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Examining current issues in education that highlight the ongoing work of the faculty of the School of Educational Studies at Claremont Graduate University.

The Black Gender Achievement Gap A Historical Perspective

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Recent studies have discussed the growing gap of college attendance and graduation rates of women and girls¹. While the rate of White women's college attendance and graduation now surpasses that of men, this has been the case for Black women for over a century. Throughout the twentieth century until the present, Black women have earned more college degrees than Black men except for the decade between 1920 and 1930².

This essay shall discuss the intersectionality of race and gender and how they have impacted the education of Black women and men from the nineteenth century to the present. It will shed light on the role of race and racism in reducing Black males' college attendance beginning early in the twentieth century and the consequences of the tremendous gap in Black male and female higher education attainment.



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For more than 80 years, the School of Educational Studies (SES) at Claremont Graduate University (CGU) has been a leader in providing graduate education. Many of our more than 5,700 alumni have held positions as college presidents, superintendents, principals, award-winning teachers, and tenured professors at colleges and universities around the world.

The educational, economic and political discrimination experienced by Blacks due to slavery and the aftermath of Jim Crow laws and segregation required the efforts of all Blacks, male and female, to help one another. While pre-Civil War African Americans encouraged Black women to become educated to help “uplift” the race, by the end of the nineteenth century, a conservative and more patriarchal view of gender roles emerged within the Black community.

Because of the denial of literacy and education to the entire race during slavery and afterwards, Blacks have viewed education as essential for their “uplift and elevation.” Black women were encouraged to become educated to improve their race. In the Black newspaper, *The Weekly Advocate*, an 1837 article entitled, “To the Females of Colour,” urged Black women:

“in any enterprise for the improvement of our people, either moral or mental, our hands would be palsied without women’s influence ... let our beloved female friends then rise up, and exert all their power, in encouraging and sustaining this effort [education] in which we have made to disabuse the public mind of the misrepresentations made of our character; and to show the world, that there is virtue among us, though concealed; talent, though buried; intelligence, though overlooked”.³

Black Education in the North

There were scattered opportunities for Blacks to obtain a formal education in the decades of the 1830s and ‘40s in the North. By the 1830s, female seminaries and normal schools (teacher training institutions) emerged. However, Black women were routinely barred from entering such institutions. *The Colored American*, a Black newspaper of the 1830s, appealed to White females to admit Black women into their seminaries. When these pleas were ignored, an article in the paper stated, “the culture of the black females minds require more care and attention, and it should not be neglected.”⁴ In 1835, Oberlin College, founded in an abolitionist town of the same name, became the only institution of higher education in the nation that admitted students “irrespective of color.”⁵

Education was viewed as so important within the Black community that it was not uncommon for Black families to relocate to Oberlin, Ohio. For example, when Blanche Harris was denied admission to a White female seminary in Michigan in the 1850s, her entire family moved to Oberlin. Similarly, Mary Jane Patterson, who in 1862 became the first Black woman to earn a college degree in the nation, moved from North Carolina in the 1850s to Oberlin with her family because of the educational opportunities available at the college. The college had a Preparatory Department, a Ladies Department and a College Department. Three

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Patterson daughters and one son graduated from Oberlin.⁶ Fanny Jackson Coppin, the second Black woman to earn a college degree (Oberlin, 1865) was sent by her family from Washington DC to live with relatives in Newport, Rhode Island, prior to her attending Oberlin because of greater educational opportunities.⁷

Emancipation & Reconstruction: Impact on Black Women

Despite the enlightenment of nineteenth century Blacks towards the education of women, due to lack of opportunities, by 1890 only 30 Black women held baccalaureate degrees compared to 300 Black men and 2500 White women. Emancipation and Reconstruction resulted in important gender distinctions among African Americans for the first time in history, which resulted in a change in Black male attitudes towards the role of Black women within the community. As a result of the Fifteenth Amendment in 1870, Black men obtained the right to vote. By 1900 twenty-two Black men had served in the nation's Congress and scores of others had held state and local government posts. These accomplishments and opportunities for Black men to exert authority and power, even for a brief moment in history, changed the tone of Black enthusiasm and praise for Black women's leadership and aspiration.

