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# Determining our Destination: The Future of Professional Counterspaces for African American Women in Student Affairs

NICOLE M. WEST\*

*Missouri State University*

MICHELE D. SMITH

*Missouri State University*

*This qualitative study catalogued the collective insight of Black women student affairs professionals regarding the evolution of professional counterspaces in the future. Focus group discussions were facilitated with 50 women participating in a professional counterspace (PC) in the U.S., known as the African American Women's Summit (AAWS). Participants were asked to explore the following topics with regard to the AAWS: 1) the purposes of PCs for Black women, 2) how PCs can be enhanced with regard to curriculum content and delivery, and 3) how PCs can be enhanced with regard to opportunities for leadership. Findings indicated that Black women in student affairs still need professional development opportunities that allow them to share their collective wisdom, and that are focused on helping them combat isolation and succeed in the profession. In addition, these types of PCs should include a high degree of interactivity among participants; feature a structured curriculum focused on concrete skill and professional competency development; and provide opportunities for prolonged engagement, perhaps even virtually. Finally, the leadership of PCs for Black women in student affairs can be enhanced by engaging in clear and regular communication with participants, maximizing opportunities for leadership among participants, and using technology to facilitate participants' leadership development.*

## Introduction

A recent research brief from the College and University Professional Association for Human Resources noted the multiplicative impact of belonging to two underprivileged groups for Women of Color (WOC) in higher education (McChesney, 2018). According to this report, the median annual pay for Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx women in higher education was \$50,000 compared to \$67,000 given to White men and \$61,000 given to White women; for WOC, these earnings equated to 75 cents on the dollar when compared to White men

(McChesney, 2018). WOC are also grossly underrepresented among administrators, faculty, professionals, and non-exempt staff employed in higher education. Respectively, White women and White men represented 41% and 36% of the higher education workforce, compared with Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx women who represented a meager 9% of the same population (McChesney, 2018). Further among administrators in higher education, White men and women were significantly overrepresented (+7.5% and +4.5%) in reference to the likely hiring pool (i.e., four-year college degree holders in the U.S. population) as compared with WOC administrators (-2%) who were underrepresented in reference to the same population (McChesney, 2018). These statistics indicate that career success among WOC in higher education continues to be negatively impacted by their intersectional identities and suggest that culturally responsive professional development strategies are needed to ameliorate this issue.

It has also been noted that African American women are severely underrepresented in the student affairs profession and as a result contend with a plethora of issues that impede their ability to attain administrative leadership positions in higher education (West, 2020). This issue is consanguineous to the isolation and marginalization African American women student affairs professionals have endured and continue to encounter, which is both perpetuated by and a consequence of their underrepresentation in higher education, especially at predominantly White institutions (PWIs). This inveterate and vicious cycle of detriment, which continues to impede the progress of African American women student affairs professionals at PWIs, signals the need to sustain, enhance, and increase the number of professional counterspaces designed to meet the unique needs of these women.

While Black women faculty and student affairs administrators have been engaged in the development and facilitation of professional counterspaces (PC) as a strategy to withstand their marginalized status in the academy (West & Bertrand Jones, 2018), research is needed to investigate the ways these counterspaces can be retrofitted to meet unprecedented contemporary challenges impeding the success of Black women in the academy. Thus, the purpose of this study was to catalogue the collective insight of Black women student affairs professionals regarding the development of professional counterspaces in the future.

## **Review of Literature**

Included in this review of literature is existing research related to the following topics: a framework to contextualize the underrepresentation of Black women higher education administrators in the U.S., a discussion of the experiences of Black women employed in higher education, and an exploration of the features of existing counterspaces for Black women in higher education.

### **Framework Contextualizing Underrepresentation**

As a construct, underrepresentation, has been conceptualized in a number of ways. One approach is to evaluate the representation of individuals in a particular setting as a correlate of their proportion of the U.S. population (Association of American Medical Colleges, 2018). From this perspective, based on U.S. Census Bureau (2017) estimates, adequate representation of Black women would be achieved when, in any setting, they represented at least 7% of the group's membership. This perspective would suggest that Black women are currently

*overrepresented* among higher education administrators since they represented approximately 9% of the 179,164 individuals employed in “student and academic affairs and other education services” positions in U.S. degree-granting postsecondary institutions in Fall 2016 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). This approach, however, fails to account for the reality that most Black women employed in higher education are positioned in predominantly White spaces where they are “the only one” or “the only one of a few,” and attempts to obscure if not, completely erase, the trauma associated with these women’s lived experiences in the academy.

By virtue of their critique of the ways race has been minimized by post-racial ideologues, critical race theory (CRT) scholars interrogate this method of calculating underrepresentation because it simultaneously “denies [both] the reality of a racialized society and its impact on people in their everyday lives...[and] the problematic aspects of race—how to decide who fits into which racial classifications” (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 9). Instead, CRT researchers, as well as Black feminist thought (BFT) theorists, emphasize the role of experiential knowledge, which is validated and disseminated via narratives and counterstories that “add necessary contextual contours to the seeming ‘objectivity’ of positivist perspectives” (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 11; see also Collins, 2000). There is an additional critique of comparing the number of Black women employed in higher education with their representation in the U.S. population. Although Black women may represent almost 10% of university administrators in the U.S. at-large—which is greater than their representation in the U.S. population—at many individual PWIs Black women administrators only represent 1% of all administrators on campus, which is the case at the institution where the authors of this study are employed. This level of underrepresentation, which is closer to the reality most Black women in higher education are experiencing, is far more damning than what is depicted by using U.S. Census statistics as a reference population.

