

Not by Magic: Perspectives on Creating and Facilitating Outreach Programs for Black Girls and Women

SOSANYA MARIE JONES
Howard University

“Black girl magic” has become a popular phrase to signal the strength, intelligence, and talent of Black girls and women. Affinity programs for Black girls and women support the development, healing, and resilience of Black females so that their “magic” can be fully realized, yet very little is known about their design or facilitators. This lack of knowledge creates a mystique that hinders replication and expansion. Drawing on a conceptual framework of intersectionality and program planning, this descriptive qualitative research (re)visions how affinity programs for Black females are presented by highlighting the perspective of six Black women program leaders. Through their voices, this study provides a greater understanding about the needs and challenges associated with developing programmatic outreach to improve the social, academic, and health development of Black females and the contextual forces that influence the sustainability of the programs they manage. Finally, implications for both researching and implementing programs designed to support Black females are also provided.

Keywords: outreach programs, Black girls, Black women, program administration

Introduction

As a whole, Black females are attending and graduating from high school and college at historically high rates (Blalock & Sharpe, 2012; Kaba, 2008; Kirkendoll, 2018). Increasingly, these gains have been celebrated as “Black girl magic,” a phrase that celebrates the strength, intelligence, and talent of Black girls and women. Patton and Croom (2017) comment, “[T]he Black Girl Magic narrative was created by and for Black women as an effort to name and reclaim our contributions, identities (individual and collective), and successes in positive and affirming ways” (p.5). While this is very promising news it could be argued that the recent focus on “Black girl magic” has camouflaged the current struggles of Black women and girls, rendering their needs invisible (Commodore et al., 2018; Daniel & White, 2018; Henry et al., 2011). One of the most telling indicators of this invisibility is the dearth of programs available for supporting the educational, psychological, and social needs of Black females.

This gap in programmatic support for Black females is troubling considering the sharp rise in the number of in-school and out-of-school suspensions given to Black girls, and the lack of Black women who choose to enroll in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) related college programs, or choose STEM related careers (Charleston et al., 2014). There is also a startling lack of inquiry on the work that goes into designing and managing outreach for Black females. Not only is there a compelling need for programmatic efforts to support and prepare Black females to successfully navigate the K-16 pipeline but also the scholarly literature needs insight into how these programs can be replicated.

Objectives

Affinity programs for Black females have long supported their development, healing, and resilience so that their “magic” can be fully realized. The programs examined in this study differ in aim, structure, and scope; however, at their core, they share a common purpose—to uplift, support, and empower Black females. The overarching goal of this study is to raise awareness about the existence and functions of programs that support Black females in the K-16 educational pipeline as well as to demystify the work that goes into creating and sustaining these programs so that they may be replicated. Towards this end, this study has three objectives: (a) provide in-depth accounts of the experiences of leaders who develop and manage outreach programs designed for Black females; b) increase understanding about the programmatic needs of Black girls and women; and (c) gain insight into the contextual forces that influence the sustainability of programs designed to increase the educational success of Black females’ schooling.

Literature Review

Black girls have increased their high school graduation rate by 63% and significantly narrowed the achievement gap with Asian and White women (Autor, 2010). Between 1970 and 2008 college completions rose three-fold among Black women, and the percentage of Black women enrolled as first-time freshmen was greater than any other non-White group (Black Women’s Roundtable Public Policy Network, 2015; Blalock & Sharpe, 2012). However, there are troubling new trends in the participation and retention of Black girls and women in K-16 schooling as well as in the psychological well-being for this population. These trends underscore the continued need for more programmatic outreach and support.

K-12 Research on Black Girls and Women

Recent research shows that while Black females have made gains in primary school education, they still tested below their female peers in fourth and eighth grade science. Furthermore, Black females enroll in Algebra or more advanced mathematics courses in eighth grade at the lowest rate of all racial and ethnic groups (2013). At the high school level, although there were some modest increases in graduation rates between 2007 and 2010, overall, Black female graduation rates have declined since 1990 (Holzer & Dunlop, 2013). When Black girls

receive attention at school, it is usually associated with stereotypes that raise negative visibility. Recent studies show that teachers, across both majority and minority schools, are more likely to view Black girls as loud, unladylike, and too assertive (George, 2015; Morris, 2007). These negative stereotypes can also have other, more serious effects. Most startling is the rise of Black girls receiving out-of-school suspensions and entering the juvenile detention and prison systems (Pratt-Clark, 2010). Black females are now the second highest group to receive out-of-school suspensions behind White, even though they represent a much lower percentage of school population (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014).

