

Fostering a Sense of Community for African American Counselor Educators in an Online Setting

Melanie Richburg, Afiya Burson, D'Netra Smith

College of Humanities and Social Sciences, Grand Canyon University, Phoenix, AZ, USA

Email: melanie.richburg@gcu.edu, afiya.burson@gcu.edu, dnetra.smith@gcu.edu

How to cite this paper: Richburg, M., Burson, A., & Smith, D. (2025). Fostering a Sense of Community for African American Counselor Educators in an Online Setting. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 13, 235-252.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2025.131014>

Received: December 18, 2024

Accepted: January 17, 2025

Published: January 20, 2025

Copyright © 2025 by author(s) and Scientific Research Publishing Inc. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access

Abstract

This reflective literature review study aims to explore the challenges faced by African American counselor educators in higher education, particularly in online platforms, and the role a sense of community plays in addressing these issues. The research method employs a literature review and critical analysis to examine disparities such as unequal rank placement, feeling undervalued and unheard, disproportionate pay, and racial microaggressions. The findings reveal that these challenges significantly hinder the professional experiences and contributions of African American counselor educators. A sense of community, operationally defined as support from other faculty, access to resources, recognition of membership, and fostering belonging, trust, and mentoring, emerges as a critical factor in mitigating these challenges. The study concludes that creating a robust sense of community within online academic environments can enhance equity and inclusion for African American faculty in higher education, ultimately supporting their professional growth and retention.

Keywords

African American, Counselor Educators, Sense of Community, Online Faculty

1. Introduction

The online university landscape has transformed higher education, however, unique challenges and opportunities are presented for faculty, particularly African American counselor educators. Bradley and Mead (2022) noted that “Underrepresented minority (URM) faculty hold about 10% of tenured positions, despite URM comprising more than 30% of the United States population; thus, disparities

remain in the recruitment, development, retention and promotion of diverse faculty in large part because of a lack of mentoring” (p. 1). The issues that comprise the working environment for African American educators can negatively impact their rise and movement through the academe. This exploration examines the experiences of African American educators within the context of online higher learning, focusing on their sense of community. The exploration continues with an overview of the factors that contribute to or hinder their sense of community within the online counselor education system.

1.1. Counselor Education as a System

Understanding counselor education as a system involves recognizing the interconnected components that contribute to its functioning and effectiveness. The environment in which it operates includes factors that may comprise of, but are not limited to societal, cultural, economic, and technological (Hale & Bridges, 2020). Some of these factors are often overlooked in the operation of online programs, which may hinder the formation of collaborative interconnectedness and an established culture suitable to meet the needs of the online system (Ahmad *et al.*, 2023). Any changes in the environment can impact the online system, requiring effective operation from all participants. Each group or member plays a significant role in shaping and implementing the counselor education system. Therefore, a holistic approach to advancing the system needs to be considerate and inclusive of all parties involved.

Whether in a traditional setting or online, African Americans make up a small percentage of the counselor education system (Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP Vital Statistics), 2023). However, they can contribute to promoting cultural competence and increasing awareness of disparities and equity within the counseling profession. A program is only as effective as its counterparts, so well-established inclusiveness is essential for continued growth, development, and functioning to meet the needs of all involved (Snow *et al.*, 2023). This can be challenging for online faculty, as there is a constant need to revise new technological tactics for teaching and communication, alongside the requirements of academic labor (Ovetz, 2020).

Advocating for the oppressed and recognizing how faculty of color are affected can help foster cooperative efforts in making necessary shifts to allow minorities to feel included (Wingfield & Adams, 2019). Considering the literature on African American educators, one general focus is on campus climate and inequality (Stanley, 2006, as cited in Wallace *et al.*, 2014). African American educators may experience gendered racism, gender devaluation, struggle to obtain inclusion, and difficulties in exerting power and voice (Wingfield & Adams, 2019). There is an assumption that they are not the “best fit” for leadership positions due to their desire to demonstrate their power as agents of social change. However, the policy becomes chaotic and confusing as African Americans seek autonomy in their growth while facing covert exclusion. These experiences may lead to low job satisfaction

and isolation (Wallace *et al.*, 2014), especially for online African American educators—a research area that requires further attention.