Employing a Black feminist framework, West (2015) centered the perspectives of African American women student affairs professionals employed at PWIs by asking them to self-conceptualize underrepresentation. Women in the study discussed underrepresentation as:

the unequal numerical proportion of individuals from various cultural groups who share a common physical and/or structural environment (i.e., an actual office location or committee meeting vs. a department, unit, or division). Several participants recounted experiences of being “the only” African American woman, or “the only one of a few” African American women, employed in their department, building, or institution. (West, 2015, p. 112)

Participants in West’s (2015) study also described the psychological and professional consequences that manifested while working in environments where they were underrepresented. Some of these issues included feeling expected to speak on behalf of all African Americans; being burdened by the constant pressure to perform perfectly to avoid devaluation of their cultural group(s); having no support system to navigate racist/sexist microaggressions and traumas; and coping with “subtle, yet intentional nuances of exclusive behavior exhibited by their colleagues, supervisors, and subordinates, which relegated them to the figurative, and sometimes [literal], periphery of their respective work settings” (West, 2015, p. 113).

West’s findings confirmed the work of Viernes Turner (2002), who studied the experiences of WOC faculty, and concluded that when these women inhabit a particular context (e.g., academe) in small proportions, they are subjected to the effects of marginality in ways

those who are present in larger proportions are not. One manifestation of this is the paradoxical feeling of being socially invisible, yet constantly on display (Viernes Turner, 2002). Given these findings and in line with CRT and BFT, this study posits that “the underrepresentation of African American women in postsecondary education exists when there is a noticeably smaller number of these women present in institutions of higher education as compared to the number of members of other cultural groups present” (West, 2015, p. 109). As result of these conditions, Black women contend with a wide array of psychological and professional challenges related to isolation and marginalization. It is from this perspective that the underrepresentation of Black women is viewed as a real, contemporary issue—as opposed to an imaginary, metaphorical, or historical issue—which, this study seeks to redress.

### **Experiences of Black Women Employed in Higher Education**

Black women’s mere existence in the academy is radical and counter to traditional academic spaces. Access to higher education has become an optical illusion, with Black women being accepted and presented with a false expectation that they will have similar experiences and the same resources as their White counterparts. Viernes Turner (2002) described how the echoes of racism, sexism, and classism in American society have served to limit opportunities for Black women in the academy. Black women experience macroaggressions—overt forms of racism—and microaggressions—subtle forms of racism—connected to not only their research, service, and teaching, but also their very presence in the academy. These experiences often lead to Black women faculty experiencing gendered racial battle fatigue (Carter Andrews, 2015). Carter Andrews (2015) suggested that Black women faculty need to “develop an arsenal of emotional and psychological weaponry against the cumulative effects of the gendered racism and racist sexism” (p. 79).

The isolation and marginalization that African American women student affairs professionals encounter in higher education has also been well-documented in the research literature (Bonner, 2001; Gregory, 1995; Henry & Glenn, 2009; Moses, 1997; Patitu & Hinton, 2003; Watson, 2001). One qualitative study, which included open-ended interviews with 12 African American women student affairs professionals employed at predominantly White institutions (PWI) in the Midwest, revealed the extreme isolation and marginalization experienced by these women (Holmes, 2003). Participants indicated that they regularly contended with the burden of being an African American woman at a PWI, suspicions regarding their qualifications, tokenism, heavy institutional and community service loads resulting in low job task completion, lack of true collegiality and support, issues related to cross-gender interactions, and the challenges related to the “double whammy” of being Black and female (Holmes, 2003, p. 60).

### **Features of Existing Professional Counterspaces**

While existing literature reveals that the negative experiences of Black women enrolled and employed in higher education remain unaddressed by higher education faculty and administrators, Black women are engaging in a variety of counterspaces to ensure their success in the academy. We draw on the pioneering work of Solorzano et al., (2000) and Solorzano and

Villalpando (1998), who defined counterspaces as academic and social safe spaces that allow underrepresented students to: promote their own learning in a nurturing and supportive environment where their experiences are validated and viewed as critical knowledge; vent frustrations by sharing stories of isolation, microaggressions, and/or overt discrimination; challenge deficit notions of people of color (and other marginalized groups); and establish and maintain a positive collegiate racial climate for themselves.

Examples of counterspaces can include informal personal networks and formal gatherings associated with churches, community organizations, book clubs, and exercise groups, which is where some Black women graduate students have reported finding the sense of belonging, and support they are missing in their academic programs (McClure, 2018; Patton & Harper, 2003). Miles et al. (2011) also noted how several of the Black women undergraduates in their study involved themselves in minority student organizations, or “ethnic enclaves” (Murguia et al., 1991), which provided a safe environment for these women to interact with other students of color and eventually integrate themselves into the broader campus community successfully. According to existing literature, Black women report these personal networks are their primary source of support (Patton & Harper, 2003).

In a qualitative study by Bennett et al., (2011), counterspaces were also noted as a strategy employed by faculty of color to “offset their sense of not belonging” and enhance their ability to persist (p. 55). These non-academic counterspaces took the form of informal peer groups comprised of like-minded faculty colleagues and off-campus institutions and organizations focused on service to the community and issues related to race. Another type of non-academic counterspace being accessed by Black women faculty and administrators in higher education is known as a professional counterspace (West & Bertrand Jones, 2018). A professional counterspace is a culturally homogeneous site of resistance for marginalized groups of individuals, infused with a variety of culturally responsive resources, delivered via a culturally intentional curriculum, which is intended to promote the professional success and personal well-being of its participants; these counterspaces are conceived of and coordinated by members of the cultural groups they exist to serve (West, 2018). Case and Hunter (2012) offered a detailed analysis of three challenging processes that occur within counterspaces that have potential to positively impact marginalized individuals’ psychological well-being. The essential features of Case and Hunter’s framework include: 1) several types of narrative identity work (i.e., the creation and maintenance of oppression, resistance, and reimagined personal narratives); 2) the acting out of various forms of resistance; and 3) direct relational benefits that accrue to individual members, like social support and the transmission of adaptive strategies to resist oppression. These components, identified in Case and Hunter’s framework, hold particular relevance for the current study, which seeks to explore the development of professional counterspaces in the future for Black women in student affairs.