These educational challenges do not occur in a vacuum; on the contrary, they are manifestations of persistent contextual issues such as historical stereotyping, marginalization, and discrimination (The NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc., 2014) and highlight a need for more support tailored specifically to the needs of Black females. The challenges this population face and the contextual forces that create these challenges do not cease in primary school but extend to postsecondary education as well.

Higher Education

While Black women are participating in higher education at greater rates than ever, only 23% of all Black women hold a bachelor's degree or higher (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2013). Additionally, there is strong evidence that Black women experience both racial and sexual discrimination in higher education (Henry et al., 2011; Leath & Chavous, 2018). Black female graduate students reported that they felt they were treated unfairly by peers and faculty (Donovan, 2013; Schwartz, et al., 2003). A 2014 study of 204 African-American women showed that Black women are vulnerable to stressful events as a result of the intersectionality of their race and gender (Stevens-Watkins et al., 2014). Other effects include a limited ability to build networks and mentoring relationships, as well as difficulty participating in research and funding opportunities. Social support for Black females in higher education has been shown to help mitigate the effects of racism and sexism attributed to contextual challenges, such as low critical mass and isolation (Stevens-Watkins et al., 2014). Another 2016 study by Lewis et al. (2016) supports the findings of this study, adding that Black women experience microaggressions based on the stereotypes that exist about their gendered racial group.

Additional Challenges

In addition to academic support needs, studies show that Black females also may struggle with internalized racism and sexism connected to their identity (Bailey et al., 2014); isolation and invisibility related to a lack of support systems (Chao et al., 2012; Johnson et al, 2014; Patton & Harper, 2003); and a lack of networks, which decreases their likelihood of mentoring and research opportunities. Black females are also at an increased risk of psychological distress as the result of these challenges (Harmon, 2009). Based on the challenges highlighted in this literature review, it is clear that there is still a need for more sustained programmatic support and services designed especially for this population.

Programmatic Support for Black Females

One of the most cited critiques of the “Black girl magic” phrase is the way it sometimes plays into Magical Negro narratives that downplay the hard work and struggles that accompany success. This plays out in the scholarly literature as well. Successful programs aimed at marginalized populations are often praised for their outcomes and impact, but rarely are their leaders’ inner workings and struggles acknowledged. This is harmful for two reasons. First, it reifies the mystique that programmatic efforts to help special populations just happen, providing no insight into their design or what it takes to sustain them. Second, it minimizes the work of those who work to create, implement, and sustain these programs and, in the case of programs designed for and by Black females, this replicates a troubling pattern of erasing Black women as role models and contributors.

Although empirical study on Black female support programs is sparse, the findings show that it has a positive effect and that these types of programmatic outreach are valuable (Covington, 2010; Seawell et al., 2012). Programmatic support for Black females can provide new relationships, networks, and information that improve academic and personal development (Seawell et al., 2012). Croom et al. (2017) found that Black women in college engaged in “sister circle” organizations to find community, role models, and a space to discuss and be themselves. This study also confirmed the role of gendered racism in creating a need for these kind of spaces for Black women. Covington’s study on a bridge program for Black females revealed that over 75% of participants reported the race and gender tailored programs increased their self-esteem and helped prepare them for future academic and career goals. In spite of this encouraging evidence, there is little support for Black female programs (2010). While Black females face similar systematic, structural, and institutional challenges as Black males, they receive much less attention and support (Crenshaw et al., 2015). In fact, programs for Black males are funded 100-to-1 compared to programs for Black females, and there are hardly any Black female achievement programs to match the rising creation of Black male achievement programs (Butler, 2013). Parity is needed, not because Black females share the same challenges and needs as Black males, but because they face different challenges and needs and have consistently been ignored or forgotten in terms of institutional support.