For example, by the 1880s, articles by the Black press began to express conservative views of women reminiscent of those written in antebellum

New England concerning White women. Unlike the articles prior to the Civil War in the Black press that urged Black women to join with Black men in obtaining an education, Black publications frequently indicated that the Black woman's place was in the home. Further, these articles stated that education for Black women should be primarily for moral education and preparation for motherhood and marriage. Articles such as *Shall our Girls be Educated?*, *The Homemaker*, and *Woman's Exalted Station* appeared in the 1880s, and by the 1890s articles that glorified homemaking and encouraged

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Black women to obtain an education to "prepare their sons for manhood" appeared.⁸ These articles echoed the advice White women had received earlier in the century which also urged them to become educated for domesticity.

These articles shaped the thoughts of twentieth century Blacks in their views towards women's roles within the community. However, racism thwarted any serious patriarchal dominance within the Black community. By the turn of the century, Blacks were completely disenfranchised in the South. They also had

limited employment options, and lynching of Black men and sexual assaults of Black women by White men were commonplace. Thus, while historian Joel Williamson notes that after Emancipation, Black men "internalized fully the role of Victorian men,"⁹ the reality was they were not economically able to sustain a patriarchal existence. Unlike White women who normally terminated employment after marriage, married Black women shouldered a sizeable burden in the economic maintenance of their families. Ten times as many married Black women compared to White women worked in 1900. As a consequence, education and economic survival were paramount to Black women. Even in the North, Black women's economic contributions to the family were key. Northern Black men suffered job discrimination as early as 1850 due to foreign immigration. Europeans replaced Black men as servants, doormen, and barbers resulting in Black women often becoming the sole breadwinner.¹⁰ A study of Blacks in Boston at the turn of the century noted:

"they [Black women] have made a relatively greater economic contribution within their race than have white women in theirs, so they have attained a place of relatively greater importance in the social order of their own community. Negro women manifest a marked independence, coupled with a sober realization of the extent to which the welfare of the race is in their hands".¹¹

Black Women in the 20th Century

Economic factors and racism towards educated African American men largely explains the imbalance in gender rates in Black college attendance. Most college educated Black men could not find jobs commensurate with their educational qualifications throughout the twentieth century. As a result, Black families educated their daughters disproportionately to men. Teachers were critically needed in the developing school systems of the South, and employment was virtually guaranteed. While the salaries of Black teachers in the public schools of the south were abysmal, the work was highly respected and desperately needed. Black women overwhelmingly enrolled in state teachers' colleges. In Jeanne Noble's study of Black women college students, she reported that of the 14,028 Black students admitted to the seventeen Black land-grant colleges in 1928, 64 percent admitted by high school certificates and 73 percent admitted by examination were women. A study of Black college graduates in 1938 by Charles S. Johnson further confirmed the high number of Black women in the field of teaching. His study indicated that 71 percent of Black elementary school teachers were women and 63 percent of Black high school teachers were women.¹²

Noble's study also noted that in 1952-53, Black women comprised 62% of Black college graduates while White women comprised 33% of college degrees earned that year. These data resulted in Black women often feeling guilty for their

academic accomplishments. On this issue, an administrator in a Black college remarked:

'If it hadn't been for the economic necessity, I don't feel that they would have done it [attended college]. Sometimes I feel that Negro women feel guilty about the education that they do have. Of course, I feel that all women have this feeling, but it is more prevalent among the Negro group. They are very conscious of the fact that accomplishments may prevent them from getting married. I have actually had them [Black women] ask me how they can put on brakes, to keep from being A students and president of clubs, and so forth.'¹³

In an article written in 1947 entitled, *Why Negro Girls Stay Single*, Pauli Murray, a graduate of Hunter College, Yale and the University of California, Berkeley, also addressed the issue of educated women having a dearth of Black men as potential mates. In addition, she wrote of the enormous responsibilities that Black women had on behalf of the race economically and that they often felt like revolting:

'This revolt proceeds in part from the consciousness on the part of the Negro woman that she has been compelled to act as breadwinner and cementer of family relationships in the Negro community since its inception. Historically, few Negro women have belonged to the leisure class ... With reference to women of my own generation, people now in their thirties, it is a matter of history that more Negro women proportionately have availed themselves of higher education than Negro men ... The complete hopelessness and dejection which led Negro boys of my age-group to abandon their studies in droves before they completed a trade, and

to flounder about for years without vocational direction is one of the tragic sources of frustration to the Negro woman of marriageable age. If professionally trained, she finds a shortage of her educational peers among men in Negro circles.'¹⁴

The greater academic achievements of Black women within their communities throughout the past century have had a negative impact on Black boys and men psychologically. By the 1940s, Black men began to blame Black women instead of the racist society that kept them out of occupations and educational institutions. In a society that expected men and women to conform to socially constructed gender roles, Blacks were constantly told they maintained a matriarchal race. This charge omitted the history of why Black women's roles within their families and communities were so central. Hence, discussions of the gender gap among Black students within the educational community should consider the historical, sociological, psychological and economical factors that have contributed to this reality.



Notes

1. "Why Do Women Outnumber Men in College?", *Digest of the National Bureau of Economic Research*, January 2007; Tamar Lewin "At Colleges, Women are Leaving Men in the Dust" in *New York Times*, July 9, 2006; *Projections of Educational Statistics to 2016*, Department of Education, 2007.
2. Noble, Jeanne, *The Negro Woman's College Education* (New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1956).
3. *The Weekly Advocate* (New York), 7 January 1837.
4. *The Colored American* (New York), 14 January 1839.
5. Dubois, W.E.B., "The College Bred Negro", *Proceedings of the Fifth Conferences for the Study of the Negro Problems*, held at Atlanta University, May 29-30, 1900 (Atlanta University Press, 1900): 10.
6. Henle, Ellen and Marlene Merrill, "Antebellum Black Coeds at Oberlin College", *Women's Studies Newsletter* 7, number 2 (Spring 1979): 10.
7. Coppin, Fanny Jackson, *Reminiscences of School Life and Hints on Teaching* (Philadelphia: AME Book Concern, 1913): 18.
8. *AME Review* (1889):45-47;8(1891):63-65; 8(1892):402-406.
9. Williamson, Joel, *New People: Miscegenation and Mulattoes in the United States* (New York: Free Press, 1980): 91.
10. Green, Lorenzo and Carter G. Woodson, *The Negro Wage Earner* (New York, reprinted in 1969):213.
11. Daniels, John, *In Freedom's Birthplace* (Boston: Ayers Publishing company, 1969): 213.
12. Noble, Jeanne, *The Negro Woman's College Education*; Charles S. Johnson, *The Negro College Graduate* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1938).
13. Noble, 29, 105.
14. Murray, Pauli, "Why Negro Girls Stay Single" in *Negro Digest*, July 1947: 4-8.



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Dr. Perkins is a historian of women's and African American higher education. Her primary areas of research are on the history of race and American women's higher education, the education of African Americans in elite institutions and the history of talent identification programs for African Americans students. She has been the recipient of grants from the Ford Foundation, the Spencer Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Richard Humphreys Foundation, the Ruth Landes Memorial Foundation as well as grants from the University of Illinois, the City University of New York and Claremont Graduate University.

Dr. Perkins has served as Vice President of Division F (History and Historiography) of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) and has also served as a member of the Executive Council of AERA. She is currently on the editorial boards of the *History of Education Quarterly* and the *Review of African American Education*. She was on the National Planning Committee for the 50th Anniversary Commemoration of the Brown v. Board of Education at New York University and taught a course on Brown in the Fall of 2004. She hosted a national research conference in February 2008 on the impact of the Brown decision and the 1964 Civil Rights Act on Black higher education.



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According to AWS Director, Dr. Linda Perkins, the program produces 'activist scholars ... [who] take their education and use it to make a difference in a direct, applied manner'. The program's internships have helped AWS students engage in local contexts like the Los Angeles County Office of Women's Health, as well as far away as Dubai and Peru.

Articles and book chapters by Linda M. Perkins

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