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WHEN THE VOICES OF WOMEN STUDENTS OF COLOR ARE HEARD

Resisting Erasure in Higher Education Policy and Practice

A common narrative about women students of color in postsecondary education centers on the fact that they typically outperform men of color on measures such as college access, retention, and persistence.¹ As a result, decision-makers might conclude that women of color do not need additional supports from institutions of higher education.² Although they do earn associate's and bachelor's degrees at higher rates than men of color, equity gaps remain between women of color and their White female peers.³ According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 40 percent of White women earn a bachelor's degree by the age of 31, nearly twice the rate for Black women (23 percent) and Latina women (21 percent).⁴ This disparity is often overlooked in postsecondary education policy and practice. While there has been national attention over the years amplifying the need to strengthen supports for male students of color, there has not been a similar focus on the unique needs of women of color.⁵

In addition to barriers related to race, women of color also face barriers related to gender. These intersecting factors contribute to economic, social, and health disparities and challenges that women of color may carry over into their lives as students.⁶ For example, wealth gaps along racial and gender lines contribute to higher rates of college debt among Black women and Latinas compared with White women.⁷ Pursuing a degree is often difficult for women of color who are parents, given their preeminence as caretakers as well as the economic inequities that make child care a disproportionately costly expense for them compared with White women or their male counterparts.⁸ Racial and gender biases can also contribute to a hostile campus culture. Women of color may not feel they are supported or welcomed in predominantly White institutions.⁹ Additionally, race- and gender-based mental and physical health disparities may impede their focus on academics.¹⁰

These challenges suggest, and potentially compound, the need for such things as increased financial support, on-campus child care, targeted mentoring, counseling resources, and sociocultural and academic supports for women students of color; there are limited programs and resources that specifically target these needs. At the same time, there is little empirical research on the effectiveness (or the lack) of existing services aimed at the intersecting needs of women of color.

In early 2023, MDRC convened a virtual gathering, *Resisting Erasure: Women of Color College Success Research and Practice Roundtable*, to address this void. It brought together 24 students, higher education administrators, faculty scholars, and funders from across the country who were interested in advancing knowledge and best practices in postsecondary education regarding the needs of women of color. The term “erasure” refers to practices that

make certain groups of people invisible within a specific context. The experience of women of color being erased from or ignored within postsecondary education was articulated by many of the student, faculty, and staff participants. Therefore, “resisting erasure” speaks to actively engaging in efforts to bring attention to issues affecting women of color.

The goals of the roundtable were to understand more deeply, and hear firsthand about, the disparities, needs, and knowledge gaps regarding women of color; to synthesize knowledge on targeted supports; and to develop recommendations and a research agenda that could help improve postsecondary education and career outcomes. The event included a student panel, small group discussions, and full group discussions. Students were invited to share their lived experiences, representing key voices often overlooked in discussions about postsecondary education reform and policy, and they were candid about what they felt could be improved at their institutions. Although critical at times, the students offered thoughtful and insightful perspectives on how institutions can better meet the needs of women students of color.

This brief highlights some of the insights distilled from that roundtable, including themes and issues at both the student and institutional levels, recommendations for how to address those issues, and considerations for future action. It includes citations to existing research that reflects and supports the observations and experiences discussed by roundtable participants. The insights shared throughout the brief are also intended to inform how funders in public agencies as well as nonprofit philanthropic organizations can commit to and invest in strategic priorities focused on women students of color in postsecondary education.

NEEDS OF WOMEN STUDENTS OF COLOR

Several themes emerged during the roundtable regarding the experiences and needs of women of color, factors that support and hinder student success, and recommendations that institutional leaders and policymakers might consider when developing programs or services to support these students. The themes included:

- Intersecting, identity-based needs
- Representation of women of color among faculty and staff
- Mentoring that targets women of color throughout the college experience
- Mental health and well-being resources, including more counselors of color
- Financial support

Intersecting, Identity-Based Needs

Student roundtable participants spoke of the need to recognize how their identities shape both their college experiences and their needs, and noted that faculty, staff, and administrators sometimes lack this understanding. “It’s not just about gender and race—intersectionality comes into play,” one student participant said, a sentiment that was echoed by several other students. Intersectionality as a framework focuses on how students’ experiences are intimately bound to the multiple identities they bring to postsecondary institutions (such as their religious affiliation, whether they are undocumented, parents, caregivers, or are working full or part time). It also refers to multiple, historically marginalized identities that may have a magnified effect beyond how they might be experienced individually, such as being a woman, Black, Latina, from a low-income background, or having a disability.¹¹

Faculty members also spoke of the importance of considering intersectionality. Research studies have examined the barriers women of color encounter due to racism, sexism, and classism, especially at predominately White institutions.¹² One faculty member pointed to additional identities often overlooked, such as queer women of color and women of color who are not Christian. A program administrator commented on the unique pressures that women students of color may feel in postsecondary spaces. The administrator noted, for example, that gendered and cultural expectations from family members may increase the stakes for students’ “success” in college, given that women of color are often depended on to support multiple generations within the family.

