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Original Publication Citation

Horton-Parker, R. J., & Wambui Preston, J. (2021). Amid dual pandemics of COVID-19 and racism: Helping Black doctoral students thrive. *Journal of Human Services*, 40(2), 147-160. <https://doi.org/10.52678/001c.75391>

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Amid Dual Pandemics of COVID-19 and Racism: Helping Black Doctoral Students Thrive

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Abstract

How can we help Black doctoral students thrive in a world of COVID-19 and racism? In the special issue's final contribution, we explore this question first by identifying the longstanding challenges Black doctoral students have faced in higher education. Examples of such challenges include structural racism, microaggressions, and biases based on the intersectionality of race, gender, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status. We next address how the "dual pandemics" of COVID-19 and racial injustice have magnified such challenges. Then, we consider how institutions can better support Black doctoral students by recruiting and retaining faculty of color and enhancing student support initiatives. Finally, we suggest strategies that faculty and the students themselves can employ to increase Black doctoral students' retention and overall success, including empathic mentoring, student and faculty collaboration, peer support, and attention to self-care and mental health needs.

Keywords: Black doctoral students, COVID-19, racism, microaggressions, academia, mentorship

Introduction

At the launch of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation Annual Goalkeepers Report, Melinda Gates stated:

This pandemic has magnified every existing inequality in our society—like systemic racism, gender inequality, and poverty. And it's impossible to pick one issue as more serious because so many people live at the intersection of all of those challenges. (Ford, 2020)

Living at this "intersection" is harder for some than for others. COVID-19 has had a disproportionate negative impact on communities of color in areas such as food insecurity (Dubowitz et al., 2021; Wolfson & Leong, 2020), unemployment, healthcare, childcare, and transportation (Litam & Hipólito-Delgado, 2020; Peek et al. 2021; J. C. Williams et al., 2020). Although non-Hispanic Black people comprise only 12% of the total U.S. population, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported that 34% of COVID-19 deaths were members of this population (I. M. Brown et al., 2020). In addition, non-Hispanic Black people constitute the primary workforce of the top nine essential service occupations. Thus, they are more directly exposed to the virus and incur higher mortality rates (Litam & Hipólito-Delgado, 2020; Rogers et al., 2020).

Concurrent with the COVID-19 pandemic, a second pandemic has also arisen. Egregious acts of systemic racial hatred and injustice have repeatedly occurred and have been prominently displayed in the media (Eigege & Kennedy, 2021). The January 6, 2021, attack on the nation's Capitol highlighted how ingrained racial animus has become in our cultural milieu. For the first time in history, a Confederate flag was paraded through the halls of



Congress (Bendix, 2021). Armed hate groups have proliferated even as the Black Lives Matter movement draws national attention to the ongoing systematic brutalization and murder of African Americans in our society (Kelly et al., 2020). Disturbing images showing the unjust killing of African Americans have been shown recurrently in news coverage and have been especially traumatizing for Black viewers to watch (Eigege & Kennedy, 2021).

As challenging as these troubled times have been, heroes have emerged, and their courage and hardships have been recognized as they performed the duties of their jobs. From the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, much attention has been focused on the challenges facing healthcare workers, bus drivers, grocery workers, and others whose services are deemed essential (Time, n.d.). The majority of these frontline workers, who COVID-19 has disproportionately affected, are Black (Litam & Hipólito-Delgado, 2020; Rogers et al., 2020).

There are other Black individuals within the human services educational community, however, who have also faced adversities but received little notice as they bravely carried out their responsibilities. Although they are some of the hardest-working individuals within academia, our doctoral students frequently go unnoticed (Horton-Parker & Preston, 2020). While their contributions are essential for successfully training the human services professionals of the future, the needs of such students are frequently unaddressed—especially if they are students of color (Esposito et al., 2017). We have written this article specifically to address some of the issues facing Black doctoral students as they strive to fulfill their multiple roles and responsibilities while also encountering the dual pandemics of COVID-19 and racial injustice. Many of our citations and recommendations relate to doctoral students in counselor education and other helping professions, because much of the available supporting literature is from these fields.

