

Elephants in the Room: Examining and Understanding the Black Assembly Line

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Abstract

Despite the increase in efforts to recruit Black student affairs professionals in the field to keep pace with the growing level of Black students entering university doors, Black student affairs professionals are still heavily underrepresented across campuses in proportion to their White counterparts. This is attributed to the often subtle, yet constant, barrage of discrimination and discomfort Black professionals are made to feel within predominantly White and homogenous spaces. Due to discrimination, power hierarchies, and the continuous lack of adequate support systems, there are high attrition rates of many Black practitioners, contributing to this concept of the Black Assembly Line. Rooted in the original idea of the P.O.C (People of Color) assembly line introduced by Browning and Palmer (2018), which addresses the toxic workplace cultures that bring in professionals of color, overworking and undervaluing them while also tokenizing and further marginalizing them leading to the attrition of P.O.C professionals, the conception of the Black Assembly Line seeks to build on Browning and Palmer's (2018) initial idea of the systematic treatment of professionals of color within student affairs. Instead of hiring and forcing another staff of color to endure the cycle of toxic workplace culture, this analysis of the Black Assembly Line aims to investigate the environmental culture's impact on the attrition. The narrative of the Black Assembly Line also is creating a platform to outline the specific experiences of Black student affairs professionals navigating toxic work environments that impact their presence in the field. Ultimately, the question remains: how do we combat the Black Assembly Line, in order to solidify and affirm the presence of Black professionals within the field of student affairs?

Introduction

"Addressing the elephant in the room" can contextualize many situations and scenarios, regardless of individuals involved, workplaces, and perceptions around controversial interviews, the elephant in the room trope often refers to the abstract entity that permeates an environment that no one directly wishes to address or discuss. However, what is this scenario like from the perspective of the elephant? The narrative could become quite different in the perspective of being the object of avoidance within a room, requiring attention yet being faced with ignorance. This analogy best mirrors the experience of many Black student affairs professionals to acclimate and find support within the various arenas of student affairs without the acknowledgement from their White colleagues. As they seek support to navigate their environments, many Black student affairs professionals may experience feelings of isolation, frustration, and, ultimately, apathy.

This trope is not used to indicate that Black student affairs professionals are awkward within these spaces or take up too much space within higher education. Instead, it is used to draw the parallels of the awkwardness of the lack of acknowledgement by White and non-Black colleagues of the struggles many Black student affairs professionals face in the workplace. These racialized assaults range from constant microaggressions from supervisors to consistently being tokenized within a department as the foreseen expert on all things related to Blackness which are all connected behaviors of upholding oppression in higher education (Harro, 2000). These persistent racialized barrages have harmful effects on Black professionals as they experience a lack of support, mental strain from providing emotional labor to support students, and struggle to navigate the various systems of performativity when conducting their work (Quaye, Karikari, Allen, Okello, and Carter, 2019).

Like code-switching, performativity under these circumstances is nothing new to Black professionals within the field of higher education (Young, 2009). However, this environment of constantly subjecting Black student affairs professionals to these behaviors and poor practices can lead to both burnout and attrition from the field (Quaye et al., 2019). In turn, this leads to a cyclical process of bringing in other Black professionals to environments already organized for their downfall. This also serves as an opportunity to acknowledge how this phenomenon is rooted in racism and oppression while also detailing strategies to dismantle the Black Assembly Line, in order to create environments where Black professionals can not only survive but thrive within these environments as well.

Theoretical Frameworks

In order to provide adequate context, there are two theoretical frameworks that lay the foundation to both conceptualize and dismantle the Black Assembly Line. Both theories have contributed greatly to the development of student affairs literature and practice, but they are inherently interdisciplinary theories meant to connect multiple bodies of knowledge. Given the nature of these theories, they provide a larger glance in the various elements of the student affairs work environment, along with its impact on Black professionals.

