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The Roles and Activities of Senior Level African American Administrators at PWIs

Walter A. Brown

The George Washington University

“Since the civil rights movement in the 1960’s, there has been substantial increase in the number of senior level African American Administrators at predominantly white institutions (PWIs). However, I argue that this is a partly false perception. There are more African American administrators, but they tend to be in positions that lack power and authority.”

Since the civil rights movement in the 1960s, there has been a substantial increase in the number of senior level African American administrators at predominantly white institutions (PWIs). However, I argue that this is a partly false perception. There are more African American administrators but they tend to be in positions that lack power and authority. A review of the kinds of senior level positions held, not just the numbers will provide bases for developing a better understanding of this complex issue.

The inclusion of African Americans as administrators at PWIs was not a matter of choice. The hiring was a result of several critical events during the late 1960s and early 1970s external to university control. However, these events would directly affect the hiring practices and enrollments of minorities at PWIs. According to Calvert Smith (1981), after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968, the Black community put pressure on the Federal Government to provide equal opportunity for minorities in higher education, particularly at PWIs. They demanded an increase in enrollment for minority students, recruitment of minority faculty and the employment of minority administrators. To accomplish this, the federal government, in turn, applied pressure to PWIs in the form of withholding funding for research grants if they did not conform to federally mandated employment guidelines. As a result, the number of African American administrators began to increase at PWIs. Their job titles (managers/ directors of minority affairs) and responsibilities were concentrated exclusively in monitoring the academic progress and behavior of minority students. However, these positions were outside the periphery of traditional administrative power and opportunity in the university. They were classified as "staff" versus "line". As McPhail observed, "line officers are managers vested with the power and authority to make decisions in the areas of budget, faculty affairs, student affairs and academic programs. They are part of the formal administrative hierarchy of the university. Staff officers are subject to the decisions of the line officers, and both are keenly aware of the parameters of each role." In other words, as staff officers, African American administrators had no decision-making authority. This was a double-edged sword for the African American administrator at PWIs. Although these staff positions carried no real power and authority, their responsibilities were vital to minority students.

But what is the current employment status of African American administrators at PWIs? In a recent national study I conducted at George Washington University on the roles and

activities of senior level African American administrators at majority institutions, the type of positions and job responsibilities currently held are clearly delineated.

The majority of the senior level positions held by African American administrators in the study (eighty-percent) are in the Student and Multi-Cultural (Minority) Affairs. The remaining twenty-percent included Vice Presidents (Associates and Assistant) for Academic Affairs, Human Resources, Research and Technology, Graduate Studies, Deans of Schools of Liberal and Fine Arts and Education. According to the study, there were no African American Administrators listed as holding positions as senior financial officers in more than two hundred PWIs contacted.

Also from this study, the evidence supports a different understanding on the current status of African American administrators at PWIs. Although there are more African American administrators at PWIs who hold senior level positions with line authority, why are the majority of their positions in areas of Student and Multi-Cultural Affairs? The study confirms the fact that their impact has grown to accommodate "diversity pressure" as they did in the 1960s, but in real terms, their influence remains stagnant. This is evidenced by (1) minimal control over a small portion of financial resources when compared to the entire university budget, (2) limited opportunities for advancement within their majority institution, (3) excluded from decisions that are critical to the strategic placement of the institution and (4) the near absence of opportunities for career development that would create alternative options as senior level administrators.

Consequently, the positions of Student and Multi-Cultural Affairs Vice President do not place African American administrators in the main stream of decision making and authority for the university. Nor do these positions give them the background and experience to move into other areas such as deans or vice presidents for academic affairs. So how can this be remedied?

First, African Americans who are seeking positions in central administration at PWIs regardless of the academic background should receive additional training in areas of management, budgeting-finance, decision making, resource allocation and strategic planning. Second, in an effort to both attract and retain African American administrators, PWIs should develop formal training programs with two objectives: (1) to enhance and augment the skills of senior level minority administrators in student and multi-cultural affairs in an effort to increase their marketability for positions as deans and vice presidents of academic affairs and (2) to attract lower level minority administrators and faculty to central administration. This will ensure that the administrator already possesses the needed skills prior to assuming the senior level position. It will also point to commitment on the part of the institutions to hiring from within and to diversifying central administration. At the same time, this strategy would begin to build a critical mass of potential African Americans administrators for PWIs.

Finally, African Americans seeking positions in senior level positions in central administration need to be more focused and direct in their career pursuit. They must be aware of the most efficient routes to traditional positions of power (vice president,

provost and presidential appointments) and not settle for the traditional positions offered in Student and Minority Affairs that appear to be limited in career growth opportunities.

PRESENTER

Walter A. Brown holds a doctorate degree in Higher Education Administration from The George Washington University. He has a Masters in Business Administration (MBA) from Clark-Atlanta University with a concentration in Finance. He received his Bachelor of Science degree from Morgan State University in the area of Business Administration.

Dr. Brown has spent the last ten years as a faculty member and administrator in higher education. He has worked for Bowie State University as a full time faculty member in the Department of Business, Economics, and Public Administration, where he taught finance and management courses in the undergraduate program. He also worked for the University of the District of Columbia as the coordinator of the Week-End College program in Division of Continuing Education. He is currently an Assistant Professor of Higher Education Administration in the Graduate School of Education and Human Development, Department of Educational Leadership, The George Washington University. His research interests include the financing of higher education, strategic planning, administrative management, governance and the progression of minority administrators at majority institutions.

Prior to entering the field of higher education, Dr. Brown worked in New York where he held positions with three Fortune 100 companies in the finance and strategic planning areas. He left New York to accept a position in Washington, D.C. as a professional staff member, Committee on the Budget, United States House of Representatives.