

LEADING IN HIGHER EDUCATION AS AN AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMAN DURING COVID-19

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As early as mid-March most colleges and universities shuttered their doors and shifted to remote learning for their students because of the global health pandemic COVID-19. With closed campuses, higher education professionals also began to work remotely while maintaining required student services such as admissions, academic advising, career support, and financial aid. As offices adjusted to a new work environment, it required campus leaders to reimagine how to manage and support their staff to ensure that required and essential work continued for students.

As a higher education professional, my 20-year career has been at the same private university located in the Midwest. My career has always involved significant student engagement and I currently lead an office of seven student services professionals. As the stress and challenges of working remotely persist because of COVID-19, the nation also grapples with ongoing calls for equality and justice for minorities and marginalized people. During this unprecedented time, leading a team remotely has its challenges and is compounded even more when you are leading a team as an African American woman.

Even though the number of African American women who obtain college degrees continues to [increase](#), the number of African American women in leadership roles at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) does not meet a [critical mass](#). For African American women who work in leadership roles at PWIs, research shows ongoing experiences of [marginalization](#) and isolation on their respective campuses. With most universities working remotely, these feelings of marginalization and isolation continue for African American women. While there is research available on the lived and professional experiences of African American women in faculty roles at Predominantly White Institutions, there is limited research that focuses on this same topic for African American women in non-faculty [roles](#).

Prior to the global health pandemic African American women were able to connect with colleagues for in-person conversations about the challenges they were facing in their roles. In addition to in-person conversations, some women participated in organized gatherings on campus to expand their network and support system. These affinity group gatherings were organized based upon one or more shared minoritized identities. A goal of these campus groups, also referred to as sister circles, was to create a supportive environment where participants could freely speak on specific issues and challenges without suffering repercussions. Campus-based affinity groups for African American women serve to benefit ongoing professional development that helps sustain a positive well-being for their members.

With the numerous audio and visual online platforms available, there are a variety of ways African American women, specifically those at PWIs, can remain connected to colleagues and maintain engagement with campus support systems to reduce feelings of isolation and marginalization. Here are three strategies that African American women should consider to maintain and grow their campus support system.

First, stay connected with campus colleagues. Each week schedule a 15-minute conversation with a campus colleague. The goal is for ongoing brief check-ins with colleagues to not take time from an already full work schedule. The conversations could address work issues such as leadership strategies or just getting to know a colleague in a more intentional way.

Second, involvement in a campus affinity group provides an opportunity for African American women to focus on their professional development. Affinity group gatherings can be topic-driven to assist members in expanding their knowledge in a subject area or to acquire technical skills. An [affinity group](#) could host a guest speaker to

present on a topic of interest to the group. To reduce the financial impact of securing a guest speaker, look to your campus faculty or executive leadership for presentation ideas. With the inability to host in-person conferences, many professional organizations are offering free or low-cost professional development webinars and virtual workshops. Promote these events with members through the affinity group's communication platform.

Third, this is a great time to think about the next step in your career. With the expectation that we will get beyond this health pandemic in the coming year, think about things you could be doing now in preparation for that next career opportunity. Consider establishing a mentoring relationship with a focus on [career development](#). The mentor could assist with crafting a career strategy, review your revised resume, and participate in practice interviews. Mentors can connect protégés with their professional network. Employers are going to be interested in how your responsibilities and leadership changed while working remotely during the health pandemic. A mentor can assist with identifying career changes and ways to talk about them during an interview.

As the global health pandemic and conversations about equity and social justice continue, African American women continue to face feelings of isolation and marginalization while working remotely. To reduce the impact of these feelings, use this time to focus on your leadership and professional development by remaining connected to colleagues, participate in an affinity group for support, and prepare for your next position with the assistance of a mentor. These strategies can be helpful in creating networks of support, easing the weight of social distancing, and crafting community.

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