Being a Doctoral Student—And Being a Black Doctoral Student

We should begin by pausing to consider what a Herculean burden it is just to be a doctoral student. They are expected to co-teach with faculty and/or teach courses on their own; to supervise practicum students and interns; to participate as members of research teams; to serve on departmental, college, university, and national committees; to hold positions of leadership in professional organizations; and perhaps to serve as graduate and research assistants to faculty members (Dickens et al., 2016; Minor et al., 2013). In addition to these academic roles, doctoral students might hold full-time or part-time clinical, supervisory, and managerial positions in schools, agencies, and private practices (Horton-Parker & Preston, 2020).

The lives of doctoral students are not circumscribed by these roles alone. They are often full-time students; as such, they are expected to successfully complete the massive pedagogical tasks of doctoral-level coursework, including writing dissertations and scholarly articles and presenting at conferences (Horton-Parker & Preston, 2020). Finally, doctoral students are human beings: parents, partners, and family members (Zeligman et al., 2015), and their caregiver roles could be especially extensive in light of COVID-19 (Eigege & Kennedy, 2021).

As they perform their academic responsibilities, doctoral students work daily alongside full-time faculty, teaching and supervising undergraduate and master's students (Dickens et al., 2016). Thus, they are often seen, but they are less often heard. This is particularly true for Black doctoral students who might face greater challenges than their White peers (Barker, 2016; M. S. Williams et al., 2018; Zeligman et al., 2015) and who often have unique issues due to the complicated history of racism and cross-race tension in the U.S.



(Barker, 2011). As Barker (2016) so aptly stated, Black doctoral students “live as both Black and doctoral student” (p. 127).

In academia, doctoral students’ responsibilities are often framed as expectations, and so they are reluctant to express their needs, fearing negative reprisals (Baker & Moore, 2015; Dickens et al., 2016). This is especially true in the case of students from marginalized groups (Baker & Moore, 2015). Even before the arrival of COVID-19, the pressure on doctoral students was such that 43–56% of doctoral students considered interrupting their programs, and approximately one-third of others did not plan to return to academia after graduation (Schmidt & Hansson, 2018).

Racial disparities have been found in the number of students who attained doctoral degrees, with Black students far outnumbered by their White peers. The National Center for Education Statistics (2020) reported that in the U.S. in 2018-2019, 65.7% of those who earned doctoral degrees were White, and 9.2% were Black. Students of color were especially likely to abandon their doctoral studies citing self-doubt, depression, and stress (Baker & Moore, 2015), and female students of color might be particularly at risk for these concerns (Zeligman et al., 2015). Approximately two-thirds of Black women in STEM fields who began a doctoral program are unlikely to complete their degree (Joseph, 2012).

A contributing factor to Black doctoral students’ noncompletion of their programs could involve their feeling that they do not fit into the culture of academia, and as a result, think of themselves as “imposters” who do not belong there (Blockett et al., 2016; Squire & McCann, 2018). In addition, “tokenism” (i.e., being the only doctoral student of a given race, ethnicity, or gender) can result in perceived pressure to speak for the entire group to which the student belongs (Baker & Moore, 2015; Esposito et al., 2017; Squire, 2020; Squire & McCann, 2018). Seeing few others who look like them among their faculty and peers can further contribute to a heightened sense of isolation, uncertainty, inadequacy, and self-doubt in doctoral students of color (Barker, 2016; Squire & McCann, 2018).

Women of Color in Academia

For many years access to higher education was not an option for women and minorities (Green et al., 2018). White males have dominated universities since the beginning of collegiate education, and the status quo of racial and gendered norms has persisted (Bell et al., 2021). Women of color are in double jeopardy, because they face the threats of both sexism and racism within academia (Squire & McCann, 2018). According to Green et al. (2018), “Ideologically, Black female identities in the United States were constructed hierarchically from a socio-historical perspective in a way that positions Black women as inferior to every group from Black men, through White women, to White men” (p. 297).

