Transforming Climates for the Academic Woman of Color: Facilitating Greater Understanding in the Workplace Climate and in Social Structures

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the findings of a workshop designed to determine impediments for academic success of women of color in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM), as well as Social and Behavioral Science (SBS), disciplines at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Funded by a National Science Foundation (NSF) five-year ADVANCE Institutional Transformation (IT) grant, three concurrent cohorts – single women, women with partners, and the partners of the women – explored various factors that hinder academic women's progression. Utilizing mixed methods, including focus groups, pre- and post-surveys and recorded interviews, it was found that women of color at HBCUs not only lack informal mentoring and support male colleagues find at work, but also face climates at home where spouses, partners, or family find their work demands unfamiliar. Discussions of the impact of marital status and family life on work success were previously lacking. A clear disconnect of perceptions between partnered and single women were addressed in a joint session. All three cohorts repeatedly noted a definite benefit of the workshop was development of community across the university, and across families. After the workshop, many women noted feeling less isolated and realizing their difficulties were similar to other women at the institution.

Keywords: academic women of color, affirming communities, HBCUs, transforming climates, STEM disciplines

1. INTRODUCTION

The academic woman of color faces many challenges in higher education, especially in disciplines that continue to be predominantly male and predominantly white. Faculty women in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) are rare, and women of color in these disciplines are rarer still. So, academic women of color in STEM face climates and colleagues at work that may find their presence in the field uncommon, even at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs).

Lacking the informal mentoring and support that male colleagues find at work, these women of color at HBCUs may also face climates at home where their spouses, partners, or family may find their work demands and struggles unfamiliar. This need to further transform the climates for the advancement of women of color was formally acknowledged when the National Science Foundation (NSF) awarded in 2010 a NSF Grant to Transform

the Climate and Advance STEM and Social and Behavioral Science (SBS) Women at Jackson State University (JSU), an HBCU in the South (JSU ADVANCE).

This article addresses program efforts for the advancement of women of color in STEM-SBS in HBCUs by facilitating greater gender understanding both in the workplace climate and in the social structures these women look to for support. Reducing bias and transforming both of these climates can result in better success for the academic woman of color and more productive climates for all men and women touched by HBCUs.

2. LITERATURE AND RESEARCH REVIEW

The National Science Foundation (NSF) has accomplished much in addressing inequitable circumstances faced by white women and people of color in academia. NSF, through its ADVANCE program, has funded work at many educational institutions to transform climates and advance STEM-SBS women. Much of this work, though, focuses on experiences of underrepresented groups at predominantly white institutions (Turner, González & Wong (Lau), 2011). The work of JSU ADVANCE is foundationally supported by this other important work funded by NSF at predominantly white institutions. Therefore, JSU ADVANCE is similar to other funded NSF work; JSU ADVANCE is different, though, in at least two significant ways.

First, the JSU ADVANCE effort expands this important NSF ADVANCE work by its focus on needed gender transformation at HBCUs. JSU ADVANCE addresses issues quite unique to HBCUs and to the women of color at HBCUs. JSU ADVANCE fills a gap in considering their challenges. The National Science Foundation funded grants to transform the climate and advance STEM-SBS women at predominantly white institutions are much needed, as those institutions' white women and women of color academics are also in need of climate improvement. However, little direct attention had been given to the unique experiences of women of color (Malcom & Malcom, 2011) or to the particular climate challenges for such women at HBCUs.