ROUNDTABLE RECOMMENDATION: There is a need for campus programs and resources to engage women of color across a diverse set of needs. Institutions might consider more comprehensive approaches that address multiple aspects of students’ identities and issues unique to their experiences. For example, the “Enough” mentorship program at the University of Miami offers women students of color programming that is relevant and relatable to their identities and creates a safe space where they are surrounded with faculty, administrators, and peers who share similar life experiences and who show them that they belong and can be successful.¹³

Representation of Women of Color Among Faculty and Staff

The lack of women of color among faculty, administrators, and student services staff was frequently mentioned by students and other roundtable participants. Several students talked about the challenges of navigating college without support from people who share their gender, racial, and ethnic identities. Students suggested that staff members who do not have that shared experience might not have sufficient skills or knowledge to find identity-specific resources that some women students of color need, such as culturally sensitive mental health supports. Some students said that it is often difficult to open up to staff members whose gender and racial/ethnic backgrounds are different from their own. That can make it harder to discuss academic and personal challenges, such as feelings of exclusion in STEM classes, where there may be few women of color, or difficulties due to immigration status.¹⁴ Similarly, a funder expressed the importance of employing more staff members who are women of color, to alleviate the burden placed on those offering their time to support students.

ROUNDTABLE RECOMMENDATION: To better help women of color navigate challenging school and life situations that affect them as students, institutions can prioritize the recruitment and retention of more women of color in student support services and faculty roles.

Mentoring That Targets Women of Color Throughout Their College Experience

The need for strong mentorship was discussed by all roundtable participants. Some noted that mentorship can help students who get the “what to do” but not the “how to do it.” In these discussions, mentorship was defined as the kind of support that can help students effectively navigate college and make plans for a career.¹⁵ A few students described the experience of coming into college without such support. One student said transitioning into a large, predominantly White university from a high school comprising mostly students of color was particularly difficult without “on-ramping” guidance from a female mentor of color who could relate to what she was going through. Another student shared that this type of support would have alleviated much stress. When considering the most powerful aspects of having mentors who are women of color, one student said having someone like that “show you the ropes” is important. A few students said that having a sponsor is critical. One student described this as someone “who will advocate for you.” Another student said, “Advancement is often about who you know.”

ROUNDTABLE RECOMMENDATION: Colleges and universities can do more to align mentors’ and mentees’ shared identities in order to improve students’ experiences. This shift would require more intentionality in the development of mentoring opportunities for women students of color that meet them where they are—helping them navigate student life and prepare for a future career.

Student-Centered Design

Roundtable participants observed that assumptions are frequently made about students and their priorities. As a result, programs may not reflect or address the needs of women students of color. Participants spoke of wanting increased student input, known as student-centered design, in the development of student success and support programming.¹⁶ One program administrator with experience in student-centered design said that such involvement would increase student buy-in, ownership, and investment in the programs. A student participant noted the importance of this approach, saying, “Students may not have language such as academic, grant speech, but [we] still [need to make] sure [students] are centered.” A funder added that student-centered programming would help capture the “cultural, socioeconomic, racial and lived experiences of women of color students.”

ROUNDTABLE RECOMMENDATION: Institutional leaders can employ different approaches to collect and implement student input, such as using participatory action research to provide opportunities for student involvement throughout the program development process.¹⁷ These practices focus on being inclusive of all stakeholders, allowing the students who are affected by programs and interventions to have a say in how those programs are designed.

INSTITUTIONAL AND SYSTEM-LEVEL POLICIES

Several themes emerged during the roundtable regarding institutional and system-level policies and practices that can affect the experiences and educational outcomes of women students of color, factors that can hinder student success, and recommendations for how institutions can address campus-wide challenges. Those themes included:

- Institutional policies and priorities that support women students of color
- Adequate resources to address the needs of women students of color
- A welcoming, supportive campus environment

Institutional Policies and Priorities That Support Women of Color

College and university functions are governed by formal (written) and informal policies and practices that reflect institutional priorities and mandates. While institutions must contend with challenges related to such things as strategic planning, campus housing, and admissions policies, some roundtable participants noted that programs and initiatives dedicated to serving women students of color such as those described earlier are often at the bottom of priority lists, if present at all. One faculty member noted, “There are immense supports needed on campuses to better support women of color that are completely absent or are tacked onto the already large lists of staff responsibilities, often people of color, with no additional resources. There is a lack of structured support.” Infrastructure for staffing and funding is also needed, participants said, for women of color programs to be effectively expanded in postsecondary institutions. One student participant referred to a structural gap in the support for women of color, suggesting there is a lack of “real policies that can support [us] when things go awry.” In fact, institutional policies that seem neutral may unintentionally exacerbate inequities between students.¹⁸ For example, policies that penalize students’ ability to register for classes because of financial holds further disadvantage those who may already be struggling financially. At the postsecondary level, these students are disproportionately Black women and Latinas.¹⁹

