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# "Dreams Hanging in the Air Like Smoke": A Personal Reflection of Factors Influencing Enrollment and Persistence in Higher Education

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—Beatrice Lassiter



# 3

## “DREAMS HANGING IN THE AIR LIKE SMOKE”

### A PERSONAL REFLECTION OF FACTORS INFLUENCING ENROLLMENT AND PERSISTENCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

#### Introduction

The number of students of color, particularly African Americans, in higher education has been consistently low (Allen, Epps, & Haniff, 1991; King & Chepyator-Thomson, 1996; St. John, 2000; Thomas, 1987; Wilson, 1992). Though African Americans experienced an increase in college enrollment during the 1970s and 1980s, African Americans had high attrition rates and low academic performance (Wilson, 1994). In 1983, 31,190 doctoral degrees were awarded; surprisingly, only 1,000 were awarded to African Americans (Matthews & Jackson, 1991; Slaughter, 1989). However, African American professional degree attainment seems to be increasing. During the 1990s, the number of professional degrees earned by African Americans increased significantly. For example, from 1992 to 1998, there was an 8.6 percent increase in African American earned master's degrees and doctoral degrees (St. John, 2000).

According to St. John (2000), a growing number of African American students who are attending doctoral school are enrolling in Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) as well as Predominately White Institutions (PWIs). The purpose of this chapter is to explore and reflect on my experiences in doctoral school at a PWI. I chose to attend a PWI not because it is predominately white or because its college of education is ranked among the best in the country, but because it was the only one accessible to me. My husband is in the military, so my choices of universities to attend were limited. In fact, The Ohio State

University is the only school in the four states my husband was allowed to transfer to with a doctoral program in English education.

Historically, most African Americans earned professional and undergraduate degrees, primarily, at HBCUs. Wilson (1994) argues that this changed in the late 1960s and 1970s because of TRIO programs (college reach-out, upward bound, and regional science and mathematics institute) and several GI bills developed after major wars. Allen, Epps, and Haniff (1991) add that African Americans gained greater access to higher education in PWIs in the 1960s because of the Civil Rights Movement. These initiatives made it possible for more people of color to gain access to higher education at colleges and universities that traditionally serve predominately white populations (Allen, Epps, & Haniff, 1991; Wilson, 1992; Wilson, 1994). To illustrate this point, Wilson (1994) writes that in 1965, “600,000 African Americans were in college and 65 percent of them were in historically black colleges. By 1980, African American enrollment had doubled to 1.2 million but only 20 percent were in historically black colleges” (p. 196).

Nevertheless, the increase in the number of African American students enrolled in higher education programs at PWIs has done little to alter the small number of tenured Black faculty on these campuses, the amount and degree of negative experiences Black students face, or the low achievement and high attrition rates of Black students (King Chepyator-Thomson, 1996; Wilson, 1994). The literature states that students of color have unique needs that often go unmet at PWIs (Allen, Epps, & Haniff, 1991; Brazziel, 1988; King & Chepyator-Thomson, 1996; St. John, 2000). Further, much of the literature on Blacks in higher education uses the deficit model to discuss the experiences of Blacks, particularly males, in higher education (Coaxum & Ingram, 2002). Often-times, the Black woman’s experience in higher education is ignored, as the larger number of studies about the Black experience in higher education focuses on Black men (Carroll, 1982; Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Matthews & Jackson, 1991). Traditionally, Black women, as Carroll (1982) suggests, “[have] been excluded from institutions of higher education as [they have] been excluded from all other opportunities” (p. 117).

Moreover, the studies on Blacks in higher education often concentrate on the negative experiences of students of color who attend Predominately White Universities and Colleges. There are almost no studies that focus on the successful Black students who earn professional

degrees at PWIs yearly. Though many scholars have discussed the alienation Black students feel at PWIs (Allen, Epps, & Haniff, 1991; Beckham, 1988; St. John, 2000) or the need for special programs and Black faculty (Allen, Epps, & Haniff, 1991; Beckham, 1988; Clark & Garza, 1994; Wilson, 1994), there is almost no discussion about what Black students themselves feel contributes to their own academic success at PWIs or what they believe enhanced their experience. Additionally, there is little literature that includes the individual voices of Black students (King & Chepyator-Thomson, 1996; Lewis, Chesler, & Forman, 2001). Moreover, much of the literature neglects to consider students' personal experiences and reflections on their experiences while pursuing graduate degrees at PWIs.