Women at HBCUs are predominantly women of color. While they may not experience quite as frequently issues of race that women of color may confront at predominantly white institutions, women of color at HBCUs still face many challenges as they work in environments or disciplines with few female colleagues and fewer female academic leaders in the STEM disciplines. The experiences of women of color generally have received little attention; women of color on the campuses of HBCUs have received even less attention. Studies conducted suggest that at HBCUs: male professors far outnumber female professors; a gender based salary gap continues; and, the role of religion and the urging of a focus on racial equality over gender equity dominate the culture further disadvantaging female faculty (Geiger & Kilma, 2006). Moreover, in Black communities, Gasman (2007) observes, "issues of gender are rarely discussed" or are "swept under the rug" (p. 760). Hence, there is limited discussion in the HBCU institutional context about gender inequities and males mainly populate leadership positions (Gasman, 2007). Thus, while gender problems exist and hinder institutional advancement, these issues have been rarely examined externally to the institution (Gasman, 2005), and even more infrequently internally. The difficult experiences that women of color face regarding gender at HBCUs are then multiplied in the experiences of women faculty seeking advancement into male-dominated leadership positions and in faculty seeking promotion and tenure in male-dominated STEM-SBS disciplines (Ong et al., 2010). The STEM-SBS academic woman at an HBCU may face at work a discipline heavily populated by male colleagues who lack empathy regarding circumstances female colleagues face at home with childcare and other responsibilities. Gender bias or cultural, religious, or ethnic factors may also affect the ability or willingness of male colleagues to mentor female academics in the same way they do male colleagues. Hence, the academic woman in this climate may accurately perceive she is not getting the support she could at work (Thomas & Hollenshead, 2001).

Second, the work of JSU ADVANCE fills in a gap left by former bias studies. JSU ADVANCE examines bias by examining not only how bias affects the experiences of underrepresented individuals in the workplace and the experiences with work-life imbalance, but also by examining how women of color, caught between institutional bias and lack of understanding in their social structures, can be advanced by creating more supportive climates. Previously funded programs are foundational to the work of JSU ADVANCE. The NSF ADVANCE program has an established record of support of projects that focus on Institutional Transformation. These comprehensive projects seek to transform workplace climates by changing institutional structures that may hinder the

participation of women and minorities in academic communities. Here policies are evaluated and climate surveys are conducted to root out explicit and implicit biases that negatively impact the academic careers of women and others from underrepresented groups. The NSF ADVANCE program also supports projects to offer Work-Life Support. NSF ADVANCE recognizes that women faculty members are more impacted by these issues than their male colleagues. Thus, institutions are evaluated for flexible career policies, support programs, and for other work-life balance support. Information about the NSF ADVANCE program can be found at http://www.nsf.gov/funding/pgm_summ.jsp?pims_id=5383. These earlier programs to prevent both explicit bias and implicit bias all focus primarily on the lack of support of white women and minorities in the workplace itself; they do not address any lack of support from actual social structures themselves. The programs previously funded seek to find better institutional support for women faculty to achieve balance and be more productive. These programs have not of yet determined the type of support-enhancing programs that can be developed within social structures, too. Hence, the work of JSU ADVANCE fills the gap in this regard, too.

This gap is most appropriately filled through an ADVANCE program at an HBCU where women of color faculty members may suffer from lack of understanding both in their workplace climates and also in the climates of their social structures they look to for support. Moreover, little research exists particularly examining their experiences (Ong 2009). Many of the academic women in STEM-SBS at HBCUs have spouses/partners who are not employed in academic environments or who do not have advanced educational degrees, or the academic women are single and divorced, or single and never married. While 42 percent of Black women have never married, 70 percent of professional Black women are unmarried (Gilchrist, 2011). The STEM-SBS academic woman at HBCUs, then, is in family relationships with others who do not really understand what she does at work and the gender-related challenges she confronts as she seeks to survive and thrive as an educator or academic leader. Therefore, she may accurately perceive that she is not getting the support she could in her family relationships. Some researchers have noted that for women of color, cultural, family and personal expectations may place additional burdens on them to maintain a high level of "domestic responsibility" even in the midst of a demanding career as a scientist (Malcom, Hall, & Brown, 1976). They find "special cultural barriers to careers in science [for women] based on views of marriage, roles, conceptions of relatives [including in-laws] and a women's priorities" (Malcom et al., 28). Furthermore, the married/partnered academic STEM-SBS woman of color may not be aware of the struggles of her single female counterparts, and vice versa. The academic woman of color, then, is in multiple environments needing understanding of her challenges, and in multiple environments lacking this understanding which lead to more explicit and implicit biases directed toward her, hindering her advancement and the advancement of the academic institution (Malcom et al., 1976).