Currently, most K-12 outreach programs designed for Black females are funded by Black female organizations (Butler, 2013). In higher education, such programs have received little funding and are largely initiated by Black female administrators who have taken a special interest in the cause. Scholars have suggested that outreach groups for Black females should be culturally relevant, responsive, and focused on the intersectionality of being Black and female (Lindsay-Dennis et al., 2011). Butler (2013) found that most Black female programs are self-help or networking programs. Within education, many Black female support programs are primarily designed to address social, psychological, and health needs, rather than academic gaps.

According to Cervero and Wilson (1994), educational program planning is a “social activity in which people negotiate personal and organizational interests to construct programs” (p. 249). The social aspect of educational program planning requires program planners to take their institutional and organizational context and target population into consideration. They must

understand and work within a defined set of power relationships to accomplish their goals. With this in mind, the principles of program planning have a general five-step structure: (a) assess learners' needs, (b) define objectives based on these needs, (c) identify learning experiences to meet the objectives, (d) organize the learning experiences, and (e) evaluate the program in terms of the stated objectives.

Conceptual Framework and Theoretical Lens

Intersectionality is a concept derived from a Black feminist perspective that highlights the convergence of the experience of being both Black and female. Intersectional theory describes a unique convergence of how both race and gender create uniquely marginalized experiences and identities for Black females (Bernal, 2002; Crenshaw, 1991). Providing support services for Black women entails creating spaces where they can share their experiences and be accepted and validated by their peers (Collins, 2000). Therefore, programmatic support must be tailored to consider and address the intersection of both gender and race and the related unique experiences that may shape the way Black girls and women navigate and experience the world. While some intersectionality and Black feminist theorists point out the benefits of outreach programs for Black females, currently, there is very little research on the actual *construction* and program planning that considers both race and gender for this population. This study aims to address this gap in research by using the conceptual framework of intersectionality to gain new insight into how program leaders address the needs and challenges Black females face by considering both race and gender in their programming planning.

Methodology

A descriptive qualitative research design was chosen for the purpose of gathering in-depth accounts from Black women program leaders about the needs of Black females, including how these needs shape programmatic outreach design and delivery, and the challenges and opportunities these program leaders experience in their efforts to support Black females.

Participants and Sampling

Black women and girls in different contexts may have different goals and experiences, thus the necessary affinity programs they need would have to be constructed very differently. The goal here is not to paint Black females or the programs that support them as a monolith, but to highlight the various types of programmatic supports for them and how they share similarities and differ. Using purposeful sampling and criterion selection, I used referrals, the Internet, and published articles and periodicals to conduct a national search of community and higher education outreach programs designed to support Black females. Using email and telephone, I contacted 28 prospective programs to participate in the study. Six program leaders (two from K-12 level, and four from higher education) responded to my invitation to speak about their programmatic efforts to support Black girls and young women.

The participants were affiliated with various types of institutions and organizations, including higher education institutions, sororities, and community education organizations. The

sole criterion was that participants led an outreach program specifically designed to support Black females who currently participated in K-12 or higher education. Each participant was interviewed using a semi-structured protocol. Below is a description of each of the programs the participants led (see Table 1). Human Subjects Approval was sought and granted. The risks and possible benefits associated with this study were deemed to be minimal. Confidentiality was emphasized to all participants and pseudonyms and other masking techniques were assigned to all transcripts. Numbers are used to protect the identity of the program leaders, their programs, and their participants.

Researcher Positionality

As a Black woman who has participated extensively in higher education, I have a strong interest in the support and success of Black women. I have personally experienced and observed marginalization as a Black woman and as a result of these experiences, I had a few assumptions before developing this study: 1) Black girls and women experience alienation in unique ways as a result of their identity; and 2) those that support Black females have an important perspective about the needs of the population they serve. With these assumptions in mind, I sought to increase its trustworthiness and honor the participants' voices by using member-checking for all transcribed interviews (Creswell, 2007). Additionally, triangulation was employed by gathering web-based descriptions about each of the programs associated with the participants.

Analysis

Using a grounded theory approach to coding, thematic and open axial coding was used to conduct the data analysis (Glaser, & Strauss, 1965). A list of codes were developed from the conceptual framework of intersectionality and program planning and research questions; then, through an iterative coding process, new codes related to emergent themes were applied. Data was examined for patterns and common themes, and related codes were combined and/or linked in a hierarchical format. The use of Dedoose qualitative software was instrumental for both purposes. Not only was I able to focus on the frequency rates of particular codes across all six interviews, but I also used coded frequencies to re-examine the descriptions provided by the participants.