In academia, the oppression of women of color often goes unchallenged (Patel, 2015), and when women of color address such inequities in their research, it is considered unscholarly (Bell et al., 2021; Green et al., 2018; Squire & McCann, 2018). Because of the multiple marginalization that they frequently experience, female doctoral students of color often believe that they must work harder than their counterparts to prove themselves competent (Davis & Livingstone, 2016). Many also worry that their failure to perform adequately could adversely affect not only them, but also future students like them (Zeligman et al., 2016).



Structural Racism

Structural racism is “the historical and contemporary policies, practices, and norms that create and maintain White supremacy” (Urban Institute, n.d.). Structural racism is manifested in the academy in institutional policies and practices that can create obstacles to the success of doctoral students of color, depending on how they are implemented. For example, residency requirements that mandate being a full-time student for up to a year before they can be employed full time, can be problematic. As one doctoral student stated, “I learned about this residency requirement about going to school full-time for a year and I thought, ‘There’s not a Black person I know who can just afford to go to school full time for a whole year’” (Barker, 2016, p. 133).

Another example of structural racism that has negatively affected Black doctoral students involves the use of standardized graduate exam scores to determine graduate admissions (Squire, 2020). The use of metrics such as the GRE is based upon the “myth of meritocracy,” in that it assumes that students are basically similar, and that their suitability for admission can be accurately evidenced through standardized achievement tests (Liu, 2011). This assumption puts African American students at a distinct disadvantage when competing for admission and fellowships with their more privileged White counterparts (Squire, 2020).

During the pandemic, numerous universities have temporarily discontinued using the GRE for graduate admissions, primarily due to concerns regarding equity in using the online version for students from rural and low-income households that might lack computers with webcams and stable internet access (Hu, 2020). Due to the GRE’s questionable ability to predict graduate school success for students from underrepresented groups, some argue that eliminating the GRE from college and university admissions requirements should become permanent (Hu, 2020).

An additional aspect of structural racism that can adversely affect doctoral students of color entails universities’ failure to recruit and retain faculty of color (Kelly et al., 2020). It is precisely this type of faculty that can serve as optimal mentors, advisors, and research support for marginalized students (Zeligman et al., 2015). The current dearth of such faculty could cause future problems in that lack of such mentorship might result in fewer African American doctoral graduates, perpetuating and compounding the problem (Davis & Livingstone, 2016; Kelly et al., 2020).

Microaggressions

Unfortunately, Black doctoral students often experience racism not only from institutional policies and practices, but also in their encounters with other students and faculty (Davis & Livingstone, 2016). Pierce et al. (1978) coined the term “microaggressions” to describe certain kinds of verbal and nonverbal insults that African Americans encounter daily. Sue et al. (2007) more broadly defined microaggressions as “brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to people of color because they belong to a racial minority group” (p. 273). For example, in Davis and Livingstone’s (2016) study, a Black doctoral student reported that when her manuscript was accepted for publication in a scholarly journal, her White peer labeled her success as “overachievement,” which she experienced as a microaggression (p. 206). In their qualitative study, O’Hara and Cook (2018) found that microaggressions can also relate to social class, as when a doctoral student disclosed that her professor had said,

You know, you seem like you’re having a hard time, or you might be a little snippy, or you’re, you have a bit of an attitude of some sort, maybe you should quit your part-time job, maybe you’re working too much. (p. 264)



The professor lacked awareness of the possibility that the student was employed out of necessity, rather than by choice.

Microaggressions are often unintentionally committed by well-intentioned White individuals who are unaware of their own implicit biases and the damage they cause (Sue, 2010). Because microaggressions can be quite subtle and ambiguous, those affected by them can become confused during such episodes (Sue et al., 2007). This confusion can cause persons of color to blame themselves for the episode; and even blame themselves after the fact for failing to respond to them effectively (Sue, 2010). Hurtful microaggressions leave people of color feeling depressed, angry, anxious, resentful, helpless, hopeless, and ignored; and may even lead to suicidal ideation (Branco & Blane, 2020; Davis & Livingstone, 2016; Hollingsworth et al., 2017; Lilly et al., 2018). Microaggressions occur frequently, in all domains of the daily lives of people of color, but they can be especially hurtful when they occur in the academy—a supposed safe space (Lilly et al., 2018). Exposure to microaggressions in academia can easily cause people of color to feel overwhelmed with racial battle fatigue and emotional exhaustion (Green et al., 2018).