These gaps in the work funded for the transformation of academic climates for women of color were more formally acknowledged when the NSF awarded in 2010, a NSF ADVANCE Grant to Transform the Climate and Advance STEM and SBS Women at Jackson State University (JSU), an HBCU in the South (JSU ADVANCE). The grant, JSU ADVANCE, focuses on the climates women of color face in STEM-SBS disciplines on the campus of HBCUs. While JSU ADVANCE has several components to advance the climate for all at JSU, this paper is focused on the particular component of evaluating the struggles JSU academic women face in their work and family climates as they balance responsibilities, expectations, and biases, and seek to expand understanding of their predicaments both in academic workplaces and in social structures.

3. THE PROGRAM DESIGN

On December 10, 2011, JSU ADVANCE hosted a day-long workshop titled, *The Academic Woman: Balancing Responsibilities, Expectations and Biases.* The program had widespread participation of women in the STEM-SBS disciplines from Assistant Professors to the Office of the President. The, then recently inaugurated, President of Jackson State University, whose academic background is in the STEM discipline and who is the first female President, also attended in support of academic women of color, JSU ADVANCE, and the transformation and advancement of the entire JSU community. The program included speakers, focus groups, surveys and recorded interviews. To continue the process of helping academic women in their various environments and to do something a bit different, the academic women's spouses/partners were included in this process of gathering

information to expand understanding of the academic women's social structures. As is noted below, this inclusion of the spouses/partners likely yielded the greatest contribution of this effort.

The program started with a presentation by Dr. Eletra S. Gilchrist, Assistant Professor of Communication Arts at the University of Alabama in Huntsville and the author of the widely acclaimed book, *Experiences of Single African-American Women Professors: With this Ph.D., I Thee Wed* (2011). The plan was to use the author's book and presentation as a framework for addressing the experiences of the academic woman in her workplace and also in her family, and for identifying the challenges she faces in each climate as each impact the other. A secondary goal was to encourage greater support between the married and single women. Dr. Gilchrist examined how, for a woman of color, obtaining a Ph.D. could lead to more challenges to finding a partner, and how a woman of color who is married or single may experience gender inequities in the workplace that also impacts her ability to have more satisfying personal relationships. In Dr. Gilchrist's edited collection, the authors and research participants speak of their experiences, exploring a myriad of topics including: relationship challenges, work/life balance, multiple intersecting identities, negative perceptions, and identity negotiation. She emphasized that while the academic woman of color, regardless of marital status, faces many challenges, singleness seems to be quite prevalent, especially for Black women. Gilchrist documented that while 42 percent of Black women have never married, 70 percent of professional Black women are unmarried. Based on her research, most single Black women want to marry, but 90 percent of those single are not willing to sacrifice their career for marriage. Therefore, the subtitle of Gilchrist's book is, *With this Ph.D., I Thee Wed.*

Furthermore, academic women of color, even at HBCUs with a mission of uplifting communities, have diverse experiences and may be conflicted on how to best support each other. There may be disconnects between single women and married/partnered women, women with children and women without children, and so on. Therefore, supportive communities may be lacking.