ROUNDTABLE RECOMMENDATION: Institutions can use disaggregated institutional data on women students of color, as panelists noted, to “show their story” and “advocate” for better-informed policies to ensure their needs are being met.²⁰ For example, institutions may be able to use disaggregated data to observe whether admissions, course registration, or financial aid policies have disproportionately negative effects on the academic experiences or outcomes of women students of color. Institutional leaders are encouraged to systematically review and revise policies and practices to meet all students’ needs, including women of color. This requires considering the effect of institutional decisions on women students of color and making policy decisions that would more intentionally minimize inequitable outcomes.²¹

Adequate Resources to Address the Needs of Women Students of Color

Colleges and universities make important decisions about resource allocation—balancing finite resources with institutional priorities that can dictate how and why resources get spent. These decisions can fail to address the particular needs of women of color in postsecondary education, such as increased financial need, because the intersections of race and gender are not explicitly addressed or supported.²² Institutional administrators participating in the roundtable explained that initiatives supporting students of color and women are often cut first when institutions must make difficult strategic financial decisions; these services often offer critical supports for women students of color, even though their targeting may be broader.²³ As a result, programs that address the intersection of race and gender and that serve women students of color are often at risk. Faculty members and administrators at the roundtable also noted that support programs for women students of color often rely on funding from external sources that is time limited and is not consistently available, instead of receiving adequate, stable, and consistent institutional funding. In addition, roundtable participants felt that institutions regularly overlook the ways women of color faculty and staff are called upon to support marginalized students, with little to no additional resources, compensation, acknowledgment, or appreciation, also known as performing “invisible labor.”²⁴ This practice can lead to undue burdens on faculty and staff, leaving many women students of color on their own to find ways to meet their academic, social, and financial needs.²⁵

ROUNDTABLE RECOMMENDATION: For a program or initiative aimed at women of color to be successful, roundtable participants suggested that administrators look for ways to invest stable institutional resources (for example, funding for advisors dedicated to managing programs targeting women of color) to sustain programs over time.²⁶ Student participants said that additional funding could also allow for more leadership development conferences, campus spaces for women of color, community-building activities, service opportunities, and opportunities for exposure to post-baccalaureate programs.

A Welcoming, Supportive Campus Environment

Several roundtable participants, particularly faculty members with administrative institutional knowledge or direct experience mentoring and working closely with students outside of the classroom, expressed the need for colleges and universities to change or improve their traditions, practices, and assumptions regarding the needs of women of color. For example, participants noted that many schools lack faculty and staff members who are invested in developing relationships with and supporting women students of color. One student said limited student input in the decision-making process can result in initiatives that are out of touch with students’ needs. “When making decisions, students should be in the room to be heard. Women of color many times aren’t in the room. [Give] women of color opportunities to be in spaces where decisions are being made.” Research has highlighted the fact that underrepresented students, including women of color, often feel unwelcome, particularly in predominately white postsecondary institutions.²⁷

ROUNDTABLE RECOMMENDATION: Participants shared that institutions can do more to acknowledge and support identity-based and intersectional approaches to inform student support services. For example, institutions can invest in physical spaces for women students of color that encourage cultural expression, identity representation, and a sense of belonging. Institutions can also infuse culturally responsive approaches—efforts that recognize the critical importance of identifying and including students’ cultural experiences and identities—into different aspects of institutional practice.²⁸ For example, institutions could create more programs and events that highlight Black, Latina, Asian and Pacific Islander, and Native and Indigenous communities and issues. Student participants further articulated that senior administrators could proactively create opportunities for student input in decision-making about programs, policies, and processes to create a more supportive campus climate. Efforts could include holding town halls, adding student representatives to campus administrative committees, and offering regular office hours held by institutional leaders.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR FUTURE ACTION

Women students of color have unique needs that may not be addressed by current institutional policies and practices. This gap presents an opportunity for postsecondary education stakeholders to better support equitable student success by improving programming and services specifically targeting women of color. Future policy, practice, and research could address the previously discussed issues in several ways:

Future Policy

The current lack of institutional, state, philanthropic, and national attention focused on the needs of women students of color in postsecondary education offers an opportunity to expand policy discussions. Intentionally including women of color as a student population needing support provides a chance to improve educational outcomes as well as to address overall institutional metrics of success. Colleges and universities can close equity gaps in retention and graduation rates by creating or revising policies that actively seek to improve the educational experiences of women students of color.

Future Practice

As institutions and practitioners develop and execute their strategic equity goals, culturally responsive services and initiatives that support women of color are areas to bring into focus more intentionally. Student support services might include mentoring, counseling, and sociocultural resources specifically aimed at women of color, in addition to those that broadly support women students or students of color overall. Furthermore, practitioners can also disaggregate the broad category of “women of color” to identify trends and areas of need that impact specific racial and ethnic populations.

Future Research

Although there are some programs and student services specifically designed to support women students of color in postsecondary education, there is little research focused on the nature and impact

of such programmatic and institutional support strategies. Future studies can fill this critical gap by illuminating how identity-focused, targeted student supports directly address the needs of women students of color and contribute to their academic and career success.

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