## **Methods**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to catalogue the collective insight of Black women student affairs professionals regarding the development of professional counterspaces (PCs) in the future. Focus group interviews were conducted with Black women participating in the African American Women’s Summit (AAWS)—a professional counterspace in the U.S.—to

address the following research questions: 1) What should be the mission/vision of PCs like the AAWS for Black women in student affairs?, 2) What can be done to enhance the content and delivery of the curriculum in PCs like the AAWS for Black women in student affairs?, and 3) What can be done to enhance opportunities for leadership within PCs like the AAWS for Black women in student affairs?

## **Research Setting**

The African American Women's Summit (AAWS or “the Summit”) is a professional counterspace in the U.S. that has been developed by and for Black women student affairs professionals. The AAWS is a full-day, pre-conference workshop during the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators’ (NASPA) Annual Conference where participants engage in culturally relevant professional development, dialogue about their unique experiences as Black women higher education administrators, and cultivate professional and personal support networks (West, 2017). The Summit regularly attracts more than 100 Black women ranging from students enrolled in student affairs or higher education graduate programs to entry-, mid-, and senior-level student affairs administrators employed at higher education institutions in the U.S. (West, 2017).

## **Data Collection**

A total of 50 Black women participated in seven focus group interviews that were facilitated as part of the formal curriculum during the 2019 AAWS. Participants were assigned to cohorts (i.e., tables), which were diversified by level or professional role (e.g., undergraduate students, graduate assistants, and entry-, mid-, and senior-level professionals) at the beginning of the AAWS and remained in those groups during the focus group interviews. This was done to ensure a variety of perspectives would be represented in each focus group. Each group was comprised of 5-9 participants, one of whom served as a facilitator, and one of whom served as a note-taker. The focus group interviews, which ran simultaneously, lasted approximately 60 minutes, were held in the large conference room where the AAWS convened, and occurred near the end of the day-long workshop. This gave participants ample time to get to know one another prior to engaging in the focus group discussions. Focus groups have been cited as an appropriate method when assessing collective experiences because “the open response format provides a large amount of rich data regarding the issue at hand...allow[ing] the participants to build on the responses of others” (Henning & Roberts, 2016, p. 177). In addition, Collins (2000) suggested that knowledge claims which emanate from dialogical processes centered on the lived experiences of Black women are substantiated as particularly credible from a Black feminist epistemological perspective.

Focus group facilitators were members of the Summit faculty and AAWS volunteers who were provided with a focus group facilitation guide prior to the pre-conference workshop. In this guide, facilitators were told about the purpose of the study and provided with the following lists: equipment needed, facilitation tips, and ground rules. They were also provided with step-by-step instructions which, included asking them to 1) identify a note-taker with “neat penmanship,” 2) provide each participant with an informed consent document, 3) discuss the list of focus group

ground rules with participants, 4) assign each participant a number to use when responding to questions to ensure anonymity during data analysis, and 5) to audio-record their focus group's interview. Facilitators were also asked to take notes using the same note-taking protocol that was provided to their note-takers to record their initial impressions of the participants' responses. Prior to data collection, participants were asked to provide written consent if they agreed to participate in the study.

Three locally developed, semi-structured focus group protocols were developed by the first author to collect data related to each of the study's research questions, which were administered across the seven focus groups. Each protocol consisted of seven or eight questions and was administered by at least two focus group facilitators to at least two separate groups of participants (i.e., each of the three research questions, and their corresponding protocols, were addressed by at least two different focus groups). Although the interview protocols, which were randomly assigned to each of the focus groups, were designed to explore the research questions separately, they were formatted similarly and each concluded with an open discussion among participants regarding their specific topic. Table 1 provides more detail regarding the interview protocols used in the study including sample questions and the number of participants that responded to each set of questions. At the conclusion of the Summit, AAWS participants were also asked to complete an online evaluation questionnaire that solicited personal and professional demographic data.

Table 1

*Description of Focus Group Interview Protocols*

Protocol Number	Number of Questions	Focus Groups Administered To	Number of Participants	Research Question/Topic	Sample Questions
1	8	Tables 1, 2, & 3	20	What should be the mission/vision of PCs like the AAWS for Black women in student affairs?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. If you are a returning AAWS participant, what is the biggest benefit you derive from attending multiple times?</li> <li>2. If this is your first time participating in the AAWS, what did you expect to get out of attending?</li> <li>3. Why should NASPA offer the AAWS pre-conference session each year?</li> </ol>
2	8	Tables 4 & 5	15	What can be done to enhance the content and delivery of the curriculum in PCs like the AAWS for Black women in student affairs?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What has been the most useful part of the curriculum today (i.e., either the topics we've covered or the way we structured the day) and why?</li> <li>2. Thinking about [the curriculum of] other professional development programs you have participated in, how does the Summit compare?</li> <li>3. As the morning progressed you listened to many women from many perspectives, what did you think about the content of their message? Is there anything we should enhance or provide additional materials regarding?</li> </ol>
3	7	Tables 6 & 7	15	What can be done to enhance opportunities for leadership within PCs like the AAWS for Black women in student affairs?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What models of leadership have you seen be successful in other student affairs/higher education groups and organizations?</li> <li>2. If you were in charge of revamping the Summit, how would you structure the leadership?</li> <li>3. What qualifications/experiences do you think women who are members of the AAWS faculty should have?</li> </ol>
Total	23	7	50		

## Participants

Although 50 women participated in this study, only 41 (82%) completed the evaluation and demographic questionnaire. Demographic data related to age, marital and parental status, level of education, and current position of the participants who completed the questionnaire are displayed in Table 2. Approximately 15% of participants worked in Multicultural Student Programs and Services and 15% worked in Campus Activities Program. Among the participants, 22% were earning \$50,000-\$59,000, 17% were earning \$40,000-\$49,000 and 17% were earning \$80,00-\$100,000 annually. Approximately 61% of the participants were employed at public institutions and 46% were employed at institutions that enrolled more than 20,000 students. Approximately 39% of the participants indicated they were employed at PWIs.

