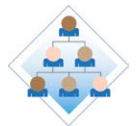# African American
LEVERAGING ADMINISTRATIVE ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES IN CAREER GROWTH

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Approaches to establish an adequate academic and professional standing to advance in student affairs administration vary along individual, institutional, demographic, experiential, and personal values and interests (Hammonds, 2012). Kanter (1977, 1993) explored the structure and opportunities, examined proportional employee representation, and investigated factors and implications related to career limitations and barriers to advancement in corporate and professional settings. Research on career trajectory limitations for professionals of color in the areas of student affairs, faculty, and academic leadership outlines societal, internal, and governmental barriers as consistently challenging across gender, faculty, and professional lines (Daniel, 2011; Hammonds, 2012; Jackson & O'Callaghan 2009; Wordlow, 2018). These factors compel exploration into the unique

challenges and specific strategies for career trajectory planning by Black student affairs professionals.

Establish Voice and Values

Amey, Jessup-Anger, and Tingson-Gatuz (2015) explain the value of gaining familiarity with decision making, policies, and information networks and establishing mentor relationships as tools to learn an institution's organizational and political realities. While learning the university, Black professionals must clearly state, articulate, and live by a self-defined system of values. Values, according to Kouzes and Posner (2008), "silently give direction to the hundreds of decisions made at all levels of the organization every day" (p. 65). No matter the position within the organization, Black professionals must identify spaces to share their values—through discussion; in writing; and with

supervisors, direct reports, and colleagues. By establishing these core beliefs, Black professionals are positioned to establish a value agenda prior to any assumptions or other environmental factors that may undermine the foundation of a solid transition into the organization.

Leveraging Assessment

One critical factor in career growth is developing the ability to leverage measurable outcomes and data to express the breadth and scope of effective job performance. The collection, utilization, and communication of data is key to a professional's success, whether in assessing programs, allocating resources, or determining the ability of an institution to meet accreditation standards (Birnbaum 1988; Henning & Roberts, 2016). Integrating assessment into daily practices allows Black student affairs professionals to effectively express work in language and terms that executive leaders, fiduciary stakeholders, and colleagues in the academy will embrace. Henning and Roberts (2016) discussed the emphasis placed on assessment by senior student affairs officers. Black professionals who seek those roles benefit from developing assessment plans and increasing familiarity with tools to measure learning, revenue impact, program success, and student completion trends. This focus provides an invaluable resource for executive leadership while developing skills that will be useful in the future.

Early Ownership of the Evaluation Process

Shapiro and Stefkovich (2011) postulated that "society contains many groups that have not always been given equal treatment and/or have not had a level field on which to play" (p. 114). Black professionals are a member of one of the groups referenced in this discussion. Within the context of student affairs, Amey et al. (2015) discussed the increased stress and transitional dissonance that new professionals, especially people of color, experience in settings that provide little or insufficient onboarding. The lack of adequate training is exacerbated for professionals who "might be unsure about the questions to ask or are afraid of appearing insecure" (Amey et al., 2015, p. 24), which increases reluctance to seek feedback. An additional barrier can be caused by the crisis-focused nature of some supervisors within the student affairs enterprise, which

may intersect with a lack of clear training, these issues can be especially compounded for Black professionals who may already experience a disconnect within the milieu of a department, division, or campus.

Historically, lack of clarity about responsibilities has been a barrier to retention of new and senior-level black professionals in higher education (Hammonds, 2012; Jackson & O'Callaghan, 2009). When mitigating this historical issue, an important equalizer lies in clarifying the evaluation process. Whether new or seasoned employees, Black professionals benefit from familiarity with the standards, measures, and expectations for performance evaluation within an organization. While evaluation and feedback may be an annual process from a supervisor's perspective, it is often detrimental for Black professionals whose first introduction to evaluation standards comes at the end of an academic year. To avoid the historical pitfall described above, Black professionals should take the additional step of requesting standards for evaluation and feedback from their supervisors in the beginning, as well as initiating discussions to ascertain key performance indicators and supervisory priorities. Once performance expectations are clear and agreed on, they should immediately be committed to writing and returned to the supervisor to confirm a shared understanding. In a unionized environment, it is equally imperative to review and understand standards for evaluation and corrective action within the appropriate collective bargaining agreement, to ensure that the supervisor is adhering to those guidelines.

Creating Support Systems

In a study of leadership practices among professionals in student affairs, Daniel (2011) postulated, "Black professionals highly value and embrace the kind of leadership behaviors and activities that inspire, support, and acknowledge their employees for their contributions" (p. 100). Wordlow (2018) examined the career advancement of Black women in chief academic officer roles, noting an "emphasis on the role of mentorship in career development" (p. 110) among participants in her study.

At the nexus of career advancement is the establishment of a support system built on mentors who are available for honest ideation, dialogue, and critique. Black professionals may rely on mentors to provide guidance in developing professional career trajectory plans, navigating challenges to values within the college environment, and balancing personal lives and career. Mentor relationships can be useful when mitigating nuanced factors often exacerbated by micro- and macro-aggressions within institutional contexts.

Conclusion

Developing career trajectory strategies for Black professionals in student affairs requires mentorship, a focus on assessment, clarity of evaluation standards, and the development of targeted skills that will enhance the career ascent. Black professionals who initiate the levers suggested above are positioned to sustain and thrive within campus administrative environments.

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