Lilly et al. (2018) collected data on microaggressions experienced by 325 students of color aged 18 and older at a major state public university. These high-achieving graduate students were enrolled in professional degree programs such as social work, nursing, biomedical sciences, pharmacy, medicine, law, and dentistry. Lilly et al. found that 98.8% of participants experienced microaggressions. The frequency and distress evoked by microaggressions were associated with a more than two-fold increased likelihood of screening positively for depression. The frequency and distress elicited by microaggressions differed significantly by race, with African Americans reporting the highest of both, followed by Hispanics, Asians, and mixed-race students.

Enter COVID-19: Even More Stress and Less Support

Learning how to juggle multiple responsibilities is inherent to being a doctoral student (Dickens et al., 2016). But the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has added additional stress and removed available support for today's doctoral students. They not only have to negotiate the effects of the virus (e.g., fear, uncertainty, illness, death, isolation, depression, loss of income; Eigege & Kennedy, 2021), but also navigate unprecedented parenting and vocational challenges (Horton-Parker & Preston, 2020).

Public school shutdowns as a result of COVID-19 have forced some doctoral students to take on the role of part-time teacher and online virtual school monitor on top of dealing with the other responsibilities of daily life (Eigege & Kennedy, 2021). Female doctoral students of color often feel especially torn while trying to balance the educational needs of their children with their own academic and work-related responsibilities (Zeligman, 2015), and the pandemic has greatly exacerbated this dilemma (Eigege & Kennedy, 2021).

Horton-Parker and Preston (2020) discussed how the move to online graduate instruction had provided further complications for many doctoral students. The responsibility for syllabi revisions and instructional strategy changes has fallen heavily upon many of them. They are frequently the go-to staff tasked with rapidly developing new skillsets for online teaching. They have even been required to purchase new computer equipment to accomplish their university's online educational goals.

With many colleges and universities operating in a primarily virtual format (Smalley, 2021), campuses have become ghost towns. The lively comradery that typically occurs when a doctoral cohort shares a common workspace has become increasingly rare (Horton-Parker & Preston, 2020). Casual conversations between doctoral students and faculty members,



which often lead to idea sessions about dissertation strategies and unexplored research agendas, have diminished (Eigege & Kennedy, 2021). Instead, interactions are scheduled in advance and conducted in brief bites via virtual meeting platforms (Horton-Parker & Preston, 2020). As a result, mentoring, an essential element of good doctoral pedagogy (Esposito et al., 2017; Minor et al., 2013; M. S. Williams et al., 2018), has become more impersonal and less frequent.

We believe that Black doctoral students, who might have felt isolated and discouraged even before the pandemic, are likely to have experienced this paucity of contact as especially challenging. The convergence of the dual pandemics of COVID-19 and horrific acts of racial injustice, as displayed in the recurring media images of African Americans being killed, has taken a heavy toll on some Black doctoral students (Eigege & Kennedy, 2021). Having few others with whom to share their worries while feeling unprepared to manage their own and their family members' fears and anxieties has been both traumatic and emotionally exhausting (Eigege & Kennedy).

How Can We Help? Recommendations for Supporting Black Doctoral Students

The intersectionality of COVID-19 and racism has affected Black doctoral students in significant ways that pose a risk to their capacity to stay and succeed in academia (Eigege & Kennedy, 2021; Horton-Parker & Preston, 2020). Therefore, there is urgency in identifying and implementing strategies that can help these students not only navigate these dual pandemics but also thrive within the academy. Institutions and faculty have the responsibility of developing culturally sustaining frameworks and systems for doctoral students. Culturally sustaining systems and frameworks include programs that commit to hiring and retaining faculty of color (Squire, 2020); demonstrate inclusivity by valuing different perspectives (Davis & Livingstone, 2016; Squire & McCann, 2018); integrate diverse sources of knowledge into the curriculum (Davis & Livingstone, 2016); require faculty to honor, respect, and understand the intersectionality of identities of their students (Green et al., 2018); and provide the support that meets the unique needs of students (Davis & Livingstone, 2016; Squire, 2020). In the next section, we discuss several culturally responsive strategies that institutions, faculty, and doctoral students can use to help ensure individual and institutional success.