Table 2  
*Demographic Profile of Participants*

Variable	Frequency	%
<b>Age</b>		
21-25	2	5
26-30	13	32
31-35	11	27
36-40	5	12
41-45	7	17
46-50	2	5
51-55	1	2
Total	41	100
<b>Marital Status</b>		
Single	27	66
Married	7	17
Have a Life Partner	4	10
Divorced	3	7
Total	41	100
<b>Parental Status</b>		
0	30	73
1	5	12
2	4	10
3+	2	5
Total	41	100
<b>Highest Degree Earned</b>		
Bachelor's	2	5
Master's	29	71
Ed.D.	8	20
Ph.D.	2	5
Total	41	~100
<b>Current Position/Title/Level</b>		
Graduate Assistant	3	7
Coordinator	2	5
Assistant Director	12	29
Associate Director	6	15
Director	10	24
Assistant Dean	1	2
Assistant VP or Chancellor	1	2
Other/NA	6	15
Total	41	~100

Note.  $n = 50$ . Missing responses = 9.

## Data Analysis

Immediately following the focus groups, transcripts of the audio-recorded interviews were produced using an automated transcription service. We then cleaned the transcripts, which



included correcting spelling and punctuation errors, delineating facilitators' and participants' responses (by each speaker's number), redacting personally identifying information, and conducting a line-by-line review to ensure the accuracy of each transcript. We used open coding and analytical coding (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) to identify meaningful units of data and sort the codes into categories. These categories were then used to develop themes related to the purpose of the study. Themes are presented with respect to the research questions that guided this study and are accompanied by illustrative participant quotes.

Several strategies were used to enhance the validity and reliability of the study. First, to enhance the credibility of the focus group interview protocols and online evaluation questionnaire, we asked AAWS faculty members to review them prior to the Summit and provide feedback about the clarity and appropriateness of the interview and evaluation questions given the purpose of the study. The AAWS faculty continuously refined the questions based on their collective years of expertise as Black women working in higher education and coordinating a professional counterspace for Black women student affairs professionals. In addition, at least one member of the AAWS faculty facilitated a focus group related to each of the three topics/research questions. Their familiarity with the interview protocols and purpose of the study also contributed to the credibility of the data collected. Second, we performed our initial analysis independently after which we met several times to compare codes and develop categories and themes. We also relied on the note-taking protocols—which were used by the facilitators and note-takers during the interviews to capture their initial impressions of the data—as another source of data to confirm our understanding and interpretations of the data. These practices have been cited as methods that increases the dependability of the interpretations drawn from the data collected (Merriam, 2009). Finally, the applicability of the findings was enhanced by the purposeful selection of participants—Black women student affairs professionals participating in a professional counterspace—who represented information-rich sources of data related to the purpose of the study.

### **Authors' Positionality**

An additional strategy we used to enhance both the credibility and dependability of this study was to unearth, reflect upon, and bring to conscious consideration our positionality with regard to the topic being studied. We share this statement to provide consumers of this research with a transparent disclosure of our relationship to the research setting and the various roles and identities we brought to this project. In 2019, Michele participated in the AAWS as a first-time attendee; Nicole has been attending the Summit since 2009 and has been a member of the AAWS faculty since 2014. Our perspectives as a first-time attendee and as a long-time attendee and member of the AAWS faculty served to counterbalance our individual interpretations of the data during the analysis. Although we are both ranked faculty in the same student affairs graduate program at a PWI in the Midwest region of the U.S., Michele is a tenured Associate Professor and Assistant Vice President for Student Affairs and serves as the institution's Dean of Students, while Nicole is an Assistant Professor and Coordinator of the Student Affairs in Higher Education master's program. Identifying as Black women faculty, we both dedicate significant portions of our research agendas to exploring the experiences of Black women in higher education. In addition, Nicole introduced the concept of *professional counterspaces* to the

research literature about Black women in higher education and has published extensively on the topic. Our positionalities as individual scholars, colleagues, and research collaborators demonstrate a significant level of investment in and connection to the topic explored in this study.

## Findings

The purpose of this qualitative study was to catalogue the collective insight of Black women student affairs professionals regarding the development of professional counterspaces in the future. Themes related to the study’s research questions are presented in Table 3.

Table 3

*Themes and Categories Related to Research Questions*

<p><b>Research Question #1:</b> What should be the mission/vision of PCs like the AAWS for Black women in student affairs?</p>	<p><b>SHARE BLACK WOMEN'S COLLECTIVE WISDOM</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teach survival strategies</li> <li>• Enhance professional competency</li> <li>• Illustrate diverse pathways to success</li> </ul>	<p><b>COMBAT ISOLATION AMONG BLACK WOMEN</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide a network</li> <li>• Affirm, validate, and reenergize</li> </ul>	<p><b>ENHANCE BLACK WOMEN'S SUCCESS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduce attrition</li> <li>• Increase leadership</li> <li>• Promote research &amp; scholarship</li> </ul>
	<p><b>RESEARCH QUESTION #2:</b> What can be done to enhance the content and delivery of the curriculum in PCs like the AAWS for Black women in student affairs?</p>	<p><b>OFFER A HIGHLY INTERACTIVE SCHEDULE</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enhance opportunities for participant interaction</li> <li>• Increase Q&amp;A with panelists</li> <li>• Diversify activities</li> </ul>	<p><b>DEVELOP A STRUCTURED CURRICULUM</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Solicit participant input via needs assessment</li> <li>• Focus on concrete skill development</li> <li>• Emphasize specific learning outcomes</li> </ul>
<p><b>RESEARCH QUESTION #3:</b> What can be done to enhance the opportunities for leadership within PCs like the AAWS for Black women in student affairs?</p>	<p><b>CLEARLY &amp; REGULARLY COMMUNICATE LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clarify structure/roles</li> <li>• Create transparent application process</li> <li>• Invite involvement throughout the year</li> </ul>	<p><b>MAXIMIZE OPPORTUNITIES FOR LEADERSHIP</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Diversify faculty (by level, generation, region, inst. type, etc.)</li> <li>• Utilize participants' expertise</li> <li>• Institute a succession structure for certain roles</li> </ul>	<p><b>USE TECHNOLOGY TO FACILITATE LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Utilize existing Facebook group</li> <li>• Create a leadership listserv</li> <li>• Distribute a leadership directory</li> </ul>