Findings

Assessing Learners' Needs

All of the program leaders conveyed a clear understanding of what their target population needed and how their program's goals and services could meet those needs. Several needs were identified, some of which appear to be exclusive to the targeted age group. The most significant needs that emerged across all programs were (a) social support, (b) mentoring, and (c) empowerment.

Table 1
Participating Programs

<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Context</i>	<i>Target Group</i>	<i>Goals and Focus</i>
Dana Program 1	National sorority community outreach for Black girls	K-12	College prep, social skills, health and wellness
Alicia Program 2	non-profit community outreach for Black girls	K-12	Career advising and social skills
Karen Program 3	state university Black women support group	Higher Ed.	Social support
Phylicia Program 4	state university Black women support group	Higher Ed.	Social support, wellness
Sonia Program 5	Black women support group at a private religiously affiliated university	Higher Ed.	Social support
Natasha Program 6	Black women support group based at a large research university	Higher Ed.	Therapeutic, wellness, social support

Social support. Social support was the most prominent need identified by all six program leaders. For all programs, this need was described in terms of providing more positive interactions between Black females for the purpose of improving the individual as well as the community of Black females as a whole. While all of the program leaders said social support was an important need, the ways in which they conceptualized this need varied, mostly between targeted age groups. Both K-12 program leaders expressed that Black girls need social support for the purpose of learning how to improve their communication and conflict-resolution skills. As Alicia, Program 2's leader explained:

So our focus in the program is making sure girls are good communicators at home, At school, and a future workplace. So that means that we want girls to know how to introduce themselves to someone new for the first time or stops in, and with excellence. You know, being able to say their names clearly, introduce and shake hands, and things like that confidently. It means that we want to have conversations with our girls about having peaceful interactions with their peers and respectful interactions with adults. So we talk a lot about conflict resolution. We talk a lot about female aggression, what is it, why does it look different from others you know male aggression, when did it start,

how do we stop. What are some different ways that we can demonstrate and assert ourselves without having to be aggressive.

While this view of social support was heavily represented among both K-12 program leaders, it was not exclusive to the K-12 group. Two out of four higher education program leaders also felt the goal of their programs was to repair broken communication. Sonia, Program 5's leader made the following comment:

The biggest one—there's a lot that kind of stand out, and maybe they stand out more here to me—is the need for support. It's that need for a safe space, [it's] that need for connection among Black women. I think in all three places, the thing that's the hardest to do but the most necessary is to get Black women to sort of create relationships with each other—to create positive relationships with each other. So I saw that as kind of a problem everywhere I've been, actually. And I think what really prompted my colleague and I to create the group...was that a lot of our Black women didn't seem connected to each other at all.

Three of the four higher education program leaders expressed the need for social support as a way of addressing isolation and alienation. Additionally, all four of the higher education program leaders reported that their programs were designed to provide social support for the purpose of building community among Black women who were largely socially marginalized from their mostly White peers on campus. Two of the four higher education program leaders explicitly expressed that their group's social support could mitigate the negative impact of external racism and sexism as well as internalized racism. Natasha, Program 6's leader stated,

We are a predominately White institution. We have a culture that is heavy on tradition. A part of that tradition is White and privileged in some ways. And very much—I mean this in a positive and a negative sense—individualistic. . . . And I think it sometimes plays on that whole invincible . . . it plays on that notion that you have to be superwoman. A lot of our students are not just Black or African American, but they are still first generation [college] students. There's a pressure to prove yourself, do it all, make your family proud, give back, stuff like that. So I think the need that I've noticed because of that culture is a need to be human. Like, to have your frustrations and your difficulties and your insecurities at times acknowledged and affirmed and not judged as like you being weak or linked to your intellect. That comes up quite a bit.

