainyquote.com/authors/shirley-chisholm-quotes>

in leadership positions in higher education is not only a matter of fairness but is also essential to advancing the current and evolving higher education landscape (Chamblin et al., 2022; Salinas, 2016; Wright & Salinas, 2016).

Defining moments for Black women higher education leaders in the United States have been shaped by historical achievements, challenges, and opportunities for reform. Black women have strived for higher education since before the Civil War, facing violence and daunting challenges but persisting in their pursuit of degrees (Williams, 2023). Despite these challenges, Black women have made advancements in higher education, with some becoming college administrators, presidents, and founders of institutions (Brubacher, 2017; Evans, 2016). Acquiring higher education was seen as a pathway to citizenship and freedom for Black Americans. Black women played a pivotal role in demanding access to education (Allen et al., 2023). However, the path for Black women in academic leadership is nuanced and multiplicative as they navigate gendered and racialized pathways to leadership (Johnson, 2024; Johnson & Johnson, 2024). Black women leaders in higher education face barriers and inequitable outcomes associated with the intersectionality of their race and gender (Showunmi, 2023). Understanding these barriers and identifying support is crucial for improving the retention of Black women leaders in higher education administration (Tevis et al., 2020).

Black women have faced numerous challenges in accessing and advancing in higher education leadership in the United States. Over the past two centuries, they have navigated cultural adversity and fought for equal opportunities, making notable strides despite systemic barriers. One particularly defining moment was the founding of Spelman College in 1881, a historically Black college for women that provided educational opportunities for Black women during a period of widespread exclusion from mainstream institutions (Mebane, 2019). Another milestone was the establishment of the Association for the Study of African American Life and History in 1915, advocating for the inclusion of Black historical experiences in higher education curricula (Dagbovie, 2003). Recent studies continue to explore the lived experiences of Black female faculty in leadership positions, highlighting the unique challenges they face, including racial and gender biases (Horhn & Lassiter, 2022). Despite this, Black women have ascended to prominent leadership positions as visible role models and advocates for diversity and inclusion in academia (Williams, 2023).

The literature on Black higher education leaders has focused primarily on Black men. Still, recent scholarship has highlighted the role of Black women – the good, the bad, and the ugly – in this field (Hailu & Cox, 2022). Challenges faced by Black women leaders include ethical decision-making, limited autonomy in selecting their administrative team, and code-switching (West, 2020). Despite being the most represented minoritized group among higher education administrators, Black women still lag behind White women and men in leadership positions (Grottis, 2022; Nickerson, 2020). Barriers to career progression for Black women administrators include systemic inequities and lack of support, but identifying these barriers can inform strategies to improve retention (Butcher, 2022; Richardson, 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic allowed African American women leaders in higher education to launch their businesses, driven by the familial history of entrepreneurship, workplace inequities, and a desire for authentic leadership (Baumgartner, 2022; Cottrill et al., 2014; Kapasi et al., 2016).

## **Two Centuries of Defining Moments for Black Women Higher Education Leaders in the United States: A Background**

*“Slavery is the combination of all crime. It is War. Those who rob their fellow men of home, of liberty, of education, of life, are really at war against them as though they cleft them down upon the bloody field.”<sup>3</sup> – Lucy Stanton, the first African American woman in the US to complete a four-year collegiate course of study (1850).*

Black women have strived to secure higher education in the United States for over two centuries. These efforts began before the Civil War and continue to the present time. In the process, African American women have earned certificates, bachelor’s degrees, and various graduate degrees and have become college administrators, presidents, and founders of higher education institutions. Multiple supporters, including Prudence Crandall, who dedicated their efforts to enlightening African American females during the nineteenth century, often encountered violence and hostility (Williams, 2023; Williams & Ziobro, 2023). Nevertheless, Black women persisted and began moving up the higher education ladder in the early nineteenth century despite facing these and other daunting challenges (Evans, 2016). Most women, revealingly, obtained their degrees in Northern states, including Ohio, and primarily at specific institutions such as Oberlin, Antioch, and Wilberforce.