Only a few studies serve as exceptions (Johnson-Bailey, 2001; King & Chepyator-Thomson, 1996; Lewis, Chesler, & Forman, 2001; Ross-Gordon & Brown-Haywood, 2000). In these studies, literature reviews, and discussions with research participants, researchers found several factors that contribute to the success of students of color in higher education:

- Motivational, environmental, and institutional factors (King & Chepyator-Thomson, 1996)
- Internal and external motivation (Ross-Gordon & Brown-Haywood, 2000)
- Relevant academic curriculum and role models (Ross-Gordon & Brown-Haywood, 2000)
- Self-efficacy (Ross-Gordon & Brown-Haywood, 2000)
- Networks of support (Johnson-Bailey, 2001; King & Chepyator-Thomson, 1996; Ross-Gordon & Brown-Haywood, 2000)
- Coping mechanisms (i.e., silence, resistance, and negotiation) (Johnson-Bailey, 2001).

## My Approach

This chapter is an attempt to contribute to the growing body of literature that focuses on the experiences of Black students in higher education. King & Chepyator-Thomson (1996) found three factors that affect African American students' decisions to enroll in higher education and

their ability to attain professional degrees. As stated earlier, these factors are motivational, environmental, and institutional. Motivational factors pertain to an individual's personal beliefs and desire to achieve. There are two kinds of achievement motivation: intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation. *Intrinsic motivation* is motivation that stems from a desire to fulfill an "internal need to be competent and self-determining," and *extrinsic motivation* is motivation based on a need or desire to be rewarded or recognized (King & Chepyator-Thomson, 1996, p. 171). Environmental factors include the campus racial climate and personal networks of support, for instance, family, friends, and advisors. Finally, institutional factors are entities that are specific to the university or college: admission policies, availability of assistantships, and other means of funding and networks of support related to academics. It is difficult to discern which of these factors most influenced my success in doctoral school, especially since I believe each factor has contributed significantly to my overall positive experience as a doctoral student. For this reason, I consider how each factor—motivational, environmental, and institutional—has affected my own enrollment and journey toward degree attainment at a Predominately White University in the Midwest (King & Chepyator-Thomson, 1996).

Coaxum & Ingram (2002) write, "Polite (1999) posits that the voices of African American males are rarely heard in research literature" (p. 2). I would argue that this is true for African Americans in general. As Johnson-Bailey (2001) aptly states, ". . . Black women [also] go unnoticed and unresearched" (p. 98). Black feminist theory suggests that Black women's individual experiences are valuable as well as useful "as a criterion for assessing knowledge" (Johnson-Bailey, 2001). As a result, this self-study focuses on my own successful experience as a doctoral student. The following questions are considered in this paper: (1) Why did I decide to enroll in doctoral school? and (2) What has sustained me on my journey toward earning a doctoral degree? It is my hope that my "schooling story" (Johnson-Bailey, 2001) or "life notes" (Bell-Scott, 1994) will help illustrate the need for rigorous recruitment of students and faculty of color and the implementation of programs designed to meet the unique needs of students of color on predominately White campuses.

## Deciding to Enroll

### *Motivational Factors*

I was both intrinsically and extrinsically motivated to enroll in doctoral school. My motivation to obtain a terminal degree is intrinsic because it has been my personal goal for quite some time. However, my motivation is also extrinsic because I believe I will not get tenure as a college professor without a doctoral degree. King & Chepyator-Thomson (1996) explain: “A person who is extrinsically motivated exhibits achievement-oriented behavior based upon external incentives such as social approval, a doctoral degree, a higher paying job, [and] tenure or promotion” (p. 171).