Mentoring. The second most frequently mentioned need identified by all six program leaders was mentoring. Program leaders stated that Black females benefitted from having role models and persons available to offer them advice, guidance, and moral support. But while they all agreed that mentoring was an important need, some differences emerged in the types of mentoring they said was necessary. Differences in the types of mentoring discussed were related

to the goals, structure, and targeted age group of the program. For example, the K-12 program leaders, who were all very much focused on preparation for entry into higher education and future careers, commented that mentoring was vital for providing role models, networks, and instruction on preparation and pathways to reach their educational and career goals. This is reflected in the following quote from Dana, Program 1's leader:

Our program prepares them for the high standards that their – their dreams, because a lot of them have dreams to go to these great colleges that are expensive that are out of state. And our – our program prepares them for the realization of these programs. Like, you need a 24 on your ACT for this school. You need four years of math for this school. You need four years of science. So we go through the program, we give them realistic expectations, and we hold them accountable as far as Pygmalion effect. Like right now, co-chair and I are talking about having them write their personal statements already. And I think it just holds them to a higher standard. It gets them prepared. And with us both being college professors, I think we already let them know what we want. And we're really hard on writing because we know what we're seeing in the schoolrooms from Black females.

For higher education, mentoring was used exclusively to describe a relationship in which faculty and staff provided undergraduate students counsel and feedback in regards to social adjustments as well as how to navigate the academic hurdles of college. Natasha, the higher education leader of Program 6 described this view of mentorship:

I use the word mentor very broadly. I mean, I think when you think of mentorship you think of very direct one-on-one guidance or advice, and I think the mission of the initiative that I coordinate – we support the retention of these students through social adjust and mentorship. So my mentorship, I do sometimes that hallway type mentorship, where you just – I am visible. So I'll just go to stuff to be a presence.

Empowerment. The third most frequently mentioned, and most *implicitly* described, was the need for empowerment. I use the term implicit to highlight that while the word empowerment was actually said only once, all of the program leaders described their target population as being in need of mechanisms that provided “tools to be successful,” “higher self-esteem,” and “confidence in their ability to succeed.” I coded these types of statements as empowerment because they convey a need to equip Black females with knowledge, skills, and/or confidence that will strengthen their self-efficacy and ability to navigate and thrive in their academic pursuits. As Dana, the leader for Program 1 explained:

The goal of the program basically is to get them prepared for college, and to get Them prepared to life as a Black woman. It's helped them grow and empower them

Through African American perspectives, and they're mentored by college educated women. We talk about the challenges, the mental health challenges, the physical health challenges as Black women. We talk about the issues with relationships as they relate to high school as well as moving into college, and just prepare – preparing them for these changes that are gonna happen.

Sonia, Program 5's leader described this type of empowerment more implicitly when she said,

I would have them take some magazines and cut all the pictures of the things that they saw in the future. And so creating a vision board. So one part of the exercise is [to] take some images, make a collage of who you think you are now. And then create another collage of who you hope to be. A lot of times they didn't have a real sense of who they were now, but they always had a sense of who they wanted to be. And I always thought – because it's easier to think ahead and to think about who you want to be.

Defining Objectives and Organizing Learning Experiences

Black female support program objectives appeared to be similar, especially within age group categories. There were also some overlapping objectives that emerged in both age categories. The three most prominent objectives that emerged for Black female support groups were (a) social support and building community, (b) knowledge and awareness raising, and (c) empowerment. Of these three objectives, by far, the most significant was social support and building community, with all six program leaders mentioning this goal several times. Program leaders described these goals as guides for how they organized the learning experiences for participants.

Due to the overwhelming goal and need for social support, all of the program leaders identified programmatic activities that focused on social support. The types of social support varied, however, according to the primary purpose of the group and targeted age group. For groups focused on career and academic preparation, the primary activities centered on career information and were highly social. For example, when Program 2 held workshops on career opportunities, they had community members and mentors mingle with the girls, and the girls were also encouraged to mingle with each other. The program leader, Alicia, made the following comment:

So we're eventually marketing for and making sure that we create opportunities that will always expose the girls to a cross-section of folks throughout community who are echoing the same principles, the same values, they're showing the same kind of successful habits, and we're pushing it and promoting it with the girls. And so you'll see evidence of that with our monthly Saturday programs that still go on. And so that shows you a lot of members within a community who are from all different walks of life, different backgrounds, a true cross-section.