### RQ1: Vision and Mission

According to the participants in this study, Black women in student affairs still need professional counterspaces that allow them to share their collective wisdom, and that help them combat isolation and succeed in the profession. One participant’s comments summarized this sentiment:

I feel like the benefit has been definitely connecting with other Black women who are in the field because I don’t see a lot of them where I currently am and just getting a whole bunch of different perspectives and views on things that I may not have realized that I need to know, especially when it comes to, you know, leveling up and wanting to push forward into a mid-level position.

Participants discussed the importance of being “able to even discuss how our identity—our racial identity and our gender identity—intersects with our work,” “know[ing] that there are many other women who have found ways to navigate,” and “the trading of social capital or those skills that are necessary in the workplace.” Participants also highlighted the need for professional

counterspaces in which they could access strategies from Black women student affairs leaders “to find ways of how to overcome it.” One participant commented:

So, being an entry-level professional, it's a benefit to be able to see other women who have made it to mid-level administration or senior-level administration to see how they did it and the ways that they went about it so that I can be better, a better professional overall.

During the AAWS, participants also found respite from being severely underrepresented and “isolated and alone” on their campuses. Many participants discussed the importance of “being affirmed in a space knowing that I’m not alone in the journey.” One participant shared the following perspective:

I know for some of us we may be the only ones in our office, in our department, in you know the entire student affairs hierarchy. So, it's just really empowering to kind of be amongst each other and kind of hear stories that kind of reflect our own experience.

Another participant echoed this idea: “This was an opportunity to get filled with support and love from peers and mentors—other Black women mentors. So that’s why, because I didn’t get it on campus.”

From reducing attrition and increasing leadership among Black women in the student affairs profession to promoting research and scholarship by, for, and about Black women, participants believed professional counterspaces should exist to help Black women succeed in the profession. One participant addressed the issue of attrition:

I think that the connection and the relationship building, you find the energy, find the strength, that some people may choose to leave the field for, or some people may lose the passion for. So, I think this Summit just brings that energy back and allows the investment to continue in the world of student affairs for Black women.

Another participant shared a personal perspective regarding the issue of “retention in the field:” “So, I’m currently student affairs adjacent, but just this experience alone makes me invigorated and excited to continue the work and even re-explore the idea of coming back institution-side just knowing that there is that level of support available.” Participants also spoke about the impact professional counterspaces could have in terms of “seeing more African American or Black women in senior leadership roles, in more presidency roles, and seeing the growth of African American women across the board in higher education.” Some participants discussed success in terms of the proliferation of research and scholarship among Black women, which included mention of Black women faculty. The following quotes are illustrative of several participants’ ideas: “I think another important piece is for those who are interested in the faculty route, so success would also look like more Black women successfully navigating that tenure track in higher ed.” Another participant added:

Success could be really focused in on publishing. There is impact in storytelling, there's impact in telling our narrative. And so, to be able to have that speak beyond this room to other individuals and letting it be from the vantage point of experts, practitioners, [and] scholars, to the point where it’s grounded in research, so that when we tell our story we’re not just telling it, we’re educating.

## **RQ2: Content and Delivery of Curriculum**

Participants also emphasized the need for professional counterspaces to include a high degree of interactivity among participants, feature a structured curriculum focused on concrete skill and professional competency development, and provide opportunities for prolonged engagement, perhaps even virtually. It was clear that participants valued the opportunity to engage one another in small groups and “to share [their] personal stories and narratives...at [their] tables.” Another participant commented similarly, “The most useful part of the curriculum today was being able to sit in a round table setting and having conversations with a group of women.” Although participants commented on the tremendous value of hearing from panelists of Black women student affairs leaders (and wanted more time to interact with the panelists), they especially noted their desire for more time to connect with one another in smaller groups. Several participants shared this perspective:

I do like the presentations and I do like the panels, but I do think we benefit more when there are like conversations that happen.

I think that was successful with the round table setting, because there were parts where we were able to kind of discuss and deconstruct some of the things that we had heard the panelists say.

Further, with respect to the delivery of the curriculum within professional counterspaces, participants noted the need to attend to different learning styles and suggested diversifying the types of activities in which attendees were engaged. One participant suggested, “Maybe splitting the groups more and doing breakout sessions, um...flip charting, like simple things that where the table has more dialoguing time and taking each of the panelists, if time allows, and pushing them to the tables.”

In terms of the content of the curriculum within professional counterspaces, participants in this study believed it was important to emphasize specific learning outcomes that aligned with the needs of the women participating and focused on the development of concrete skills and professional competencies in student affairs. One participant suggested a way to implement this suggestion:

I think the pre-survey could also have like Likert scale questions that allow you as an attendee to almost rate yourself in terms of where you are like with the NASPA competencies and then maybe even have you self-identify what your professional goals are. And then from that they'll be able to, you know I mean, like develop what the learning outcomes for the Summit will be, and what the specific sessions will be after that.