### *Environmental Factors*

Growing up, I knew only one person who had gone to college. I often read books and watched television programs and movies about people who attended college, but I did not think it would be accessible to me. When my eighth grade teacher, Ms. Anderson,<sup>1</sup> presented the idea to our class as if it were something attainable, I started to believe I would go to college. I even began to dream beyond the bachelor’s degree. Ms. Anderson became the measuring stick I used to determine my own potential. I wanted to do everything she did, but with a twist. She went to a Predominately White University; I went to a historically black one *and* a predominately White one. She pledged a Black college sorority, Alpha Kappa Alpha (AKA); I pledged Delta Sigma Theta (DST). She taught middle school students; I wanted to teach college students. Because of Ms. Anderson, I began to aim high. Luckily, she was not the last African American teacher to encourage me to pursue my goals.

Before attending a PWI, I attended an HBCU in North Carolina. My experience at an HBCU helped me never to lose sight of my dream of earning a terminal degree. When I was a sophomore, I began to work for the chair of the English department at my college. Teachers and the chair of the department took me under their wings and provided me with the grooming I needed to become a success. Whenever obstacles seemed to cloud my vision or circumstances threatened to



hinder me from attending doctoral school (i.e., I got married my junior year of undergraduate study), the chair of the English department would remind me of the low percentage of African Americans who earned the Ph.D. Or he would tell me about his wife who earned her Ph.D. while being both a wife and mother. I also had the luxury of being a member of The Ronald E. McNair Post-Baccalaureate Program, a program designed to help prepare students to pursue graduate degrees by giving them opportunities to engage in research.

The nurturing experiences I received at an HBCU are not unique, for as Dr. William H. Boone, associate provost and interim dean of graduate study at Clark Atlanta University argues, “[Black colleges] differ from . . . other schools. . . . You don’t get as much teaching and hands-on care [at other schools] as you do [at HBCUs]. Our professors are involved with a lot more than research and teaching. We do some real close mentoring, for instance, that you don’t get other places” (St. John, 2000, p. 38).

### *Institutional Factors*

Earning a Ph.D. has been my long-term goal since I was in the eighth grade. However, throughout my schooling, I lacked the academic confidence I needed to believe that my dream would become reality. After earning a Bachelor of Science degree in English education, I went on to earn a master’s degree in English and Afro-American literature at the same university.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, even while I maintained a 4.0 GPA upon graduating with my master’s, I questioned whether I had what it took to do well at a so-called *elite* university. Some Black people and the larger part of society said I had gone to an inferior college. “Anyone can make straight ‘A’s at an HBCU,” they said, and I started to believe them. Despite this, I applied to a Predominately White University anyway. To my surprise, I was accepted.

Clark & Garza (1994) identified several misconceptions that students of color have about graduate school studies. For example, according to Clark & Garza (1994), students of color believe GRE scores determine graduate school admittance. I too believed that I would not be admitted to graduate school because of my Graduate Record Examination (GRE) scores. Then I thought, if I am accepted, I will not do well. Besides, my GRE scores said I would fail. Nevertheless, my



personal experiences confirmed that the GRE does not “assess every discipline-related skill necessary for academic work or all subjective factors important to academic and career success, such as motivation, creativity, and interpersonal skills” (ETS, 1991, qtd. in Clark & Garza, 1994, p. 306).

When I entered the doctoral program, I was worried about whether or not I could prove that I was in school based on my own merit. I constantly doubted my ability. Had grades just been handed to me before, or had I earned them? Did I really know anything after five years in college? I wondered. But after the first grade report went out and I found that I got an “A” in each of my classes, I was able to focus more closely on my studies. I now realize that my anxiety about grades was largely due to images of graduate and professional school students I had seen on television or read about in books.

## **Journey Toward Degree Attainment**

### ***Motivational Factors***

Because my dream of earning a doctoral degree has been “hanging in the air like smoke” for nearly fifteen years, giving up has never been an option for me. Nevertheless, there are times when I feel I cannot go on because I am tired or cannot financially afford to do so. It is at these times that I read Lucille Clifton’s poem “Dreams Hanging in the Air Like Smoke” and remind myself that I would not feel complete if I did not achieve this goal.

Spirituality is another motivational factor that allows me to be persistent. I believe that earning a Ph.D. is a part of God’s plan for my life, and this helps me stay focused and committed to my studies.