Programs that were designed exclusively for social support, such as both of the higher education programs, held social support activities that encouraged intimate disclosure and bonding among members. Both of the higher education program leaders described holding group sessions where participants were encouraged to just talk about their challenges and offer moral support to their fellow group members. As one program leader explained:

Our students are varying degrees of, you know, consciousness and awareness of what they're talking about. So sometimes students are at maybe say an earlier stage of identity development, and have different background experience to where they don't necessarily need to talk explicitly about as a Black person. But then you have others who are at a different stage of identity development where it's becoming more and more of a salient part of their existence. And then you have students that are developmentally in a place where they're just coming into awareness and are upset, noticing they're being treated in ways that they can't understand or describe. And that has been a really interesting part of facilitating a group. Trying to respond in ways that meet people in their different spaces, and not like get on my soap box, you know, but rather help people make sense of their personal experience, and also entertain what a collective experience looks like. (Natasha, Program 6 Leader)

All of the program leaders appeared to organize learning experiences according to the needs of the participants and based on available opportunities. The organization of learning experiences for K-12 program leaders was more linear and pre-planned, almost like a curriculum. This seems to be strongly tied to their preparation goals. Dana described the organization of her program's activities in the following way:

We have a curriculum that they [the sorority] designed. And we stick to their curriculum, which has a lot to do with developing businesses. We talk about leadership skills. We talk about service to our community. And so we have curriculums set out, and so we take that curriculum, and we adjust it, and we throw things in, we take things out.

All higher education program leaders appeared much more concerned with organizing learning experiences around participants' immediate emotional and social needs and less concerned about a programmatic schedule or progression of activities as one higher education program leader describes below:

A lot of times we spend time looking – we spend the first part of each semester looking at themselves, looking at the messages they receive from home, from the community about what it means to be a Black woman. I think the first part of it is – what we really try to do in the first six weeks is create some connections between them that is likely to create some unity. Unity seems to be that big piece. And then the second piece is awareness. And I don't know if that's the particular order, but we spend a lot of time talking about what does it mean to be a Black woman, what does it mean to have relationships with other Black women, and where did you get your information about being a Black woman. (Sonia, Program 5 Leader)

Program Evaluation

There was no discussion of formal evaluation by any of the program leaders; however, both K-12 program leaders expressed a desire to conduct evaluations but listed barriers, such as a lack of money to fund external evaluations that provide data needed to be eligible for potential grant funding (Alicia, Program 2 Leader), and lack of opportunity to research and evaluate similar programs in order to consider alignment (Dana, Program 1 Leader).

The definition of success also varied widely depending on the program's goals. The higher education programs appeared to measure success by year-to-year participation and retention. For example, Natasha, the leader for Program 6 monitored the success of her program by the number of members. As she explained,

Case in point for our group, our group is a very successful group. Generally we range from six to nine, which is actually a really solid group. But I will tell you for the first time ever, because of a little bit more intentionality around outreach, we had to make an exception this year and we had 13 in our group, which is actually kind of big.

Negotiating Power and Interests

Challenges for program planners. Program leaders identified some challenges and barriers to the implementation and sustainability of their programs. The most significant and consistent of these were funding and support. The challenges of funding and support also gave rise to new challenges, most notably, recruitment for both participants and mentors. Overall, across all six program leaders, it became clear that the identified challenges of funding and support were attributed to three factors: (a) societal lack of empathy and interest in Black females, (b) lack of understanding of the unique needs of Black females, and (c) organizational resistance and internal politics.

Funding. All but one of the program leaders reported that they could be better funded. Funding sources varied according to the targeted age group and purpose. For example, Program 1, which focused on academic and social development, was sponsored by a historically Black Greek sorority. Program 2, the other career oriented K-12 program, received much of its funding from corporate sponsors. Alicia indicated she was seeking grant opportunities, but felt it was a challenge because of the target population. In particular, she complained that Black females were not a priority in the U.S. grant landscape and that there was more emphasis on Black males and non-U.S. Black females.

The higher education groups were funded by their institutions, and these leaders described their funding as very small but sufficient to run their program. They said that funding was one major indicator of how supportive their institutions were of the program. One felt that her institution could be more supportive in terms of funding. As one program leader explained:

Like, we really value this, but then when time gets crunched, or when money gets tight, it's the first thing that, that kind of gets pushed to the side. . . But our group

requires a lot more time and energy on the front end for recruitment, as opposed to other groups. So if I don't have the institutional support, the departmental support to engage in that kind of stuff, then it's gonna negatively impact the group. (Natasha, Program 6 Leader)

Support. Another concern is the lack of support program leaders said their programs received, especially in comparison to other affinity groups. This lack of support was a consistent and significant theme for most program leaders; however, it manifested in different ways.