The central grounding theory is critical race theory, due to the emphasis on race within the framework of student affairs and work environments that focus on the Black student affairs professional experience. Critical race theory (Delgado, 2012) is a branch of critical theories in sociology where the goal is to investigate phenomena through the lens of race, while acknowledging the existence of racism, privilege, and oppression within society. The primary reason to utilize critical race theory is the need to centralize the narratives of Black people within the context of the student affairs workforce, while also acknowledging racism as a real and integral issue within institutions. This logic can be applied in the case of Black student affairs professionals as they navigate their environments and make meaning of their experiences, while also attempting to help students go through similar processes. Within critical race theory, there is a general acknowledgement that this development is complex because of the inherent existence of racism within the structure of higher education and the greater society (Jones & Abes, 2013). Because of the existence of racism, Black student affairs professionals must navigate the inner workings of their jobs while managing the stress caused through racist policies and environments that target their identities. There is also the inclusive foundation of the intersectionality component connecting Black identifying individuals with other marginalized identities, which can alter the way they navigate these spaces. Intersectionality is the overlapping of identities along with the compounded impact of oppression regarding those intersecting identities (Crenshaw, 1989). In relation to the impact of the Black Assembly Line, this could lead to compounded stressors and oppressive practices affecting Black student affairs professionals who also hold other marginalized identities, such as sexual orientation, non-male gender, or disability.

If critical race theory is juxtaposed as the string threaded throughout the conceptualization of the Black Assembly Line, then systems theory could be positioned as the centerpiece into which it is woven. Systems theory, a branch organizational theory, explores the internal processes of an organization along with its connection to the environment (Bertalanffy, 1968; Katz & Kuhn, 1966). While systems theory was created through interdisciplinary literature and research, the theory is utilized in major fields of study, such as business and higher education, by providing a lens to better understand the holistic construction and operation of organizations (Chikere & Nwoka, 2015; Katz & Kuhn, 1966). Within systems theory, systems can be either opened or closed, depending on whether the inner processes of the organizational system impact the processes in the system's environment. For the purposes of this framework, an open system is the central focus of the framework, due to the inherent impact environments have on organizational processes in open systems.

The components of an open system involve inputs leading into a transformative process called

throughputs, and, eventually, leading to outputs which are juxtaposed within a certain environment. It also includes a feedback loop that connects outputs to inputs as much of the results from the original production are recycled into future processes (Chikere & Nwoka, 2015). While systems theory uses certain terminology within its framework structure often utilized in the business industry, it can still be used to examine student affairs departments given that the theory was holistically created to examine any form of organization. The theory is also useful for examination of student affairs spaces given that many universities are utilizing business models within their divisional structures in order to streamline processes and create efficiency (Pritchard & McChesney, 2018).

In connecting the systems theory to the Black Assembly Line, “inputs” can be viewed as Black student affairs professionals entering a workspace with the knowledge, skills, and available resources to perform their work. The throughputs or transformative process are Black professionals completing work tasks, navigating positive and negative elements of the environment, and learning the dynamics of the institution (Black et al., 2019). Outputs are the presumed accomplishment of departmental goals and impact on the student population as well as professional and personal growth of (or lack thereof) Black student affairs professionals. The feedback loop is viewed as the transitional phase of outcomes related to the work provided by Black professionals being utilized again to continue building better processes or outcomes in alignment with departmental goals. All internal processes of the organizational workspace would then take place within the context of the social, cultural, and political dynamics of the student affairs workspace along within the environmental context of the institution in question.

Understanding the Nature of the Black Assembly Line

The Black Assembly Line draws its creation from an original term of the P.O.C Assembly Line, coined by authors Browning and Palmer (2018) as they describe the use of job fitness, as coded and exclusionary language aimed at keeping professionals of color out of certain positions within student affairs. Browning and Palmer utilize a critical race theory framework within their chapter which informs their description of the phenomenon as a means of appealing to institutional diversity standards and hiring professionals of color as tokens within a white supremacist system (Browning & Palmer, 2018). Because of this, professionals of color can be brought into taxing work environments that hinder their development rather than help, and lead to feeling unsupported, overworked, and, ultimately, leaving the field.

The purpose of this explanation leads to the conception of the Black Assembly Line to highlight the voices of Black student affairs professionals navigating inside a system with a history of anti-Blackness. Centering the Black racial identity allows for the validation of historical origins of exclusion, discrimination, and current unjust practices that are perpetuated by both White colleagues in the field and non-Black professionals (Delgado, 2012; Harro, 2000). It is impossible to acknowledge the existence and silent operation of the Black Assembly Line without also being critically conscious about the structure of higher education.