During the period preceding the Civil War (1861-1865), Oberlin emerged as the preeminent institution in Antebellum America for conferring higher education degrees or certificates to Black women (Baumgartner, 2022; Terry, 2023). Notably, numerous Black women successfully attained literary degrees (L.D.s) from this esteemed institution. Notably, Lucy Ann Stanton is widely recognized as the inaugural Black woman to fulfill the requirements of a four-year curriculum and be awarded an L.D. from Oberlin, which occurred circa 1850. Concurrently, Sarah Jane Early pursued her studies at Oberlin, similarly to Ms. Stanton, ultimately obtaining a degree in classical studies in 1856. Moreover, Early achieved another historic milestone by assuming the first Black woman college instructor role in the annals of United States history, commencing her tenure at Wilberforce University in 1858. It is crucial to acknowledge that Stanton and Early rank among the pioneering Black women who were granted degrees from Oberlin, all of whom accomplished this feat before 1860.

Although Stanton is widely regarded as the inaugural Black woman in the United States to receive a certificate of completion from an institute of higher education, it was, in fact, Mary Jane Patterson who achieved the distinction of being the first Black woman to acquire a Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) degree in 1862, an accomplishment she accomplished at Oberlin. On the other hand, Lucy Ann earned what was then referred to as a literary degree, as opposed to a bachelor’s degree, and thus, she is not recognized as the foremost Black woman to obtain a four-year degree. To this day, our knowledge is limited to the fact that she attained "a degree" in classical studies, and based on the accessible records, it was not designated as a B.A. Two years later, in 1864, Rebecca Lee completed her degree at the New England Female Medical College. Dr. Lee

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<https://www.historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/stantonaplea.html#:~:text=Slavery%20is%20the%20combination%20of%20down%20upon%20the%20bloody%20field>

is the first documented Black woman in the United States of America to achieve a medical degree (Evans, 2007; Williams, 2023).

Prior to 1865, a minimum of twelve Black women successfully obtained their academic degrees from colleges in the southern region of the United States. By 1865, three noteworthy Black women educators, namely Patterson, Frances Josephine Norris, and Fanny Marion Jackson, achieved B.A. degrees from Oberlin College. From there, Patterson and Coppin began their teaching careers at the Institute for Colored Youth in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, one of the country's earliest secondary educational institutions for African Americans, and eventually became known as Cheyney University. Following her graduation from Oberlin, Patterson dedicated five years to teaching at the Institute for Colored Youth. Subsequently, she taught at the Preparatory High School for Colored Youth, also known as M Street School, in Washington, DC, where she later assumed the position of school principal. During her tenure as principal, she worked tirelessly to elevate the status of the school, transforming it into one of the most esteemed high schools catering to African American students in the nation.

Coppin herself was born into slavery, eventually becoming a self-made woman. She worked to secure an education at the Rhode Island State Normal School, first, followed by Oberlin. She became a principal at the Institute of Colored Youth and substantively expanded the curriculum, making it one of the nation's more notable schools for African Americans. Her expansion included the development of a Women's Industrial Exchange and Industrial Department. Coppin State University in Baltimore, Maryland, is named for Fannie Jackson Coppin (Williams, 2023). The nineteenth century proved a crucial period of growth and progress for Black women in education, and Coppin serves as an example. Now spanning two hundred years of African American women in higher education, these women played indispensable roles in the establishment of Black educational institutions, with Oberlin and Wilberforce serving as notable platforms, as a noteworthy number of Black women who obtained degrees from these institutions went on to become educators, advocates for civil rights, and founders of schools (Thelin & Gasman, 2003; Williams, 2023).

### **Two Centuries of Defining Moments for Black Women Higher Education Leaders in the United States: A Precarious Journey**

*"We needed to be assertive as women in those days - assertive and aggressive - and the degree to which we had to be that way depended on where you were. I had to be."*<sup>4</sup> – Katherine Johnson, American mathematician whose calculations of orbital mechanics as a NASA employee were critical to the success of the first and subsequent US-crewed spaceflights (1961).

Over the past two centuries, Black women in the United States have navigated a precarious journey toward securing higher education and leadership roles within this sphere. Initially, their quest was fundamentally a fight for access to a system from which they were systematically excluded. Mary Ann Shadd Carey's enrollment at Howard University in 1884 marked a significant milestone as she became the first Black woman to do so, symbolizing the breaking of gender and racial barriers in higher education. Before and after this period, African American women faced – and continue to face – considerable obstructions in accessing higher education

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.brainyquote.com/authors/katherine-johnson-quotes>

due to systemic racial and gender biases. This struggle does not end with access. Black women in academia have continuously faced challenges related to race and gender, often finding themselves in precarious, part-time, and sometimes full-time positions with considerable instability. Despite these and other setbacks, there has been much progress in recruitment, retention, and career ascension for African American women at Predominantly White Institutions, albeit within a framework that often necessitates navigating systemic barriers and biases. Leadership roles for Black women in higher education have also evolved, with a growing recognition of their unique perspectives and contributions. Current studies employing theoretical frameworks like Critical Race Feminist Theory and Black Feminist Thought, among others, have helped illuminate how Black women leaders in postsecondary education define themselves and their leadership styles, contributing to a broader understanding of leadership, primarily inclusive of race and gender.