For K-12 program leaders, there was emphasis on the general lack of support outside of the community, within the larger society, for Black females in general. As pointed out previously, Alicia, the Program 2 leader, discussed how there was very little concern for, or interest in, Black females in the United States. Dana echoed this sentiment; however, she added that this lack of support was also present within the communities of the participants themselves.

The higher education program leaders believed their institutions understood that their programs addressed a contextual gap in support and provided a needed service to Black females, but when funding was tight their programs were among the first to feel the pinch. As one higher education program leader explained,

Institutionally, I do think there's friction. And I think the friction becomes an incongruent, if you will, between what people are experiencing, and what the institution says that they do. And I don't think, to the credit of the school, I'm sure in some pockets that's intentional and kind of shady, but in some pockets, I think, it's just unconscious. I think it's indicative of privilege and stuff anyway. I don't think it's intentional or malicious. I think it just is what it is. So no, I feel like there's definitely some friction. And I feel like there are limitations. And I feel like to some degree when it comes down to the day to day operations of what this kind of work entails, we only support it to a point. Because if it takes away from a certain bottom line. (Natasha, Program 6 Leader)

One higher education program leader believed her institution could spend more time learning about the program and the issues facing Black women on its campus. As she explained:

You know, apart from me, apart from being at the women's center, I think in general in our campus and also [this state]... is a very conservative area. And so one of the, one of the things that I've noticed is dialogue about identity, gender, sexual orientation, sexuality in general, a lot of times it's coming from a very conservative place. (Karen, Program 3 Leader)

This lack of visibility within the university may also influence recruitment, both in terms of program participants and mentors. Among the higher education program leaders, there was a frequent sentiment that the programs all could benefit from more mentors, especially women of

color in faculty and administrator roles. For example, Karen (Program 3 Leader) noted the following:

Another challenge is with so many students wanting to be involved, and we're finding a short supply of mentors. Because there is a short supply of women of color here working, working at the university. And so we've actually had to, had to bring in White allies, I would say, who, who, who are in connection with the women's center we have and who understand the work that we're doing, and who are really, you know, I would say have had experiences or . . . has worked with them, they really understand that feminist lens but also you're culturally competent in that sense. And not to say, and not to say that other faculty and staff aren't, but I think it's from, from knowing someone personally, I think that it helps. So bringing in White allies, we, we've had to utilize that just because of the, the numbers. I mean, and it's been great. The numbers have – we started out with 30 last year, and we're at 120, and I keep getting emails to this day.

There was also strong indication that student participation in the programs varied year to year and program leaders had to make special efforts to recruit new students. Visibility and support for the program were viewed as the main causes for recruitment difficulties, but program leaders also identified reluctance and waning interest on the part of students as a major factor affecting recruitment.

Strategies for Thriving and Navigating Challenges

In spite of the challenges described above, or perhaps because of them, program leaders averaged five years of experience running their programs. They described similar strategies for managing program challenges and sustaining the program over time. The most frequent and consistent two strategies utilized by program leaders were partnering and collaboration. Program leaders used collaboration for many things, including fundraising, cost saving, and identifying educators and mentors.

Collaboration. Each program leader described the importance of collaborating with other outreach and support groups and/or community organizations and businesses. There was wide variance between the two categories on who program leaders collaborated with and how frequently. For example, while each the program leader had a trusted list of partners who frequently supported the group's goals and activities, K-12 program leaders described partnering and collaboration with community and business partners in order to engage in fundraising, cost-saving, and mentorship. One K-12 program leader offered the following description: And so what we do, we'll partner with a few businesses. The signature mentoring initiatives, we are sort of like an exchange. So, the individuals from the companies come out to the after-school sites a couple of times a year to participate in just after-school activities to start establishing a relationship and some kind of presence with the girls. (Alicia, Program 2 Leader)

Higher education program leaders also had partners that were grouped under their multicultural affairs office. Collaboration and shared programming between these affinity groups

commonly took place. Higher education program leaders discussed partnering more than collaborating, specifically, working with other affinity groups and resource offices on campus to cut down on costs and bring needed information to their participants. Karen (Program 3 Leader) explained,

We don't have an allotted budget specifically for the program. We work with two other mentor programs, which is for Hispanic and Latino males and for African American Black males on campus. We share a budget . . . when we have event, we do our open reception, we invite all the students. We do it together. Then we break out in sessions after, but we want our students to feel that this is, that they're really, they are . . . they are, you know, important to our community, and they really need to come together. And so we do, do like end of the year reception. We invite all our students together. At the beginning of the year, when we invite them, during the holidays, we have like all three mentor groups meet, and we invite students and our mentors.