Recommendations for Institutions

At first glance, most higher education institutions present as being culturally inclusive and sustaining, as evidenced by brochures and statements that support these messages (Patel, 2015). While this is commendable, brochures and branding are ineffective if they do not identify how structural systems of inequity, racism, sexism, and other oppressive "isms" cause the exclusion of Black doctoral students from institutions of higher learning (Horton-Parker & Preston, 2020; Patel, 2015). Bell et al. (2021) recommended that institutions have systems of accountability set up to enforce guidelines that accomplish goals related to rectifying systemic and structural racism and inequity. Lewis and Shah (2019) recommended that institutions should engage in *capacity building*, allocating resources for scholarships for students with financial hardships and assigning adequate resources in the recruitment process of students and faculty of color and requiring diversity training for faculty and staff.



Recruitment and Retention of African American Faculty and Doctoral Students

Apart from scholarships and training, Squire (2020) adds that the campuses must proportionately hire faculty of color so that doctoral students of color gravitate toward these institutions. Along with hiring such faculty, campuses must support new professors of color in order to increase the likelihood of retention (Griffin & Tolden, 2012; Patel, 2015; Squire, 2020). Additionally, recruitment and admission policies must include language that protects faculty of color from being silenced (Bell et al., 2021). A culture of trust should be established, where faculty of color do not feel afraid to speak up for students of color for fear of being penalized when they come up for tenure (Squire & McCann, 2018).

As previously mentioned, 43–56% of doctoral students consider interrupting or abandoning their studies, with Black doctoral students being especially at risk (Baker & Moore, 2015; Schmidt & Hansson, 2018). Undoubtedly, institutions must pay particular attention to the recruitment and retention of Black doctoral students to ensure their representation and continuance in the academy. The recruitment of doctoral students often requires GRE test scores. Although this assessment tool standardizes the recruitment process, it also creates barriers due to unequal preparation standards (Hu, 2020). In addition, the GRE, which has shown bias toward racialized and marginalized students, decreases diversity in doctoral programs. One solution is to eliminate standardized tests as requirements for admission (Squire, 2020; Hu, 2020).

Apart from eliminating standardized tests in the recruitment process, the centering of race is another tool that could increase the number of Black doctoral students admitted into a program (Squire, 2020). Centering race indicates an institution's acknowledgment that racism permeates all structural tenants of the recruitment and admission process and demonstrates willingness to actively dismantle invisible systems that keep marginalized groups out of these institutions (Bell et al., 2021; Eigege & Kennedy, 2021; Squire, 2020). One way of centering race in the admission process is identifying other indicators that add to the program's diversity as alternative measures of excellence, such as lived experiences of students of color (Squire, 2020). Another way is seeking out students with research interests in equity-related research topics, such as social justice, race, gender, and the intersectionality of oppressed identities (Squire, 2020). In general, doctoral programs admit students interested in research topics that mirror faculty teaching in the program. Although this practice is convenient, it perpetuates the status quo, where faculty who are uncomfortable exploring issues that require examining their positions of privilege and power become hinderers in the recruitment process. To break down these walls of exclusion, faculty must commit to making their institutions value practices that enhance equity, diversity, and inclusion (Bell et al., 2021).

Lastly, supporting and retaining faculty of color due to their race, diverse identities, and lived experiences, can play an essential role in recruiting and retaining Black doctoral students. Not only do they attract students of color, but faculty of color also tend to advocate for their recruitment and admission (Jones et al., 2015; Squire, 2020; Squire & McCann, 2018). The relationship between faculty and students can also be instrumental in retaining Black doctoral students (Esposito et al., 2017; Griffin & Tolden, 2012). The next section addresses recommendations for faculty.

Recommendations for Faculty

Empathic Mentoring

We begin with a recommendation for empathic mentoring, which Esposito et al. (2017) define as a relationship in which a peer or faculty member supports a student. This relationship is a parallel process that benefits both parties personally and professionally.