To gain a better understanding of the Black Assembly Line outside of the origins of the P.O.C Assembly Line, it is necessary to view the student affairs organizational environment through the lens of an open system. The foundation and operation of higher education is inherently racist, elitism, and orients all student affairs workspaces within a context of a history of exclusion (Thelin, 2011; Harro, 2000). Black student affairs professionals are forced to navigate these environments while also bringing their past experiences into the space as well. From here, Black professionals must learn to perform the duties of their role, understand the office and divisional politics, and help foster the success and development of students while also managing expectations of their role to office diversity. The outcomes of navigating this situation can be the attainment of office and divisional initiatives, but at the cost of the development of Black professionals along with potential burnout through lack of support and fatigue from racialized experiences in the workplace. This inquiry is further explored in Quaye et al

(2019) account of self-care practices to combat racial battle fatigue in Student Affairs professionals of Color as it can directly impact their ability to navigate their environments and work for students. This same phenomenon leads to attrition and lack of motivation to persist for faculty members of color as well (Hartlep and Ball, 2019).

Due to the nature of this cultivated environment, Black professionals often suffer in silence, as they make the continuous choice of either navigating the student affairs environment or leaving to pursue work in a different environment. This workspace, coupled with the high demands of time, energy, and resources, can lead to burnout of professionals culminating in attrition from the field (Marshall, Gardner, Hughes, & Lowery, 2016). Long after the Black professional vacated both the position and environment, there only remains questions and concerns around why they chose to leave. Reasons, such as fit, lack of developed relationships, or even competence, could be cited as the culprit of many new professionals struggling and deciding to leave positions (Renn & Hodges, 2007).

Instead of either critically assessing the attrition of the Black professional or the environment, the department will often make the conscious decision to simply begin a new job search. Thus, the Black Assembly Line is created and sustained within the system of higher education. It is silently protected by the racism inherently built into the processes and policies of the institution. Without critical introspection, this environmental system could be seen as the direct contributor to the attrition rates of Black student affairs professionals if allowed to silently exist within the walls of the student affairs workspaces.

Contextualizing the Environment of the Student Affairs Workspace

From its very beginning, higher education has established record of exclusion and discrimination towards individuals who hold marginalized identities (Thelin, 2011). Despite touting the tenets of equity and social justice in high regard, student affairs is not exempt from this history due to its position of being a small cog within the larger higher education system. Because of the ever-present nature of racism, student affairs practitioners must engage in constant practice of unlearn and relearn practices that actively dismantle oppressive systems.

In the terms of the workplace's open system, it is necessary to acknowledge the larger contextual environment of the workforce within the United States (U.S.) and then scaling down to individual institutions in order to understand the holistic impact the environment can have. For example, when the percentage of workforce labor is aggregated by race, it is estimated Black Americans comprise only 12% of the workforce population in the United States, as of 2016 (Black et al, 2019). This aligns with the workforce numbers within higher education, but with student affairs, it is necessary to analyze percentage of student affairs professionals in a ratio comparison to number of students.

For comparison within student affairs across institutions in the United States, White students are the largest portion of many universities' student populations, at 54%, while Black students comprise approximately 15% of student populations (Pritchard & McChesney, 2018). In relation to the percentage of student affairs professionals, White professionals overwhelmingly consist of 71% of all student affairs positions with White women leading at 51% while Black professionals are only represented at 15% across all student affairs positions (Pritchard & McChesney, 2018). Although it is easy to surmise that the percentages of Black students to Black student affairs professionals are proportional, Black professionals are still overwhelmingly underrepresented in comparison to their White colleagues. This data also does not account for hiring patterns or retention rate of Black professionals in relation to their White given the composition of the field. In fact, regardless of industry, Black professionals are more likely to face discrimination in the workplace than other racial minorities given discrimination of Black employees has yet to decline within the last 25 years despite showing decline for other racial minorities (Quilian, Pager, Middtboen, & Hexel, 2017).

Understanding this data, which creates a picture of the workforce environment holistically, the

creation of the Black Assembly Line within higher education is plausible, given the context of discrimination and oppression of Black professionals. Along with this evidence, hiring managers are more likely to hire employees who are racially similar to themselves, regardless of the hiring manager's racial identity, yet White professionals are more likely to be managers in a workspace making it more likely to create homogenous, White workspaces (Black et al., 2019). This creates an environment that favors White professionals and can isolate Black student affairs professionals, resulting in the toxic environment, which facilitates the Black Assembly Line.

The Black Assembly Line is further sustained within the student affairs workspace, due to the lack of critical inquiry into the construction of the space. Without this inquiry, Black student affairs professionals often find difficulty in securing positions in certain spaces and find less than supportive environments if they do enter those spaces. Thus, the space can create more barriers within the daily struggles to achieve personal and professional goals, while also navigating organizational politics and racialized emotional labor. By critically assessing these challenges, it is easier to understand the nature of the Black Assembly in order to further understand the implications of this phenomenon, such as the exit of quality Black student affairs professionals from certain positions or institutions.