By demanding access to education, Black women were at the forefront of the fight for Black equality throughout the twentieth century. African Americans considered the quest for a quality education a prominent civil rights issue (McCluskey, 2014). In the early decades of the twentieth century, Black women began to acquire graduate degrees in more substantial numbers. In the 1900s, women such as Marion Thompson Wright, Constance Baker Motley, and Autherine Lucy demanded equal access to all educational facilities nationwide. For many Black Americans, acquiring a higher education was a pathway to citizenship and freedom. Most scholarly literature on Black Americans in higher education has focused primarily on Black men. However, more recently, scholars have explicitly focused on the role of Black women in higher education. The field is defined by intellectual biographies, social histories of pivotal institutions, including Oberlin and Spelman, edited volumes of interviews, personal narratives, autobiographies, and other qualitative works of women who participated in signature moments in the history of Black women in higher education. Reoccurring themes in this lived history include race consciousness, gender equity, and class awareness (Brock et al., 2019).

Equally important are the contributions and leadership evolution of Black women. A growing number of extant studies are examining and centering the accounts of African American women in higher education leadership, focusing on how they define job satisfaction and overcome professional challenges. Georgiana Simpson made history in 1921 as the first Black woman to receive a Ph.D. in the United States; from there, similar successes by other Black women scholars soon followed this achievement. Historically, Black women's participation in collegiate education in the U.S. continues to evolve significantly, dating from the earliest settlers in the USs to contemporary times (i.e., 21st century). Recent advancements include the furtherance of phenomenological studies designed to describe and uplift the lived experiences of Black women in education, faculty, and leadership positions, highlighting their rising influence in academia and academic leadership. Studies of this nature center on the experiences of Black women and offer insights into their advancement and continued impact in the educational sphere.

African American women's progression in higher education leadership in the United States has been undoubtedly meaningful and defining. Included among these milestones are the historical and contemporary struggles of Black female scholars who continue to overcome multiple forms of resistance in higher education, namely, Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander, Eva Beatrice Dykes, and Georgiana Simpson—the first Black women in the United States to earn doctorate degrees

(Howard-Baptiste & Harris, 2014). In the ongoing work to better understand the persistent challenges that Black female academics face, it is vital to acknowledge the pioneering efforts of those Black women who paved paths despite the many obstacles. The journey is a precarious one, to say the least. Black women in and beyond the realm of higher education can forge paths forward in solidarity (Horhn & Lassiter, 2022), appreciating those who came before, among the first Black women to earn bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees in the United States (Howard-Baptiste, 2014; Howard-Baptiste & Harris, 2014).

### **Two Centuries of Defining Moments for Black Women Higher Education Leaders in the United States: Present-Day**

*“I hope to inspire people to try to follow this path, because I love this country, because I love the law, because I think it is important that we all invest in our future. And the young people are the future. I am also ever buoyed by the leadership of generations past who helped to light the way.”<sup>5</sup> – Ketanji Brown, Lawyer, Jurist, and Justice of the United States Supreme Court (2022).*

Few texts speak directly to the history of Black women in higher education. Nevertheless, notable overviews generally tend to be social histories focused on a select few Black women, with some intellectual accounts focusing on Black women novelists, academics, thinkers, and leaders appearing more recurrently since the late 1900s. Moreover, the first book-length scholarly analysis of women in higher education focuses overwhelmingly on white women (Eisenmann, 2023; Solomon, 1985). Nevertheless, this work provides an essential framework for thinking more broadly about women in higher education. After Solomon's text was published, several overviews of educated Black women working in various capacities (e.g., novelists, writers, social workers, and public intellectuals) began appearing in growing fashion. Works that followed Solomon's book, though not always explicitly about Black women in higher education, continue to provide necessary context regarding the lived experiences of Black women who have had access to higher education spaces, many of whom became educators themselves and used their knowledge as writers, activists, and institution builders, to support and uplift other women (Brown, 2006; Butcher, 2022).