### ***Environmental Factors***

It is through various networks of support, my academic advisor, and my family that I find the strength to continue to pursue my dream, despite obstacles. Additionally, the positive campus climate at The Ohio State University (OSU) certainly contributes to my ability to persist. Doctoral school would have been very difficult for me had I not had a supportive academic advisor. I believe that had she not encouraged me and answered countless e-mails and phone calls from me,

I would not have been able to persist. My mother and other family members have also been supportive. Often my mother tells me that while she does not fully comprehend what I am doing, she supports me and encourages me to do what I do to the best of my ability. Additionally, my son serves as a powerful motivational force for me. He has been with me every step of the way. His mere presence reminds me daily that I must be persistent in my effort to obtain a terminal degree. I cannot tell him we went through the stress and uncertainty of candidacy exams to give up now. He would never understand why during Christmas break I spent more time shut up in my room trying to type a dissertation proposal than I spent playing with him, only to give up and give in. I want my son to see me and know what perseverance looks and feels like. Most of all, I want him to know that our sacrifices, his and mine, have not been in vain.

According to King & Chepyator-Thomson (1996), "Research indicates that African Americans, once enrolled, have negative college experiences and higher attrition rates as compared to their white counterparts" (p. 170). Further, King & Chepyator-Thomson (1996) report that 46 percent of the respondents in their study of African Americans and their experiences on college campuses "felt they had experienced overt acts of racism at their doctoral institutions" (p. 174). Fortunately, the racial climate at OSU is such that I have not experienced overt racism. However, I am not suggesting that my race has never negatively affected my experiences in doctoral school. By this I mean that I have often felt out of place or as if I did not belong on campus or in classes simply because I am not white. Repeatedly, I have felt surrounded by whiteness to the point of frustration. Countless times I have been in social and educational situations where I have remained silent because the conversation was about matters I could not and did not want to relate to. Carroll (1982) best describes the dilemma I sometimes find myself in when she writes:

There is no one with whom to share experiences and gain support, no one on whom a Black woman can model herself. It takes a great deal of psychological strength "just to get through a day," the endless lunches [read classes] . . . in which one is always "different." The feeling is much like the exhaustion a foreigner speaking an alien tongue feels at the end of the day. (p. 120)

Lewis, Chesler, & Forman's (2001) recent study clearly reveals that students of color attending PWIs experience “high levels of alienation” and “pressure to assimilate” (pp. 75–79). King & Chepyator-Thomson (1996) aptly describe the environmental factors at Predominately White Universities that can be challenging for African American students: “. . . there are few African-American professors, students, administrators, organizations or activities, and consequently the campus climate offers little with which black students can identify” (p. 171). In another study of African American adult students, researchers surmised that some of the elements related to the academic success of African American students include motivation and relationships with people including faculty, family, and peers (Ross-Gordon & Brown-Haywood, 2000). I agree with these findings, and I believe I have been successful in spite of loneliness and alienation largely due to the closeness of my relationships with family and friends. In fact, the majority of my friends live in the city and are not affiliated in any way with the university setting. This removal from the campus environment helps me to leave academia behind while I interact in an atmosphere that provides me with greater comfort and acceptance.

### *Institutional Factors*

I attend a Tier 1 research university that has repeatedly proven its commitment to recruiting students of color. The university employs several recruitment efforts each year, including Graduate and Professional School Visitation Days, a program that gives students of color an opportunity to observe campus life at the university. According to our website, [www.osu.edu](http://www.osu.edu), OSU is a national leader in granting doctorates to African Americans. In addition to this, my school is ranked among the top twenty institutions that grant doctoral degrees to American Indians and Alaskan Natives. This information is based on data from the Higher Education and National Affairs American Council on Education. Moreover, OSU has worked in various capacities with Historically Black Colleges and Universities to help increase the enrollment of African American students ([www.osu.edu](http://www.osu.edu)). Over the last decade, my field, education, has consistently attracted the largest number of African American students pursuing the doctorate. This information operates as an impetus for me, and it indirectly helps me to withstand attrition.