African American educators are often an invisible and overlooked group in academia. Their voices are ignored and they are often not included during conversations within their specific areas of expertise (Yao & Boss, 2020). Overall, African American educators working in traditional settings may be confronted with a lack of understanding in working with diverse populations by students and faculty; their credibility and authority are challenged, and the lack of African American faculty in leadership hinders mentorship (Wallace *et al.*, 2014; Wingfield & Adams, 2019). Nonetheless, their presence helps identify challenges and contributes to a collective approach to overcoming barriers and developing a sense of community.

One suggested solution to address challenges faced by African American educators within the system is to create a sense of community. The sense of community theory explores how individuals cultivate a sense of belonging or feelings of membership in various groups (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). While there is a gap in the literature on the use of this strategy for African American educators in an online setting, this article highlights the relevant functions of the community and how this strategy can be beneficial.

1.2. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework for a Sense of Community

Due to the limited research on this topic, we looked at a sense of community by merging prior research that explores a feeling of connection in a group or workplace. McMillan and Chavis (1986) notably conceptualized and defined a sense of community after completing a review of previous literature. They proposed that a sense of community consisted of four elements: membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Collegial relationships highlighted membership in the academe and building a socio-emotional connection through collaboration (Nistor *et al.*, 2015). Influence refers to a feeling that members' voices are heard and valued, contributing to a sense of empowerment. Fulfillment of needs captures the community's ability to satisfy the members' needs, creating a sense of interdependence. Emotional connection is established by shared experiences and history that deepen bonds and create a sense of attachment. Together, these components contribute to a strong and cohesive community where individuals feel connected and invested in their surroundings.

Additionally, Trespalacios and Uribe-Florez (2020) examined a sense of community in the online setting. It was noted that there were challenges with retention not only for faculty, but for students as well in an online setting. Based on this information, the process of building community, as it relates to distance education was examined. Similarly to McMillan and Chavis (1986), they defined a sense of community as being composed of 4 dimensions. Those dimensions include

recognition of membership, trust, interaction, and commonality of expectations and goals (Trespacios & Uribe-Florez, 2020). The combination of these definitions was seen as relevant areas that could address challenges faced by African American counselor educators.

Hinton (2010) focused on the experiences of African American women in the academe and how to shift the effects of marginalization. The two main conceptual solutions proposed were mentorship and collaboration with senior faculty (Hinton, 2010; Grant, 2012). Through the guidance of more experienced faculty, trust can be built and connections can be created. In the academic setting, academic bullying from both colleagues and administration has been found to negatively impact success or rates of advancement within the academe (Frazier, 2011). Therefore, trust needs to be present in order for African American educators to feel safe enough to build community. In a recent article by Jones *et al.* (2021), the authors discuss the experiences of Black faculty in a PWI that used Faculty Learning Communities (FLC) to address the challenges faced by Black faculty. They found that when they were connected with other faculty (ranging in experience and working in various disciplines), the faculty reported having a feeling of connection and building trust that created a safe space and “sense of community” (Jones *et al.*, 2021).

Next, having access to resources was seen as an important contributor to building a sense of community. Resources are necessary for the work that faculty do, both in the classroom as well as in their scholarship. Knowing how to access these resources not only promotes success but can foster relationships with veteran faculty. A lot of the research implies the importance of connecting faculty to resources as a means to support growth, maintain retention, and address any barriers faced by faculty (Grant, 2012; Hinton, 2010; Jones *et al.*, 2021).

Mentorship creates a sense of community through fostering a relationship between new or marginalized faculty with tenured or veteran faculty, which lends to an emotional connection (Jones *et al.*, 2015; Frazier, 2011; Hinton, 2010; Grant, 2012). This relationship can be a primary source for cultivating other areas of community (trust, membership, commonality of goals and expectations, etc.). Mentorship clearly defines who belongs to the community (mentor and mentee) and fosters a sense of shared identity as educators. Also, mentorship provides a platform for mentees to share their perspectives and ideas, increasing their sense of influence within the community, which connects to prior noted theoretical concepts of influence. Furthermore, mentors offer support, guidance, and resources, helping mentees fulfill their professional and personal needs, thus reflecting an intricate factor in conceptualizing a sense of community.