Other 20th and 21st-century works include Paula Giddings' text, one of the first scholarly surveys of Delta Sigma Theta, the oldest and largest Black women's organization in the United States. Giddings' work (1988) highlighted Black women's search for sisterhood and the challenges embedded in the Black sorority movement. It was soon followed by Carby's work (1987) on Black women novelists, many of whom were, themselves, holders of higher education degrees. In addition, Brown's 2006 text is a valuable overview of Black women professionals and their collective activism, focusing on their support of the war effort and social work. Scholars who study African American women in US history and higher education have not thoroughly covered this timeframe. This and other related works are among the first to examine African American women's intellectual, scholarly activity in the 19th century via a discussion of Black female novelists (Carby, 1987). In the 20th century, notable figures highlighted in this

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<sup>5</sup> <https://people.com/politics/ketanji-brown-jackson-most-inspiring-quotes/#:~:text=%22I%20hope%20to%20inspire%20people,young%20people%20are%20the%20future.%22&text=%22I%20am%20also%20ever%20buoyed,helped%20to%20light%20the%20way>



arena include pioneers such as Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper. While much scholarship on race, politics, and African American history has focused on men such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Cooper's text (2017) critically examines race and gender in Black women's intellectual lives. Some individuals featured in Cooper's study were the first Black women to attain higher education degrees, including graduate degrees. These works cover a vast amount of information on the experience of Black women in higher education, including a discussion of the group's concern for Black civil rights and women's empowerment writ large.

Other relevant historical texts include Solomon's work, one of the more critical histories of women in higher education. This text provides vital historical information and context on women's opportunities and challenges in higher education. It remains an essential resource on the topic of women in the history of higher education (Solomon, 1985). Historian Deborah Gray White's work traverses one hundred years of Black women in US society, focusing on the Black women's club movement, including a discussion of Black women in higher education. Many women who formed literary clubs, self-help associations, and civil rights organizations (the NAACP included) were among the first Black women to obtain higher education degrees (White, 1999). Noble's work (1993) surveys Black women in higher education during the 20th century, serving as a helpful reference on this subject matter. This work uncovers much relevant information regarding African American women's higher education experiences and points current scholars to future directions in what remains an emergent field. Myers' text (2002) is a sociological study underscoring the interwoven systems of race and gender in academia in the US. Rooted in narrative inquiry and ranging across various disciplines, Black women employed at predominantly white colleges and universities provide recollections (i.e., primary sources of information) for historians examining Black women in higher education and their perspectives regarding academia in the twenty-first century. Perkins (2015) is a leading scholar on Black women and higher education. Authoring several works in this discipline, she uses an intersectional approach to understanding the quest for higher education by some leading Black women education activists embracing their collective work as a strategy toward Black women's empowerment. These timelines reflect a trajectory of perseverance, achievement, and increasing influence of Black women in higher education leadership as they continue shaping a more diverse academic landscape.

### **Two Centuries of Defining Moments for Black Women Higher Education Leaders in the United States: Managerial Significance**

*"The greatness of Americans is that we are mosaic - we are diverse."*<sup>6</sup> — Sheila Jackson Lee, American lawyer and politician, U.S. representative for Texas' 18th congressional district (1995-2024).

The paths of Black women in higher education leadership in the United States have evolved significantly over the past two centuries. Dating back to before the Civil War (1861–1865), Black women have persistently fought to acquire higher education in the U.S., demonstrating remarkable resilience in overcoming substantial barriers related to race and gender (Showunmi, 2023). Despite the educational advancements Black women have made, they are

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<sup>6</sup> <https://quotefancy.com/quote/1290916/Sheila-Jackson-Lee-The-greatness-of-Americans-is-that-we-are-mosaic-we-are-diverse>

underrepresented at the highest levels of academic leadership (Grant, 2015). Nonetheless, Black women have made notable inroads as academic leaders. These roles shape student experiences and institutional policies and are critical to creating pipelines for emergent and future educational leaders (Grottis, 2022). In increasing fashion, emergent studies continue to reveal the unique challenges African American women face working to advance in predominantly white institutions. Particularly in recruitment, retention, and career advancement, recent research has focused on the intersection of race and gender in academia, highlighting the experiences of Black women and advocating for more inclusive environments (Barak, 2005).