The institutional factors that have sustained me on my journey toward earning a Ph.D. are these: (1) the university's ability to provide adequate funding for graduate students, (2) the university's commitment to recruiting and retaining students of color, and (3) the university's devotion to culturally specific programs like PROFS (Providing Research Opportunities for Future Scholars). When I enrolled in doctoral school, I taught high school full-time in order to support my son and myself. After my first year of attending doctoral school part-time, my academic advisor urged me to attend school full-time though she knew I could not afford to do so. To show her support of me, she worked hard to see that I received an assistantship that pays for school fees and provides me with a monthly stipend. Nevertheless, we both knew the stipend would not be enough money for my son and I to survive on, so I also applied for loans.

Each school year, I consider returning to work full-time to avoid loans, but because I want my degree, I continue to rely on borrowing money instead of working full-time. Brazziel (1988) and King & Chepyator-Thomson (1996) suggest that African American students rely heavily on loans to finance graduate school. Moreover, they suggest that other types of aid, for example scholarships, should be made available so students do not have to depend on loans.

One of the greatest factors that influenced my ability to persist at OSU is my participation in PROFS. I was accepted as part of the PROFS Fellow group my second year in the doctoral program. When I became a PROFS Fellow, I had no idea how much the experience would influence my journey toward obtaining a doctoral degree in English education. Before I knew it, the culturally engaged nature of the program had provided me with a home away from home, an atmosphere that nurtured and supported my research interests. PROFS has provided me with many opportunities I am sure I would not have had had I not been in the group. I realize we are fortunate to have such a program. King & Chepyator-Thomson (1996) reveal “. . . the support for social policies and programs that would aid African Americans' pursuit of higher education degrees has dwindled largely due to 'downturns in the U.S. economy'” (p. 170). This is unfortunate because students of color matriculating through PWIs often have unique needs and actually benefit from such programs.

One of the things I am most thankful to the PROFS group for is the relationship I have with peers and faculty. At our monthly meetings we talk about our academic progress, or in some cases setbacks. These discussions motivate me and offer me guidelines to help ensure my own success. Many times I have felt "out of the loop" or "in the dark" about the procedures necessary for earning a Ph.D., but because members in PROFS are at various levels, I am exposed to information most students have to stumble upon accidentally. For example, because there were PROFS members who had gone through the candidacy exam process before I did, I was able to query them about the procedure before my exams. I believe that my discussions with several fellow PROFS members about their experiences helped me succeed when I went through the process. Now there are PROFS members who have secured teaching positions at various universities. As a result, I have had conversations with them about job seeking strategies, and they have shared copies of vitas, cover letters, and other tips that will help me find a position when I go on the job market. The guidance they have given me is priceless.

The same can be said of my relationship with faculty members, particularly faculty and staff of color. King & Chepyator-Thomson (1996) argue, and I concur, "Students of color need examples of success to encourage them . . . to look toward the future as professionals in their field of interest" (p. 171). I feel comfortable going to a number of faculty members of color for information about academics and professional development. I am fortunate, as some doctoral students of color attend universities that, according to King & Chepyator-Thomson (1996), have "no black professors in their doctoral programs or departments" (p. 172). In contrast, I have had opportunities to present and write with faculty members who may not have known me had I not been a part of PROFS.

Faculty and PROFS Fellows have also motivated and encouraged me to excel in academic research endeavors. A few years ago, Brown (1999) revealed that few African Americans had had a chance to conduct scholarly research. I feel fortunate that engaging in serious research is expected of me. It is through listening to and talking with faculty and PROFS Fellows, that I realized that it was OK for me to do culturally specific research. I learned that my identity as a Black woman would not make my research on young adult literature by and about

African Americans any less valid. This was a breakthrough for me because I have always had a love for my people and a willingness to work to see how I can help bring about a positive change in the lives of Black children.

The use of traditional methodological and epistemological approaches to the type of research I engage in would be inadequate, for traditional methods of inquiry are largely informed by European worldviews (Christian, 1994; Dillard, 2000; Joseph, 1995; Scheurich & Young, 1996). Repeatedly, epistemologies derived from the “socio-cultural histories of people of color” are devalued and dismissed as illegitimate (Scheurich & Young, 1996, p. 9). This is especially true for Black feminist theory, which continues to struggle to maintain recognition and validation (Christian, 1994; McDowell, 1994; Scheurich & Young, 1996).