Turning Off the Assembly Line

Much like an assembly line in a car manufacturing plant, the Black Assembly Line operates by a switch. This means just as it can be turned on, it can also be turned off, stopping production. However, to turn off the Black Assembly Line, educators and practitioners need specific and strategic tools that can counteract the development of the oppressive environment that harms Black student affairs professionals. Combining this blueprint with an understanding of student affairs organizational environments, student affairs can create radically affirming and supportive workplaces.

Culturally Relevant Supervision

Developing supervisors who have culturally relevant leadership, knowledge, and skills is the first step to breaking down the Black Assembly Line. As new professionals navigate their new roles and work culture, supervisor relationships are one of the most influential factors (Renn & Hodges, 2007). However, there is not often enough inquiry concerning how identity impacts the supervisor-supervisee relationship. There must be a recognition of identity within the context of their supervision style and philosophy in order to support the Black supervisees, especially in supervisor relationships where White professionals hold the higher positionality. Lack of this awareness greatly amplifies the power of White supervisors given the statistics in which White professionals are more likely to be managers in comparison to their Black colleagues (Black et al, 2019).

Ideally, supervisors are likely to have the power and social capital to advocate for their supervisees particularly in spaces where certain voices are not given equitable volume to express concerns or are not taken seriously. In the open system, supervisors can be a part of the transformative process, throughputs, where Black student affairs professionals are supported or hindered by their contributions, which in turn directly impacts outputs of the system (Black et al, 2019; Chikere & Nwoka, 2015). Simply, supervisors have an actualized and perceived hierarchical power within the supervisor-supervisee relationship.

Because of this power imbalance, supervisors must be more conscious of their power and use this power to advocate for their team. As co-creators in the supervisory relationship, Black supervisees can seek to benefit from voicing their needs to their supervisors and showing initiative of the supervisory relationship (Shupp & Arminio, 2012). However, these actions must not be misconstrued that Black professionals should bear the sole responsibility of voicing the issue of harmful, exclusionary practices, as it is the role of the supervisor to advocate and share the emotional labor of combating racism in the workplace. The advocacy and support by the supervisor must also be, at its roots,

intersectional, in order to recognize the variant needs of the various populations within the Black community (Jones & Abes, 2013). For example, Black women comprise a larger percentage of student affairs positions (10%) in proportion to student populations in comparison to Black men (5%), but this does not negate the lived experience that Black women encounter must navigate both sexism and racism in the workplace (Pritchard and McChesney, 2018) . With this in mind, White and non-Black supervisors must be cognizant of how to support Black women, while also actively disrupting the oppressive system.

In order to combat the Black Assembly Line, White and non-Black supervisors must educate themselves on how they can actively disrupt the system which harms many of their Black colleagues and supervisees in order to create spaces to which they can be fully supported. Whether it be through connecting their Black supervisees to Black faculty and staff networks, or simply connecting them to other professionals who share similar identities, supervisors with privileged identities can take actionable steps to ensure the success of their colleagues and supervisees. Another example is holding conversations surrounding critical issues that affect students of color and specifically Black students, and how their office can best create actionable support for these student populations. With strategic and critical inquiry, supervisors can utilize their positionality to foster the professional and personal growth of their supervisees, while also facilitating a workspace allowing for the successful accomplishment of office goals.

Disrupting White Normativity in Hiring Practices

Since racism is embedded within every institution of our society, it is inherent that every structure created within the institution of higher education orients Whiteness as the standard through which all subsequent variables are measured. This conception of Whiteness as a construct must be acknowledged as a dangerous entity that privileges certain groups over others in order to be actively dismantled to create spaces that affirm Black student affairs professionals. This can be especially true in hiring practices as there can often be hidden biases against Black candidates and candidates based on historically White or oppressive social norms.

The privilege and value of Whiteness places Black candidates at an unfair disadvantage through having to navigate spaces through performativity and ascribing to White social norms in order to be seen as viable candidates. As recounted by Ashlee (2018), Whiteness is silently whispered as the standard for hiring. Other coded terms, such as job fitness, professionalism, and qualifications, are used to justify hiring decisions. These words are used throughout the hiring process by countless hiring committees or hiring managers, despite no definition or criteria for them (Ashlee, 2018). Because of this, Black professionals can doubt both their abilities and self-worth despite being reputable candidates, as they are forced to navigate an exclusionary field. Critical conversations and introspection can counteract this phenomenon to create equitable hiring practices and understand the harm this has within the field. Outside of conversations, practitioners must also engage in the process of interrogating biases within hiring committees through bias training, as well create policies reflect the student affairs organizational value of and commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion.