A number of specific topics were mentioned including leading while Black, responding to microaggressions, interacting with other marginalized populations, negotiating salary, and managing budgets. However, several participants also expressed concerned about balancing the need for a “safe place for us to learn” with the desire for a more structured curriculum:

I see this space is one of like, restoration and community and I don't want to lose that, because I feel like that's central to this experience. But I wonder if there's any

opportunity to balance that with more almost like a curriculum like, I would have loved a syllabus with contact information and presentation titles and like that, that...really concrete learning experience.

Participants also expressed a desire to connect with one another beyond the full-day, pre-conference workshop and suggested many ways to expand professional counterspaces to meet the ongoing needs of Black women in student affairs. Participants believed Black women in student affairs could benefit from maintaining mentoring and peer-support relationships after participating in professional counterspaces. One participant shared the following: “Sometimes I feel that after we leave, I’m excited and, the contact is not kept up as well as I would like it to be with some folks. So, some type of longitudinal mentorship that you know, continues on.” In general, participants wanted to stay connected to one another and engage in learning throughout the year. They suggested several ways technology could be used to facilitate this type of engagement and maintain these types of connections:

If we can have a like, an online platform to hold the pre-work so whether it's like Canvas or Blackboard, and that way we can stay engaged in the work and maybe do blogs and do writing, so I think incorporating that technology into it and having, or a Google share drive where we can like drop documents and things like that, or books, or things like that, I think that would be good.

Participants also suggested that professional counterspaces, like the AAWS, that only convened once a year as part of larger professional association conferences might consider reassembling as, “a symposium dedicated to African American women,” or “an institute where it’s a weekend of events versus a one-day summit.” In addition, several focus group interviewees agreed with a participant who shared, “I think a natural evolution of this space would be a membership of this body of women.”

### **RQ3: Opportunities for Leadership**

Participants believed leadership opportunities within professional counterspaces for Black women in student affairs could be enhanced by engaging in clear and regular communication with participants, maximizing opportunities for leadership among participants, and using technology to facilitate participants’ leadership development. It was clear as one participant noted that, “the resounding theme from this discussion is that I feel like we all are more able to talk about the actual Summit and critique that, than anything about the leadership because we know nothing, or very limited information about it.” Among the participants who discussed leadership, it was almost unanimously agreed that clarifying the structure, roles, and process by which leaders were included, and formally sharing that information with participants on a regular basis, would benefit both the AAWS and the women who attended. One participant’s response summarized this opinion:

I would say sending out information in advance about opportunities...clear and I guess concise options for leadership, because to be honest I don't even know what all the roles are and how folks got into those roles and how to get into those roles. So, having that shared openly and transparently for the people that are going to the conference, people

that have gone to the conference, and then maybe even on the Facebook group, I think that'd be great.

Participants also believed that maximizing opportunities for leadership among the Black women who participated in the Summit might be a way to enhance the quality of this particular professional counterspace. Participants expressed the idea that those who participate in the leadership of professional counterspaces for Black women in student affairs should be a diverse representation of not only the women who attend, but the students those women serve and the younger staff they may supervise on their respective campuses. In addition to discussing the need for diversity in terms of professional level, region, and institutional type, several participants noted a desire to include leaders representing different generational categories (e.g., Millennials, GenZ, etc.). This recommendation included an admonishment to “model what it means to be inclusive and equitable in our processes of positioning folks by also doing those things ourselves.” Related to this, one participant expressed the following:

I think ultimately, we have to hold ourselves to the same things that we tell non-Black individuals to do in terms of mitigating bias and making sure there's equity in a process—and it's not just the good ol' boys are in place of a good ol' Black women's club, right?

Participants also believed that there was untapped talent and expertise among the women who participated in the AAWS that could be leveraged by the current leadership to strengthen the program. One participant shared:

You don't know what you have in your audience because you haven't asked us what is our area of expertise...So, you may be sitting on a goldmine of knowledge...of how to make this interactive, creative, and inspiring for the women that's in the room. You don't know that, because you haven't had the opportunity to poll us to ask us.

Finally, participants were interested in discussing how technology could be used to facilitate the development of leadership within the AAWS. Some participants were aware that there was an existing AAWS Facebook group, but believed that it was not used regularly and when it was used to communicate about leadership opportunities, there was not enough specificity. One participant offered the following perspective:

I think I remember seeing a Facebook post looking for volunteers to work with this event today. I was going to sign-up, but I think I missed the deadline. But the flipside to that is it wasn't very descriptive specifically what the volunteers would be doing.

Another participant shared, “If you're going to put the call out on the Facebook page, just make sure it has detail with what the expectation is, what the role will be, so people can decide if they have the bandwidth to participate.” Participants believed they would also benefit from a listserv that could be used to ensure regular communication about leadership opportunities. In addition, some participants thought “it would be cool if you could go online and see who all came and put your research interests down.” Another participant expanded upon this idea and suggested creating “a brief list of everybody who attended, their position, with maybe like a picture if they wanted to provide that, and just their titles, just so we can have a document to use as a directory.”

## Discussion

Several theoretical frameworks like CRT and BFT undergird the need for this study by explicating the consequences associated with Black women's underrepresentation in higher education (Collins, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1998). In particular, BFT highlights the ways PCs like the AAWS can be designed to enhance the success and well-being of Black women student affairs professionals in the future. Recommendations in this study that center around PCs providing a space where Black women can share their collective wisdom, participate in a high degree of interactivity, have prolonged opportunities for engagement, and use technology to facilitate leadership development are illustrative of Collins' (2000) articulation of *standpoint*, which is firmly rooted in the lived experiences of and communicative dialogue among Black women. These types of interpersonal interactions afford Black women the opportunity to both collect and transmit what has become known (among themselves) about how to survive and succeed in academia despite the prevailing racist/sexist oppressions they face. According to Collins (2000), "knowledge without wisdom is adequate for the powerful, but wisdom is essential to the survival of the subordinate (p. 257). It is evident that participants in this study recognized this truth, as they expressed concern that PCs provide multiple opportunities for Black women to interact and share with one another.