In an important essay, Christian (1994) asserts, “for people of color have always theorized—but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic. And I am inclined to say that our theorizing (and I intentionally use the verb rather than the noun) is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create . . . in the play with language, since dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking” (p. 349). Since traditional theory is “reductively defined” (McDowell, 1994, p. 569), and in spite of the fact that Black feminist theory is often unacknowledged as “theory,” it still seems to me that one of the most productive and informative ways to approach literary works by African Americans, particularly women, is through the use of Black feminist literary theory. Black feminist literary criticism and its devotion to analyzing how Black female characters negotiate issues of race, class, and gender informs my work. Recently, I studied how two contemporary young adult novels, *I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This* (1994) by Jacqueline Woodson and *Crossing Jordan* (2000) by Adrian Fogelin, negotiate issues of race, class, and gender as they depict interracial friendships between young girls.

My research leans heavily on the work of Black feminists such as Mary Helen Washington, Barbara Smith, and Deborah McDowell. These scholars, among others, have contributed to, and in some cases, largely defined what is often thought of as Black feminist literary



criticism. For instance, Mary Helen Washington's work illustrates her preoccupation with establishing an African American female literary tradition while focusing on common themes and intertextuality within the works of Black women. Washington (1990) maintains, "[W]riters speak to other writers. They change, challenge, revise, and borrow from other writers so that the literary tradition might well look like a grid in one of those airline magazines that shows the vast and intricate interweaving patterns of coast-to-coast flight schedules" (p. 7). I believe this statement can also be applied to the African American young adult literary tradition. Presently, I am studying young adult literature written by African American women in order to highlight and define intertextual themes within and across the works of several young adult African American women writers. This research is important because it begins to lay the groundwork for tracing a literary tradition among African American young adult writers.

Under the guidance of my academic advisor, faculty members of color who serve as my mentors, and PROFS Fellows, I have invested in my future. My journey has been a successful one. Nonetheless, it will come to an end (or a beginning) soon, and I will at last see my dream of earning a doctoral degree come to fruition. But what will become of me after I earn my degree? Will I be able to find a place for myself in academia? In 1982, Carroll wrote: "Obviously, no serious efforts have been made until very recently and on a very limited scale to recruit or promote Black women to important staff, faculty, or administrative positions in institutions of higher learning" (p. 121). Similarly, in 1991 Mickelson & Oliver assert: "Despite the almost twenty years of [recruiting faculty of color, particularly African Americans, and women] minority scholars—particularly African Americans—remain significantly underrepresented at practically all levels of faculty employment" (p. 177). Further, historically, African Americans have been excluded from faculty positions in higher education, and only recently has there been "[t]he appearance of noticeable numbers" of them in colleges and universities across the country (Mickelson & Oliver, 1991, p. 178). Based on this information, my future as an assistant professor in the college of education at a college or university seems uncertain.



## Conclusion

According to Clark & Garza (1994), Nettles' 1990 study revealed that

The quality of life for minority students has virtually been ignored by many institutions. . . . [I]nstitutional researchers and administrators tend to concentrate on quantitative rather than qualitative factors in higher education, noting increases in the number of students but ignoring their experiences on campus. (p. 305)

In this chapter I have attempted to give voice to my own experiences as a product of an HBCU who is now a Ph.D. candidate at a PWI. I hope that the information contained here will complement the small but increasing number of studies that describe factors that affect students of color who pursue higher education degrees at PWIs. I believe accounts of personal experiences are valuable and are an asset to studies about students in higher education. Such accounts provide opportunities for individuals to give rise to their own voices while telling their own stories. For as Morrison (1994) argues, “. . . [I]t is no longer acceptable merely to imagine us and imagine for us. We have always been imagining ourselves. . . . We are the subjects of our own narrative, witnesses to and participants in our own experience . . .” (p. 375). Finally, I propose that culturally specific programs, a generous number of faculty of color, and a positive racial climate at PWIs will provide a setting that is conducive to educating all students.

## Notes

1. All names of individuals are pseudonyms.
2. Afro-American is the descriptor printed on the actual certificate.

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