There is also a driving need to center race within hiring processes and office environmental construction in order to highlight the negative experiences of Black student affairs professionals, while also working to dismantle the oppressive systems that keeps them out of student affairs (Palmer & Browning, 2018). The operation of oppressive systems, like the Black Assembly Line, can go unnoticed for long periods of time leading to large impacts aimed directly at many Black student affairs professionals' career paths. Given the large disproportion of White professionals compared to Black professionals, there must be active inquiry in the form of empirical research, counternarratives, and policy change to better uplift the voices of Black professionals in order to enact social change.

Strategic Utilization of Human Resources

For Black student affairs professionals, finding affirmation and success within student affairs workspaces requires a progressive view of diversity, inclusion and equity by the institution. Much like faculty members, student affairs professionals are disproportionately represented with regard to the diverse student populations (Pritchard & McChesney, 2018). In order to have equitable representation, the institutional outlook of diversity must advance past quantitative representation and move towards the viewpoint of which diversity is an institutional value, inserted into the fabric of the mission and goals of the institution alongside equity and critical support for individuals who have historically been marginalized.

There cannot be success in equitable representation without strategically utilizing and aligning human resources with the mission to transform Black student affairs representation on college campuses. Realignment requires shifting the mission and function of human resources away from merely legal compliance to address discrimination, actively counteracting the systems of oppression through implementing equitable practices and practices which target the root of discrimination. Many companies and organizations are beginning to observe that diversity creates more innovation and competitive employee performance (Black et al., 2019). One method many organizations are implementing is strategic human resources management, which seeks to align diversity and equity within the organization's goals and mission to make human resources a part of the strategic planning process (Black et al., 2019).

For institutions, the strategic human resource management approach can be an effective methodology in moving towards equitable representation when operationalized within the framework of critical race theory. The approach can create space for human resource managers to collaborate with student affairs in order to intentionally recruit Black professionals to institutions, while also combating the Black Assembly Line through actively creating and maintaining resources for professionals to be successful in their environments (Black et al., 2019). Human resources can become a more integral element to reshape the operations of student affairs and to recruit and retain Black student affairs professionals. This restructuring can take the form of intentional enhanced trainings for non-Black professionals to understand allyship to Black professionals, creating spaces for community and mentorship around racial identity, and shifting the organizational lens to the organizational perspective of integration & learning at the core of the organization's goals (Black et al., 2019). This approach can also denote an intentional investment into diversity, equity, and inclusion by institutions through actively creating spaces for critical introspection with the goal to dismantle oppression and create more access for Black student affairs professionals, providing more representation to the student populations.

Conclusion and Implications for Practice

Despite the intentions and promises of diversity, student affairs still has a long journey towards equity within colleges and universities. The experiences of Black professionals consistently forced into a cycle of navigating microaggressions, lacking support, and being overworked, only to matriculate out of the field, is nothing new (Browning & Palmer, 2018). In order to observe legitimate progress, there must be critical introspection into the leadership practices and environments Black student affairs professionals endure, despite the harmful impact it can have. This analysis must include building culturally competent supervisors, acknowledging White Normativity, and reforming hiring practices.

Implications of this paper include further research into the Black Assembly, while incorporating the intersectionality component of how holding both Black and other marginalized identities can affect how support needs to be garnered for these professionals. There is a need for research centering the experience of Black student affairs professionals, including counternarratives. With this, there can also be further introspection into how change can take place to dismantle the Black Assembly Line and other cycles of oppression to create spaces for success of Black professionals. Given the constant

discrimination Black student affairs professionals' encounter in hiring processes, there must be more contribution to dismantling oppressive practices within human resources in order to progress towards a point of equitable representation. Student affairs cannot hope to expand beyond mere numbers to account for diversity without critical inquiry, resource allocation, and policy change to effectively recruit, support, and retain Black student affairs professionals.

As student affairs practitioners, Black professionals are responsible for the development and engagement of all students on college campuses similar to their White counterparts and fulfilling an additional obligation of helping Black students navigate the system of higher education while having to navigate it themselves. As a profession, there must be a line in the sand drawn to acknowledge the harm the Black Assembly Line has caused to Black professionals and actively dismantle it to allow for the liberatory success of Black student affairs professionals.

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