Case and Hunter's (2012) framework also provides a conceptual model that can be used to situate this study's findings. Participants' responses reflected a variety of similarities with two of the three challenging processes identified by Case and Hunter. First, participants noted several ways PCs should be designed to help Black women combat isolation, share their collective wisdom, and provide opportunities for prolonged engagement; these findings are reflective of *direct relational transactions*. According to Case and Hunter, marginalized individuals participating in counterspaces receive various forms of social support including empathy, a sense of community and inclusion, and fictive kinship, all of which can provide respite and restoration for counterspace participants. Participants also discussed the need for PCs to provide participants with access to the tactics other Black women have used to withstand and navigate the various manifestations of racist/sexist oppression on their campuses. Case and Hunter (2012) referred to this as the "transmission of adaptive cognitive and behavioral strategies" (p. 263), and contended that, "counterspaces exist as living repositories of collective experiences and wisdom that can inform the everyday strategies through which marginalized individuals navigate oppressive contexts" (p. 266).

Several additional themes and categories, which emerged from participants' responses, were aligned with a second component of Case and Hunter's (2012) framework known as *narrative identity work*. Participants suggested that PCs for Black women student affairs professionals in the future needed to include opportunities for, what Case and Hunter referred to as, the "creation/maintenance of resistance narratives...[and] reimagined personal narratives" (p. 263). By encouraging Black women in PCs to share the diverse pathways they had taken to achieve success, promoting their engagement in research and scholarship, giving them more time to interact with panelists (who were often senior-level leaders in student affairs/higher education), and creating mentoring circles/peer cohorts, participants would have ample opportunities to forge counter-hegemonic, individual and group identities about themselves as Black women in higher education. These alternative narratives, "which speak to the strength of individuals to overcome the world as it currently exists, [are] juxtaposed against [an] idealized

articulation of the world as it ought to be” (Case & Hunter, 2012, p. 264). Perhaps by providing a space where Black women in student affairs can envision, and even momentarily experience, an alternate vision of the future where they are fully valued, included, supported, and equipped, will infuse them with the hope they need to persist until we live in the world and profession we imagine.

Participants in this study did not emphasize the need for PCs to provide a space for Black women to engage in *acts of resistance*. According to Case and Hunter (2012), “engaging in non-normative behaviors and collective critique...[is a way to] celebrate aspects of [Black women’s] culture and identity that are devalued within the larger society” (p. 263). This finding is worth noting given the demographics of the participants in this study, all of whom were Black women, with the majority (59%) between 26-35, and who could be classified as millennials (Coomes & DeBard, 2004). Scholars have noted the ways millennials, or possibly “fourth (and new) wave,” Black feminists are rejecting the respectability politics of former generations of activists and are actively engaged in crafting counterpublic critiques in a variety of technological spaces (Jackson, 2016; Love & Evans-Winters, 2015, p. 202). PCs like the AAWS, which are facilitated within the context of a larger professional development conference (e.g., NASPA), might impede participants from engaging in culturally related behaviors that are deemed unprofessional or inappropriate and/or are demeaned in dominant cultural narratives for fear of professional reprisal. This may also explain why participants in this study suggested the development of PCs that offer memberships and convene independent of larger professional associations. In the future, Black women who develop and facilitate PCs for Black women student affairs professionals should find ways to incorporate this type of resistance work. This could provide “marginalized individuals opportunities to think, feel and act in ways that are consonant with their own identities but that are typically devalued by the larger society (Case & Hunter, 2012, p. 265).

### **Implications for Practice**

Insights gained in this study may be useful to a broader audience of Black women in higher education engaged in the development of professional counterspaces. In addition, Black women seeking out culturally responsive professional development experiences may also use these recommendations to identify those opportunities that may be most worthwhile, given the unique set of challenges these women continue to face. Data in this study suggest the following components are important for the development of future professional counterspaces for Black women in student affairs and/or higher education:

### **Teaching Survival Skills**

Unfortunately, Black women in higher education are still saddled with the burden of learning how to survive in professional environments that are riddled with microaggressive manifestations of racist sexism/sexist racism (West & Bertrand Jones, 2018). For these women, professional success and personal well-being hinges not only upon their ability to develop professional competence, but to simultaneously build up the arsenal of defensive and offensive strategies needed to simply persist in academia. Professional counterspaces should attend to this reality and infuse their programming with opportunities for Black women to share this collective knowledge with one another.



### **Increasing Black Women's Leadership**

Despite the success that Black women have experienced in attaining administrative positions in higher education compared to other minoritized groups, they are still severely underrepresented in leadership positions when compared to White men and women (West, 2020). Professional counterspaces should exist to redress these persistent inequities and serve as sites that intentionally and strategically work with institutions, executive search firms, and professional associations to position Black women in critical administrative and academic leadership positions.

### **Enhancing Opportunities for Participant Interaction**

Due to the underrepresentation of Black women in higher education, and the resulting isolation these women experience, professional counterspaces should first and foremost provide a safe space for Black women to congregate and engage in interpersonal interactions with one another. The essentiality of this component of professional counterspaces cannot be overstated and should not be overlooked.

### **Developing Mentoring Circles/Peer Cohorts**

Developing connections that lead to increased encouragement is especially important for Black women in higher education. Thus, professional counterspaces that facilitate the establishment of mentoring circles and peer cohorts disrupt the narrative many Black women may be internalizing, and instead provides them entrée into the insight, knowledge, experiences, and survival skills of their elders and peers. Mentorship allows Black women to understand and validate their common experiences, and thereby further understand their shared viewpoint.