Black women in higher education leadership roles in the United States hold pointed managerial importance due to their unique perspectives and the critical barriers they have overcome. Historically, Black women have been at the forefront of the struggle for educational equality, with pioneers setting foundational precedents in the 19th century by securing degrees and leading academic institutions (Showunmi, 2023). Their achievements are a source of pride and inspiration for all. Despite their historical contributions, Black women continue to face underrepresentation in senior leadership roles within higher education, a disparity that necessitates targeted identity-based leadership initiatives and structured mentoring programs to support their advancement (Pinto et al., 2024). However, the growing number of female students and novice faculty underscores the need for more women leaders to inspire and reflect the shifting demographics in higher education (Johnson, 2023; Johnson & Johnson, 2024). Research indicates that Black women are the most represented minoritized group among U.S. higher education administrators. Yet, they still lag behind their White counterparts in leadership positions, highlighting the need for policies that cultivate and retain their talent and leadership acumen (West, 2020). By understanding the trajectory of Black women leaders and identifying the support they use to remain in the administration, higher education institutions can develop strategies to improve their retention and success (Nickerson, 2020). Overall, the managerial significance of Black women in higher education lies in their ability to bring diverse perspectives, challenge entrenched leadership norms, and serve as role models for future generations, fostering a more inclusive and equitable academic environment.

### **Two Centuries of Defining Moments for Black Women Higher Education Leaders in the United States: A Glimpse into the Future**

*“The future never just happened. It was created.”<sup>7</sup> — Mae Jemison, doctor, engineer, and America’s first Black female astronaut, regarding serving on the crew of the shuttle Endeavour (1992).*

Over the last two centuries, Black women have strived to secure higher education in the United States, facing a host of violence and challenges along the way (Winkle-Wagner, 2015). However, their dynamic roles in public colleges were often marginalized and obscured (Adekunle et al., 2023). The achievements and barriers Black women administrators face in higher education allow us to better understand their trajectories, identify career barriers, and consider how to support their retention (Butcher, 2022; DeWitt, 2016). The race-gender dyad is significant to the experiences of Black women and Black women leaders in higher education, particularly those operating in historically White institutions (Collins & Bilge, 2020). The

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.illumy.com/10-inspiring-quotes-by-black-women-in-stem-you-may-not-know/>

presence of Black women in senior-level higher education leadership, especially at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs), is minimal, and, unfortunately, their experiences in these positions are not well-known (Walser-Smith, 2019).

Black women in the United States have made great strides in higher education leadership over the past two centuries. The 20th century was a turning point, seeing a gradual increase in African American women's participation in higher education as students, educators, and educational leaders. In recent decades, leadership roles have opened up for Black women in academia. There has been a notable rise among Black women leaders in academic institutions, including roles as faculty members, deans, and senior student affairs officers (Barak, 2005; West, 2020). Other extant studies have used frameworks like Black Feminist Thought (BFT) to understand how Black women leaders in higher education define themselves and their roles (Allen et al., 2023; Collins, 2020). Despite this progress, Black women in academia still face challenges related to gender and racial biases. Research has examined these experiences and the resilience of Black women in these roles (Carducci et al., 2024; Evans, 2016).

Black women have historically played a pivotal role in higher education, yet their leadership roles have often been marginalized and overlooked. Despite the increasing number of female students and novice faculty, Black women remain underrepresented in leadership positions, facing systemic barriers rooted in both gender and racial discrimination. Studies reveal that Black women often ascend to leadership through academic pathways, and the challenges they face, including racial and gender harassment, microaggressions, and systemic oppression, are not only individual but also institutional. These barriers are compounded, again, by leadership practices that exclude those who do not fit the dominant cultural norms. Strategies to overcome these challenges include truth-telling about the impact of neoliberal institutions, creating support networks, and fostering environments that recognize and celebrate Black excellence. Achieving gender equality in leadership is not only a matter of fairness but also essential for the evolving landscape of higher education, necessitating reforms that support the advancement and retention of Black women leaders. By understanding and addressing these challenges, higher education institutions can create more inclusive and equitable environments that benefit from Black women's diverse perspectives and leadership.