Discussion

This study provides insight into the inner workings of affinity programs designed for Black females and sheds new understanding about how consideration of the unique experience and needs of Black females can be applied to traditional program planning models to improve support for this population. The data revealed uncovered challenges and processes related to managing programs designed for Black females, as well as some strategies and resources program leaders can employ to sustain their programs. In particular, the findings show how program leaders use collaborative partnerships as both a resource and teaching tool for support. This study also supports previous findings such as the one conducted by Croom, Beatty, Acker, & Butler (2017), showing that Black girls and women want and need spaces to affirm themselves and each other. They also need spaces where they can heal and learn strategies for combating the racist and sexist societal forces that affect their knowledge and access to valuable networks and opportunities. Additionally, the findings of this study highlight other, more insidious effects of historical oppression discussed in the literature, such as the ways in which Black females perceive their self-efficacy and self-worth. According to the program leaders in this study, these challenges also influence the way in which they relate to other Black females.

Based on these challenges, program leaders described assessing their participants' needs in different ways, depending on the targeted age group and the needs associated with that group. All program leaders said Black females needed more social support. However, what that social support looked like depended on the identified needs. For K-12 program leaders, social support included information on how to communicate effectively and connect to appropriate role models, while for higher education, program leaders identified social needs in terms of social outlets for finding friendships, connecting to appropriate role models, and creating community.

Closely related to social support was the need for mentoring. Most of the program leaders reported that mentoring was crucial for the support and development of Black females. This

affirms the scholarly literature that says social and psychological well-being of Black girls is connected to building relationships with adult Black women who are aware of the challenges, obstacles, and experiences of Black girls (Belgrave et al., 2004; Brinkman et al., 2018; Hoff et al., 2001; Leadbeater et al., 2007; Rhodes et al., 2007). Lastly, program leaders revealed that Black females, at all stages of the educational and career pipeline, need more and better information related to academic pathways and opportunities, career options, networks, and wellness maintenance.

The findings in this study demonstrate that some programs created objectives specifically to help Black females form better connections with the community and careers by addressing academic and socialization needs that affect their awareness of opportunities and their ability to progress through the academic pipeline. Other programs, mostly in higher education, were designed to specifically address the emotional, psychological, and social effects of discrimination, marginalization, and the resulting isolation. Consequently, these K-12 and career targeted programs for Black females tended to have a more linear focus with a more formal curriculum-based approach to providing support and information, while higher education programs tended to focus on developing wellness and resiliency and fostering community in order to mitigate the negative impact of toxic social environments.

The implications of this study point to a continued need for thoughtful and strategic outreach designed specifically for the particular intersectional experiences of Black females. Program leaders should apply program planning model with a careful consideration of intersectionality and how it can be addressed in the goals, objectives, activities, and assessment of programmatic outreach. It is also recommended that program leaders partner with others to seek grant funding and share resources for expanded program participation and long-term sustainability. The findings of this study also (re)vision affinity programs by uncovering the women who design and sustain them. It is my hope that this (re)vision of these programs changes the perception that they are autonomous “magic” solutions to helping Black females, and that the voices highlighted here inspire and empower other Black females who may wish to replicate these programs.

Stories of success are encouraging; yet when placed within the patriarchal and racist social context of the United States, they can also be misused to justify the dearth of programmatic support available for minority populations—in this case Black females. The invisibility and isolation that continues to pervade the experience of Black girls and women at all levels of the educational pipeline and beyond signal an urgent need for interventions designed especially for this population. When Black girls and women succeed, it is rarely by magic, and it is important that organizations and their leaders support the women who put the time and work into cultivating the “magic” through outreach.

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