Esposito et al. (2017) add that mentoring can occur between members of a group, which creates a diverse source of mutual support. Griffin and Tolden (2012) frame mentoring as a form of academic parenting that allows for compassion and caring while encouraging high achievement and perseverance in doctoral studies. Horton-Parker and Preston (2020) state the goal of mentoring is to provide broad support for students across the many areas of their life affected by the challenges of doctoral study. Finally, mentoring students also allows faculty members to model professional behaviors for their mentees and creates a strong instructional academic identity (Esposito et al., 2017; Horton-Parker & Preston 2020; Perera-Diltz & Sauerheber, 2017).

The mentoring relationship is a crucial component in the life of a Black doctoral student because most students in doctoral programs experience fatigue and academic and emotional challenges. Additionally, Black doctoral students might struggle with not feeling welcomed in predominantly White institutions (Baker & Moore, 2015). Faculty who mentor Black doctoral students must be intentional in building empathic and trusting relationships in which doctoral students feel comfortable expressing both their triumphs and concerns. According to Squire and McCann (2018), Black doctoral students benefit from cultural and cross-cultural relationships that allow critical worldviews and that support and affirm diverse perspectives (Bhat et al., 2012). Furthermore, understanding how marginalized identities intersect for these students enhances these relationships, and the willingness to openly acknowledge these identities increases trust (E. M. Brown & Grothous, 2019). Bhat et al. (2012) contributed that cross-cultural mentoring is necessary due to small numbers of Black faculty. Additionally, Squire and McCann (2018) asserted that relationships that allow the engagement of critical worldviews and inquiry into often-ignored topics are defined as spaces of resistance that involve collaboratively committing to dismantling the status quo.

Similarly, Black doctoral students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT), reported feeling included and affirmed when their faculty mentors used appropriate language and felt comfortable discussing issues related to the LGBT community (Lark & Croteau, 1998). Squire and McCann (2018) noted that when faculty demonstrate the willingness to address problems related to racism, oppression, sexism, sexuality, gender, and white supremacy, students experience faculty as being culturally responsive. Lastly, Jones et al. (2015) and Horton-Parker and Preston (2020) separately recommended structure and consistency in the mentoring relationship because it creates a stable environment, provides a sense of safety, and normalizes the feelings that students report, such as anxiety, depression, fear, anger, and uncertainty. Both sets of researchers also recommended that mentors suggest additional support such as counseling services, both on campus and in the community, if and when deemed necessary.

Mentorship Through Faculty and Peer Collaborations

Faculty can enhance Black doctoral students' academic experiences and careers by inviting them to collaborate on scholarly works and presentations (Horton-Parker & Preston, 2020; M. S. Williams et al., 2018). Borders et al. (2020) indicated that over 50% of doctoral students reported increased self-efficacy in conducting research when faculty offered hands-on learning opportunities and experiences, confirming the importance of collaborating on scholarly work. Additionally, it is recommended that faculty encourage learners to identify and work on research topics the students themselves find interesting (Borders et al., 2020).

In addition to fostering research identities in doctoral students, it is recommended that faculty model and foster collaborative, rather than competitive, interactions among doctoral students (M. S. Williams et al., 2018). For example, programs can create opportunities for



doctoral students who are further along in their studies to reach out and support newly admitted doctoral students (Esposito et al., 2017). Furthermore, students can be encouraged to seek support outside of their programs if faculty in other departments can mentor Black doctoral students (Horton-Parker & Preston, 2020). Programs can develop a list of faculty members from different departments who are willing to mentor Black doctoral students and then arrange meetings where these faculty members so students can meet, socialize, and establish mentor/mentee relationships (Horton-Parker & Preston, 2020; Jones et al., 2015; Squire & McCann, 2018). Finally, faculty should emphasize to Black doctoral students that asking for help is acceptable and encourage them to seek it when needed (M. S. Williams et al., 2018).