Throughout the 21st century and beyond, we have seen substantial progress and notable milestones for African American women in higher education leadership in the United States (Idowu, 2023; Johnson, 2021, 2023, 2023; Johnson & Fournillier, 2022, 2023). Despite enduring systemic barriers, African American women continue to face the challenges of accessing higher education head-on. As a result of these struggles – and continued perseverance – Black women continue to work towards closing the gaps to their fundamental rights as equal members of and participants in academia. For example, social justice and other extant leadership ideologies serve as necessary frames, exploring African American women's experiences in educational leadership and highlighting their contributions and challenges in job satisfaction and career advancement. These and other historical milestones, such as landmark achievements such as Lila Fenwick becoming the first Black woman to graduate from Harvard Law School in 1956, continue demonstrating Black women's ability to break racial and gender barriers in and beyond the academic sphere.

## In Conclusion

*“It isn’t easy for Black women in the academy to love institutions that do not love us back. Yet, we persist because we are committed to holding institutions accountable for realizing their full potential, which includes creating space for and bringing out the richness in research and practice that comes from diverse perspectives and forms of knowledge. I’ve seen glimpses of this potential through various possibility models inside and outside the academy. I draw critical hope from them.”*<sup>8</sup> – Dr. Joy Gaston Gales, president of the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE) and Senior Advisor for Advancing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (2022).

This chapter marks two centuries of defining moments for Black women in higher education. These significant historical benchmarks speak primarily to Black women’s trajectories, experiences, and higher education (Soares, 2023; Thelin & Gasman, 2003). These signatory occurrences in African American life offer a timeline through the 19th century, the World War I and World War II eras, the Civil Rights and Post-Civil Rights eras, to the present day. A topical-chronological approach predominantly defines these analyses, allowing shareholders to understand the topic’s historiography on a whole scale. Black women’s history is still a relatively new, emergent field. Much of the work on Black women in higher education can be found in biographies, era-specific survey histories, and edited volumes, with a few pertinent monographs. The history of Black women advancing in higher education has only recently become a subfield in and beyond historical, era-specific studies. Only recently have a few survey and monograph studies begun appearing about Black women and higher education that have helped to move the historiography of this vital subject forward beyond oral histories, biographies, case studies, and edited volumes, to name a few (Williams, 2023).

The state of Black women in higher education remains complex and multifaceted. Despite growing relevant research and scholarship, this group continues to be marginalized in academic discourse and curriculum, with works too often relegated to less prestigious journals, which questions the value placed on critical research centered on their experiences (Patton et al., 2024; West & Porter, 2023). Black women in higher education navigate a landscape fraught with intersectional challenges, including historically rooted racial and gender discrimination. The persistence of these issues is evident in the discursive representations of Black women in academe, who are often depicted as resilient in the face of adversity, reliant on interdependent relationships, and defined by their intersectional identities of race and gender (Johnson, 2021, 2023, 2023). Furthermore, the experiences of Black women in academia are riddled with sophisticated racism and sexism, which not only undermine their career progression but also contribute to racial trauma and a decline in their well-being.

Nevertheless, Black women continue to disrupt monolithic perceptions and assert their full humanity, living integrated and complete lives while striving for success in predominantly White institutions, historically Black institutions, and other educational contexts (West & Porter, 2023). The need for more varied, nuanced, and intersectional literature is critical, as is the call for higher education institutions to critically engage with and support Black women’s success and well-being both on and off campus. As Black feminist epistemologies and methodological

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.diverseeducation.com/opinion/article/15295726/does-anyone-see-us-disposability-of-black-women-faculty-in-the-academy>

approaches gain traction, future research must continue to innovate and rigorously address Black women's unique needs and experiences in higher education (Patton et al., 2024). The ongoing efforts to highlight and address these issues underscore the importance of creating inclusive and supportive environments for Black women in academia (Howard-Hamilton, 2023; West & Porter, 2023).

Understanding the multifaceted experiences and challenges Black women educators and leaders encounter can contribute to positive change and decrease workplace disparities in academia (Adekunle et al., 2023; Johnson, 2025). The underrepresentation of African American women in executive and administrative positions in colleges and universities highlights the need for effective and diverse leadership in contemporary higher education. To move this needle forward, and as a member of this same group myself, I highlight the criticality of understanding the challenges Black women leaders face en route to identifying strategies to improve their retention and advancement. By understanding and addressing these challenges, higher education institutions can create more inclusive and equitable environments that benefit from Black women's diverse perspectives and leadership. This is further evidenced by the creation of forums and spaces that value the perspectives and experiences of Black women leaders; in these and other ways, higher education institutions can do their part in the work towards achieving gender equity in leadership (Johnson, 2024).

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