Following Gilchrist's provocative presentation, three parallel programs were held which were designed to determine the specific needs of single and married/partnered academic women in the STEM-SBS areas to negotiate issues of gender bias. The three focus groups were: the spouses/partners of the academic woman, academic women with spouses/partners, and single academic women. The focus group of the spouses/partners considered the unique expectations of academic women of color. Dr. Anthony DePass, Professor, Long Island University, who conducts research in this area, provided an opening presentation for this group, held parallel to the presentation by Dr. Gilchrist. Dr. DePass discussed: the unique pressures facing academic women of color; the issue of double racial consciousness for women of color, even at an HBCU; and gender bias as well as work/life balance issues for female academics. The focus groups for academic women met separately for detailed discussions, building on the topics broached in the large group presentation by Dr. Gilchrist. The goal of the workshop groups was to identify the unique needs of academic women in STEM-SBS in negotiating climates and bias within the workplace and their own unique needs as married/partnered or single women to brainstorm ways to constructively foster more supportive climates. The outcomes expected were: to foster greater understanding among participants of the issues facing women in the academy; to foster greater understanding among the spouses/partners of academic women of the issues facing women in the academy; to create greater community among the women of STEM-SBS regardless of marital status; and to identify future programming for after the workshop to address bias and transform climates. After the focus groups met, two separate working lunches were held, one with all participating academic women and the other with the spouses/partners of academic women.

4. FINDINGS

4.1 SPOUSES/PARTNERS OF ACADEMIC WOMEN

4.1.1 FOCUS GROUP

One focus group that produced very hopeful findings for climate transformation was the cohort of the spouses/partners of academic women. Most of the men participating in this group were not academics themselves. Interestingly, many had been in relationships with academic women for long periods of time. This group focused

on the techniques by which they had crafted successful partnerships with academic women. They also brainstormed ways to be more understanding and more supportive of their spouse's/partner's unique challenges.

Those in long term relationships demonstrated a good understanding of the expectations placed on their wives/partners and the consequences of these expectations on their relationships and the wife's/partner's career. One participant commented that a simple but major way to be of support is, "Just learn her academic calendar cycle." Others agreed the academic work cycle and expectations are different from employment with more defined schedules, vacations, and time off from all work duties. Some emphasized that as spouses/partners become more attuned to the demands with teaching, scholarship and service, they can help create a less stressful home environment by not placing additional stress on the academic woman during the busiest times of her year. As one participant stated, "you must learn to let go of her time, as she has to respond to the challenges of her work." Others added a need for self-confidence in both partners and open communication between the two to do this.

The group openly enjoyed the opportunity to talk with other men who really understood these struggles. They also expressed a desire to organize more formally, to meet frequently, and to find a way to help the new spouses/partners of women or the spouses/partners of women new to academics, to offer the support that they wish they had had early in their relationships and early in their wife's/partner's academic career. They recommended: a support network of spouses/partners; university or college orientation sessions for the spouses/partners of new academic women; and a few meetings a year that included their spouses/partners.

The spouses/partners in this group were all male, and most were married. For the married spouses, the duration of the marriages ranged from approximately six years to more than thirty. The unmarried partners included men in shorter- and longer-term relationships with academic women. The event planners wondered weeks prior to the event whether there would be significant attendance and participation by the spouses/partners. However, not only did these men come and participate, with some encouragement from their spouses/partners, the findings from this group may become the most significant contribution of this workshop event.

This group of men frankly discussed at length how, to use the words of one participant, "men cannot be hung up on social norms, as there is no such thing as husband and wife norms, and you cannot let others get in your head." This comment is a key to advancing the home environments of married/partnered academic women of color. The academic women are in relationships which do not fit the STEM-SBS faculty stereotype; they are not white male academics. Nor do the academic women fit the STEM-SBS faculty stereotype for similarly situated faculty at HBCUs: they are not Black male faculty. Therefore, the spouses/partners of academic women of color in STEM-SBS do not fit the stereotype; they are not a white faculty wife or a Black faculty wife. These spouses/partners are primarily men of color, likely not academics or in jobs considered professional appointments, may not have advanced degrees, and their wives may have higher financial incomes than they do. So, the men, too, are seeking to build strong relationships with dynamics that may be contrary to societal stereotyped norms by resisting the negative relationship impacts from outside pressures suggesting that one lacks value when one is outside the stereotypical norm. Much discussion centered on the men as spouses/partners being confident and encouraging their wives/partners to be confident, too, especially as their relationship may not reflect the lingering American emphasized ideal of breadwinner male, with a stay-at-home wife with children. While this ideal has never been the norm in Black families and with economic realities is rapidly losing ground as a norm in white families, this ideal may continue to be highly valued by many, including many academics. Thus, at HBCUs, those who come closer to resembling the idealized norm may explicitly or implicitly reject those who do not.