### **Inviting Involvement Throughout the Year**

It is clear from the participants in this study that Black women involved in professional counterspaces could benefit from regular and ongoing opportunities to enact their leadership. Not only does this strategy enhance the leadership savvy of the Black women engaged, it also strengthens the leadership capacity of the counterspace itself by creating a stronger network of individuals who are highly invested in the success of the program.

### **Utilizing Participants' Expertise**

Black women seeking professional development opportunities would benefit in multiple ways by being consulted for their expertise even in the context of experiences meant to enhance their success and well-being. Professional counterspaces that assess and utilize the expertise of their participants help these individuals make a stronger case for institutional support to participate, even in the midst of tightening institutional budgets, which typically results in a reduction of professional development funding. Using this approach, participants are able to leverage these experiences as opportunities to both “give back” and “take from.”

### **Implications Specific to the AAWS**

Although the findings of this study may have general applicability to a variety of Black women in higher education engaged in the creation or refinement of professional counterspaces, there are specific insights gleaned in this study that should be used to shape the future direction of the AAWS. Related to the first research question, AAWS faculty may wish to adopt the following vision and mission statements, which reflect participants' overall sentiments regarding the purpose of this specific professional counterspace:

**Vision:** The AAWS will serve as a nationally recognized clearinghouse for the development and discovery of Black women's leadership in student affairs.

**Mission:** The AAWS exists to enhance resiliency and professional development of Black women in student affairs at all levels, to increase the number of Black women positioned for leadership in student affairs as administrators and faculty, and to contribute to the body of scholarship produced by, for, and/or about Black women in student affairs.

In terms of strengthening the Summit curriculum, AAWS faculty might consider restructuring the workshop agenda to include more time for participants to engage one another in small group dialogue and increase opportunities for participants to interact with panelists; this could be accomplished by reducing the number of panels offered, panelists on each panel, or pre-scripted questions. Another practice that might enhance the AAWS curriculum content is to survey participants prior to the workshop to assess their perceived degree of knowledge and skill with regard to the ACPA/NASPA professional competencies and use that data to fine tune the workshop learning outcomes. Participants also believed they would benefit from opportunities to connect with one another beyond the full-day, pre-conference workshop and suggested the creation of a virtual learning community specifically for AAWS participants. Members of the AAWS faculty, particularly those with online teaching expertise, could leverage their knowledge of learning management systems like Blackboard, Canvas, and Google Classroom to develop an online classroom that could be used to facilitate synchronous and asynchronous discussions, encourage reflection, share resources and announcements, solicit participant feedback, and co-create content with participants (Henry & Glenn, 2009). This recommendation combined with the idea to develop a stand-alone membership structure for the AAWS might serve as one source of revenue, which could be used to convene participants in other face-to-face meetings independent of the NASPA Annual Conference.

The implications for practice related to the leadership structure of the AAWS offered in this study are in line with earlier findings about what is needed to preserve the legacy of the Summit in the future. According to West (2017):

As the AAWS prepares to enter its third decade of existence, its continued success is dependent on future generations of African American women who are attentive to the needs of contemporary African American women student affairs professionals and are courageous enough to propose innovative solutions. Further needed are African American women who will provide unwavering stability to the AAWS by consistently coordinating and delivering a high-quality, culturally responsive program. (p. 334).

As the findings of this study suggest, the leadership of the AAWS might benefit from more intentionally accessing its participants' diverse perspectives and areas of expertise by clarifying

which opportunities for leadership exist and sharing more broadly the process by which those leadership appointments are made. One recommendation that might help facilitate this goal is to create a leadership position solely responsible for managing and expanding the AAWS's social media presence and use of platforms like LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram to connect with participants throughout the year around the topic of leadership development. Content published to these sites could also be disseminated via a listserv comprised of past AAWS participants.

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

Several threats to the credibility of the study exist. First, because the focus group interviews were conducted during the AAWS, participants' responses may have been influenced by their exposure to the Summit curriculum and/or their interactions with other participants and the AAWS faculty; this also includes the potential for participants to provide socially desirable responses during the focus groups due to the influence of the facilitators and other participants. In addition, because the data were only collected at a single point in time, it is possible that participants' responses could vary temporally. Another limitation is related to the study's dependability since we did not use additional sources of data beyond the focus group interview transcripts and the note-taking protocols to triangulate the findings.

While professional counterspaces have been found to positively impact the personal well-being and professional success of Black women in student affairs (West, 2019), further research is needed to document the efficacy of other culturally responsive professional development strategies employed by Black women and other minoritized groups in higher education. One line of inquiry includes conducting qualitative analyses of content posted in social media groups created by and for marginalized groups in higher education (e.g. Facebook groups like BLKSAP, Black Women in Higher Education, Alpha Kappa Alpha Student Affairs Professionals, Women of Color in Higher Education, etc.). These studies could be used to extend the findings of previous research by exploring the impact of virtual PCs on marginalized higher education professionals. In line with several epistemological themes of BFT espoused by Collins (2000), other methods that could yield useful findings about the impact of participating in PCs include collaborative autoethnography, as well as critical participatory action research. In addition, with the findings of this study in mind, as Black women continue to enhance existing (and develop new) professional counterspaces, longitudinal research is needed to assess the broader systemic impacts of these spaces over time. Professional associations and institutions with an articulated commitment to enhancing diversity could benefit from partnering with researchers to investigate the long-term individual and organizational effects of PCs with regard to the experiences of Black women and other minoritized groups in higher education. Further, Gardner et al. (2014) suggested that professional success among Black women in student affairs was impacted by early engagement in student affairs, particularly during their undergraduate careers. Missing from practice and the literature, is an exploration of the impact of professional counterspaces for Black women undergraduate, masters, and doctoral students interested in pursuing faculty and/or administrative careers in higher education and student affairs.

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