Recommendations for Doctoral Students

Self-Care and Mental Health

Doctoral programs are overwhelming, particularly initially, and doctoral students must engage in self-care practices and guard their mental health to survive the academic journey (Baker & Moore, 2015). There are several strategies students can engage in to decrease levels of stress in their academic and personal functioning. One approach is to break down tasks into manageable chunks (e.g., focusing on finding *three* articles for a research paper within the next 24 hours, rather than accumulating an entire bibliography; Horton-Parker & Preston, 2020). Another strategy is to monitor the “super achiever” mindset tied to high achievement goals by evaluating and prioritizing tasks to ensure that students can find balance, accomplish their academic goals, and maintain their mental health (Horton-Parker & Preston, 2020). Maintaining this kind of balance could be particularly difficult for Black doctoral students. Continual exposure to racism, sexism, microaggressions, and other challenges, such as COVID-19, can cause chronic stress, depression, and anxiety (Branco & Blane, 2019; Lilly et al., 2018).

For this reason, Black doctoral students must guard their mental health by being aware of these risks, prioritizing stress management, and practicing healthy coping strategies (Baker & Moore, 2015). Horton-Parker and Preston (2020) identified healthy coping strategies as physical movement, maintaining a normal sleep schedule, finding regular time to relax, and being kind to yourself. When students need additional emotional support, they should seek help from mental health professionals (Horton-Parker & Preston, 2020). Peer support can also be instrumental to the wellbeing of doctoral students.

Peer Support

Doctoral students should be encouraged and empowered to care for one another creatively (M. S. Williams et al., 2018). They can create a collaborative, supportive social climate and establish regular times to meet the cohort informally. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, when in-person meetings were problematic, Horton-Parker and Preston (2020) recommended planning a virtual “happy hour” once a week. Students can also team up, check on each other, and keep each other on task (Horton-Parker & Preston, 2020). Davis and Livingston’s (2016) Anti-Racism Project showed that doctoral students might also benefit from paired cross-race journaling and discussion sessions regarding their experiences involving racism and White privilege, which could enhance and deepen their relationships. Student organizations are other sources of support (Squire & McCann, 2018).

Student Organizations

Students can advocate for themselves by asking for support and guidance from the faculty in their program. If they cannot find faculty members willing to provide support, they



should not give up, but should instead seek supportive relationships outside of their department (Squire & McCann, 2018). Joining national organizations, such as the Black Doctoral Network, can provide students with a community network and resources, including advocacy and research opportunities. Other organizations, such as the National Organization for Human Services, the Association for Multicultural Counseling and Development, and the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision, can provide valuable spaces to link up with others who are interested in topics related to marginalization and social justice (Horton-Parker & Preston, 2020). Black doctoral students can also engage in service and advocacy within their doctoral programs and departments (Squire, 2020).

Student Service and Advocacy

Each year doctoral programs admit a new cohort of students and might also hire new faculty. Black doctoral students can be of service to other Black students and faculty by serving as student representatives on faculty search committees and student admission committees. Serving gives students an opportunity to advocate for hiring and admitting faculty and doctoral students who look like them. The representation of critical worldviews in these rooms matters (Squire, 2020).

Conclusion

We have highlighted some of the unique issues and stressors that Black doctoral students face. The continuing challenges created by both COVID-19 and the current climate of heightened racial animus have underscored their need for institutional and interpersonal support (Eigege & Kennedy, 2021). To ensure the success of Black doctoral students in the academy, it is imperative that universities make actual substantive improvements *vis-a-vis* diversity (Squire, 2020). They must make systemic changes and establish policies and practices that promote inclusion and make it possible for students of color to thrive (Davis & Livingstone, 2016; Green et al., 2018; Squire & McCann, 2018).

We are aware that lasting change does not come easily or quickly. Resistance might arise from those who have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo within a traditionally White, patriarchal system (Green et al., 2018). Nevertheless, we believe that we live in a time in which change is already underway and in which the tide has begun to turn in our battles with COVID-19 and racism. Therefore, the time to act is now. In 1966, Robert F. Kennedy stated,

Each time a man [*sic*] stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he [*sic*] sends forth a tiny ripple of hope and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.

(Mimmott, 2013)

It is our hope that Black doctoral students, who are living at the intersection of so many challenges, will soon experience a sea change within the academy that will herald a chance to thrive in a new post-COVID, unified America.

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