As an aside point then, this over-valuing of unrealistic stereotypical models may affect the climate for many at HBCUs. The academic woman of color in STEM-SBS is outside the idealized norm, for she is female, of color and in the sciences. A married woman's husband is outside the norm. A woman with a partner, and not legally married, is then outside the norm, as is her partner. Several unmarried women in attendance even struggled initially with deciding where they fit: did their relationship qualify to be more like those in the married/partnered group, or should they join the single women's group. A single academic woman of color in STEM-SBS who is not in a dating relationship is thereby many steps removed from the stereotypical norms. So transforming the climate to be more inclusive of non-stereotypical notions of what an academic should look like and live like can be liberating for the university community at large. This transformation also adapts to the benefits of academic

men of color, who are not stereotypical white male academics, and to the benefits of all at HBCUs with their unique missions, which are not predominantly white universities.

Now returning to the discussion of their unique challenges, the spouses/partners emphasized how they can be of help to other men who unite with an academic woman, as they can help them learn adjustment strategies early on—strategies these spouses/partners spent years learning in their own relationships. Years ago when faculties were almost all male, universities had Faculty Wives' clubs to support academic spouses. Perhaps these organizations at their inception offer insights for the spouses/partners of academic women at HBCUs. In addition, other professions had wives' clubs, which later became spouses' clubs as more women became professionals. An example is the National Bar Association, an association of minority and progressive attorneys and judges. The National Bar Association formed a wives group called the National Barristers' Wives, which changed its name in 1987 to become the National Association of Bench and Bar Spouses, recently installing its first male President (National Bar Association, 2011). As a final note, the participants in this focus group emphasized that to have successful relationships with their woman spouses/partners and to help them succeed, the couple must create what their relationship best looks like without regard to external audiences. As one participant commented, the academic woman and her spouse/partner "must affirm each other as the culture changes."

4.1.2   PRE- AND POST-GROUP EVALUATIONS

In order to gauge the impact of the workshops and determine how best to meet outcome objectives, pre-workshop and post-workshop surveys, with evaluative elements, were given to all participants. An evaluation included the preparation of a thorough evaluative report of the pre-test/post-test survey results. Overall the results demonstrate that the event addressed its goals and this type of programming meets a variety of needs articulated by the participants and met the goals and objectives of the workshop related to awareness of and enhancing skills to address gender bias and work/life balance issues. As to the spouses/partners of academic women, their evaluations revealed that the workshop improved both awareness of and sense of competency in their future ability to help their spouses/partners negotiate issues of bias and professional life/personal life tensions. In relation to the exposure of their wives/partners to racial bias in their work environments, men gained knowledge from the workshop and their already existing knowledge of the gender bias their wives/partners face also rose lightly. While none of the male spouses/partners participating in the workshop had ever engaged in a similar workshop or discussion before, all of the participants found it to be a helpful endeavor. In fact, their participation increased their understanding of the academic expectations and obligations of academic women, from 57 percent before the workshop to 86 percent after the workshop noting that they understood. In addition, the workshop gave them greater confidence in their abilities as men to be of support to their academic spouse/partner.

Overall, the workshop improved awareness and proficiency in helping their spouses/partners negotiate issues of bias and professional/personal life tensions. Moreover, as illustrated in the discussion above, the workshop helped the men establish a sense of community support from other spouses/partners of academic women, with the men's hopes that such a community can be more formally institutionalized in the STEM-SBS disciplines, in the larger JSU community, and broadly in the HBCU context. From the beginning of the workshop to the end, these spouses/partners relished the opportunity to commune with men in similar relationships. Even before the workshop began during time for coffee and assembling, the men naturally gravitated to each other at a large table and started their community building and offering of support. This support and collegiality continued trough the presentation, the focus group, the evaluations, the after the workshop interviews, and hopefully will continue on and become a more formal structure for these men as spouses/partners to support each other as they improve in supporting their wives/partners who are academic women of color in STEM-SBS disciplines at JSU.

4.2 MARRIED/PARTNERED ACADEMIC WOMEN

4.2.1   FOCUS GROUP

The second focus group was composed of married/partnered academic women in the STEM-SBS disciplines. They reflected on the presentation by Dr. Gilchrist and the dilemma of single academic women. This group noted commonalties between married and single academic women and issues that transcend racial groups. They soon,

though, moved into a discussion of their prevalent concerns as academic women with spouses/partners. A prevalent theme in this group was the conflict between how women are socialized to be quieter and how that conflicts with the need for self-promotion in the academic community. Timidity on the part of women, it was suggested, hinders women's success in power negotiations within the academy. Hence, this may contribute to how women are often not as well-paid or well-recognized for their work and leadership as much as male faculty.

Another common, related theme is women seem to be socialized to, not just be quieter but to, also actively downplay themselves. Many noted that when asked what they do they say, "I teach," instead of fully disclosing their profession. This intentional downplaying was noted in the married/partnered women and in the single women focus group. Moreover, this intentional downplaying occurs both in engaging with their families and in the academic workplace. Some stated this downplaying is a matter of survival. One woman noted that she now tries to maintain a lower profile at work because she is not sure her significant professional achievements were a plus within her departmental relationships. This downplaying, whether it is voluntary or forced by others' gender expectations, also leads to lack of understanding from their families. Some participants reported family members: are unfamiliar with academia; think faculty do not work in the summer because they are working on scholarship and not teaching, so should be available for helping others; and, find their work a mystery.

As another example of a result of downplaying, one woman told the story: "I was at the grocery store with my young son. One of my students came up to speak and called me, 'Doctor.' My son said he did not know I was a doctor and then asked me what kind of a doctor. I then explained to him." After her story, group members disagreed as to whether this meant anything more than that she had not clearly communicated to her family what she does. Other participants thought this story carried greater meaning, but declined to elaborate. Regardless, this story may reveal that for various reasons, female academics of color do not explain clearly to their family or church or friends away from work who they are professionally, adding to the "mystery" surrounding their work and professional identity. On a related point, the married/partnered women noted an intentional split in their identities. Some want their identities at church or with their family to be separate from their identities at work. This leads to at times the family having less information about her work life, or the value of her degree. Although some women forge these separate identities, they may come at a cost. One commented, "At church I am not called 'Dr.,' but church is one thing and a conference is another issue."

Similar concerns were raised about the lack of understanding at home with academic deadlines. Participants were concerned that their family did not really understand their work, and this led to unrealistic demands by the family. Similarly the workplace did not seem to really understand their family demands, which led to unrealistic demands at work. As a result, an academic woman's entire life can become very stressful. This stress is compounded by gender biases that suggest that women should not say 'no' to additional duties, especially ones that male academics would prefer not to do. One participant suggested, "Gender roles in academics unite male faculty and male administrators and protects them. This affects how we women then are treated. We are told by males in the academic community that we should 'be the nurturing one, give extra help to the students, and be the secretary on the committee and complete all of the reports.'" Some of the women have tried to say "no," but suffered repercussions professionally. One participant noted, "Some difficulties I bring on my own self and some I am asked to do because of others' views about the role for women. Gender socialization and our desire to please because of fear about an upcoming Tenure and Promotion decision create tension. Even when you decline to do something and say, 'no,' you are concerned about later ramifications or penalties. So, even in saying no, it doesn't end it." Regardless then of the academic woman's decision, she experiences heightened tension for complying with other's gender norms, or heightened tension for refusing excessive time intensive demands. Some disagreed as to what causes this over workload in areas that do not advance the overworked women and other gender based disparities at work. Some thought this was caused by individual female choices; others thought the overwork was caused by structural expectations based on gender; while others based it on the explicitly or implicitly biased behaviors' of male colleagues and male administrators. Regardless of the cause, these disparities can lead to a lack of balance, and lack of balance can lead to problems in the female academic's work life and home life.

Many in the group suggested that JSU ADVANCE could help women overcome by several initiatives. Some desired additional sessions to help women become more aware of gender-based socialization and to actively train women how to become more assertive professionally and personally. Others thought there should be workshops

teaching women negotiation skills. It seems to them that male faculty can negotiate higher salaries and better conditions more often than women. Other participants added that the academic work of women does not get the attention that comparable work by males receives, suggesting that JSU ADVANCE could help in publicizing their work and in teaching them how to do so. Participants also noted the need for greater cultural sensitivity of the plight of women as caregivers. They stressed the need "to institutionalize the culture" of gender equity and a need for more formalized recognition of the family circumstances of academic women. Several were concerned about specific incidents. Others sought policies that would stop the tenure clock for family or child rearing demands. Others were concerned that widespread gender disparities existed in salaries.

4.2.2   PRE- AND POST-GROUP EVALUATIONS

Overall, the pre- and post-group evaluations revealed the program met the goals and objectives of the workshop related to awareness of and enhancing skill to address gender bias and work/life balance issues. For both the single and married/partnered women's groups, the evaluations revealed that the program improved both awareness of and ability to negotiate tensions between one's professional and personal lives. While 83 percent of the married/partnered women participating had never engaged in a similar discussion before, 89 percent found it to be a very helpful endeavor. Interestingly, the workshop planners had been concerned as to whether male spouses/partners would attend. But, prior to the workshop these women also were ambivalent about participating. Prior to the workshop, only 50 percent of married/partnered women even wanted opportunities to discuss these issues. However, after the workshop, 100 percent of the married/partnered women noted their desire for more events in the future. It seems that as with their spouses/partners, the married/partnered academic women in STEM-SBS also benefitted greatly by this community building experience.

4.3 SINGLE ACADEMIC WOMEN

4.3.1   FOCUS GROUP

The third focus group was of single academic women of color. A common theme by many of the participants was the issue of isolation, some self imposed isolation for survival and some isolation imposed by others, even by married/partnered academic women. This isolation, according to the single women, evolves as a result of the lack of understanding by others. While many of the participants commented that most of their friends are male because of their discipline, these male friends lack understanding of their situation in the academy and their singleness, too. More particularly, the idea expressed was family and male academic colleagues do not understand their personal choices or their professional lives and so are both insensitive and make their work more difficult. One participant commented, "Male colleagues assume my life is better or easier than theirs. Thus they have little sympathy for any of my struggles." This lack of sympathy is even experienced in family relationships. Another participant explained, "My family members think that because I am single and an academic that I have great financial resources." As a result, she shared that she isolates herself from many family members. Being single may also result in unreasonable expectations in one's family and at work. As one woman stated, "You get put upon. People say, 'You're single, you don't have anything to do, you can do this, or you can do that.' They dismiss the idea that a single academic woman could have a personal life or other interests." Thus, even single academic women experience work/life balance issues. The overworking, then, leads to further isolation.

Other single women academics say they become isolated even at academic conferences, where other colleagues may publicly criticize them for still being single. Married or partnered academic women also leave them out of activities; maybe for fear that they will pursue their husbands. "They need not fear me, I don't want their husbands," one participant stated. Some of the single women felt conflicted about even discussing singleness of women of color in an academic setting. Some of the women especially noted that they enjoyed being single and enjoyed their work. Others feared that the workshop was about "fixing" single academic women, which they found disconcerting. Yet others confided that while they enjoy their singleness today, they do worry about their future. As one participant stated, "I don't worry about being single right now, but I worry what effect my choices will have on me at age 65, 70 or 75." There was lots of agreement around the group to this comment. One woman of color, who was not Black, was amazed at the commonalities of her experiences with the Black women in the room. "This conversation is good for me," she added.

Sixty percent of the single academic women had never participated in such a workshop before. Prior to the workshop only 30 percent even wanted an opportunity to discuss these topics. Although some single women were conflicted about such a workshop and focus group calling attention to their singleness, in post workshop evaluations 89 percent found it a helpful endeavor and 78 percent noted their desire for other workshops on the topic. In addition to the survey evaluation findings noted above with the other focus groups, the workshop improved for single academic women their knowledge of negotiating gender and racial bias.

For all the focus groups, one important discovery was that this type of event was a first time occurrence for almost all participants. Hence, most of the participants in all three groups had not ever participated in a similar discussion group addressing the unique needs of academic women in STEM-SBS disciplines, relative to work, marital status and family lives. The evaluations showed that the workshop program was very helpful in understanding the biases academic women of color face and initiating communities of support. And, after the exposure of the workshop, almost all participants wanted more of these experiences, not less.

5.   CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE STEPS

As discussed above, this workshop is just the beginning for transforming the climate for academic women of color and for the entire institution and community. At least five areas have been identified for future work.

The combining of the different focus groups into plenary sessions and subsets went well, and the division into smaller demographic focus groups was also successful. In these sessions we divided the participants into three groups—spouses/partners of academic women, married academic women, and single academic women. In the debriefing, it was mentioned that for future sessions we may want to consider dividing into different focus groups based on different topics (gender bias, negotiating as a woman, and so on) and then recombining for new discussions. Other demographic divisions might be women with children (regardless of marital status) and those without children, or those with children at home and those without. This is based on some comments that some of the frustration about gender workload imbalances might be based less on marital status and more on child-care responsibilities or the lack thereof. Women with children have additional work/life balance issues to manage, where women without children believe they are often expected to work far more. A second area of additional programming may be in the training of academic women to learn to negotiate. A common response was that women were at a disadvantage in negotiating salary, workload, reward structures, and in self-promotion. Both negotiation and self-promotion are necessary skills for successful academic careers and are areas in which women may be socialized to be at a disadvantage. This disadvantage may be even greater with Black women and other women of color, who may work diligently with less acknowledgment to refute myths of female dominance or incompetence. While JSU ADVANCE has plans to address some of these issues in the Promotion/Tenure workshops and in the International Visibility portions of the grant, specific programming on skill development for women may be advantageous. A third area is related to the struggles of the academic women who are unmarried, whether: single and never married; or single and divorced; or single and widowed; or single and in a long-term relationship. Although most Black professional women are single, single women did not seem to articulate as much of a commonality of plights, as perhaps the married/partnered women and the spouses/partners of the academic women. This could be caused by the great diversity of experiences and outlooks of single women. Members of the single academic women focus group were, as were the other groups, very interested in further workshops.

A disconnect seemed to be between married/partnered women and single women. There may be other disconnects based on disciplines, academic role, academic rank, age, and so on. Perhaps the recommendation listed first above, can be helpful in negotiating any divide among women. In addition, other JSU ADVANCE projects, such as the summer writing retreats and international travel visibility, all have community building exercises incorporated and as one of the main goals. Therefore, a fourth area of future work is appropriately in the arena of community building. All three demographic groups repeatedly noted a definite benefit of the workshop was the development of community across the silos of the university, and across families. Many academic women noted that they felt less isolated and recognized that the difficulties they faced were shared by other women. Much

commonality was noted among the women of various colors at JSU. The spouses/partners of the academic women also noted the benefits of now being a part of a community. They desired to continue meeting both formally and informally. The men also expressed a desire to help men who are new to partnerships or marriages with academic women. Finally, institutionalizing the benefits of the workshop—both as formal and informal structures to provide support to academic women who are single, academic women who are married/partnered and their spouses/ partners—is the important overriding next step of this program.

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