The various elements that contribute to the conceptual and theoretical frameworks of defining and establishing a sense of community can be synthesized and translated to online faculty communities (Trespacios & Uribe-Florez, 2020; Shepherd & Bollinger, 2023; Terosky & Heasley, 2015; Ferencz, 2017). Thus, for the purpose of this review, a sense of community is conceptually defined as having support from other faculty, having access to resources, recognition of

membership/a sense of belonging, trust, and incorporating mentorship. Considering these constructs, this critical reflection will explore how these elements manifest within the context of African American online counseling faculty communities and the implications for fostering a strong sense of community.

1.3. Purpose of this Critical Reflection/Empirical Review

In the grand scheme of higher education, the proliferation of online instruction has opened paths for inclusivity and diversity, yet some challenges persist in fostering a sense of community, particularly for underrepresented groups such as African American instructors in clinical mental health programs (Kumi-Yeboah *et al.*, 2020). This critical reflection and empirical review delve into the multifaceted dimensions of understanding what a sense of community is within the context of online education, specifically focusing on the experiences and challenges endured by African American faculty. As a critical reflection provides an opportunity to analyze, question, and assess assumptions, beliefs and actions of African American instructors, it can also encourage reflection to decide what actions need to take place to promote systemic change.

The journey towards creating a supportive community for African American online faculty in clinical mental health programs encompasses a nuanced understanding of systemic barriers, cultural dynamics, and pedagogical/programmatic approaches. According to Abinoja (2023), there are insufficient structures that do not accommodate the intersectionality of the marginalized community in higher learning environments. Through a critical lens, this literature research explores the intersectionality of race and microaggressions, shedding light on the unique struggles faced by African American instructors in navigating virtual spaces (Kumi-Yeboah *et al.*, 2020). Nevertheless, other forms of intersectionality, such as gender and socioeconomic status, warrant attention. Due to limited research regarding other microaggressions, the need for further exploration in future research is regarded. Drawing from empirical studies, heuristic research, and theoretical frameworks, this review synthesizes existing literature to elucidate effective strategies for cultivating a sense of belonging, empowerment, and professional development among African American online faculty. By examining the role of mentorship, faculty support, developing trust, and access to resources, this literature research review offers insights into transformative practices that can foster inclusivity and equity within higher education clinical mental health programs, thus comprehending the concepts of a sense of community further.

2. Challenges Faced by African American Online Educators

Virtual/online/remote education continues to gain traction within the educational community. As a result of the 2019 COVID-19 pandemic, it has been thrust into a higher gear. With the demand for more online programs, the demand for more qualified faculty grows. How institutions of higher learning respond to this demand brings into question whether or not there is equal representation of

qualified African American male and female educators. As with the traditional brick and mortar setting, African American counselor educators face the same or even greater challenges in an online setting. These challenges consist of underrepresentation, feelings of isolation, rank placement, feeling valued, being heard, disproportionate pay, and racial microaggressions. Differences in geographical locations can contribute to these challenges, as well.

2.1. Rank Placement

Academic rank placement in higher education is considered a leveling standard for professors in the field. In order to advance, the institution outlines criteria for the expectations of educators, establishing a baseline for their evaluation – similar for online and ground educators. These implicit or explicit expectations could range from volunteering to lead a committee, planning events/conferences/training, developing curriculum, publishing, or any service for the program. Faculty are often critiqued over the course of time, as some are “shouted out” in a meeting—which allows others to congratulate their works—providing recognition for their “performance”. The performance expectations are the standard by which educators are evaluated or deemed legitimate (O’Meara *et al.*, 2018). As a full-time educator, there is an opportunity to advance or hierarchically achieve rank from an instructor, assistant professor, associate professor, and professor. Even so, leadership prospects in administrative positions are also a consideration. An extension of such occurs within academic positions that increase superiority and responsibility—showcasing the legitimacy of our professionalism and growth. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (US Department of Education, 2021), some of the lower educator ranks statistically identify African Americans at 7% with the following categories: 1.6% professor, 3.2% associate professor, 4.1% assistant professor. There is a vast underrepresentation of African American educators in higher education, thus broadening the representation gap in ranked positions. This substantiality raises questions regarding why and how this imbalanced faculty distribution persists.

One consideration is the presence of racism in the institutional setting. Dade *et al.* (2015) conducted a study to examine the impact of racism on faculty of color in the northwestern region of the United States. Out of the 2,000 education department faculty identified in their study, only 17 were faculty of color from 1995 to 2000 (Dade *et al.*, 2015). Based on their findings, it was determined that regardless of recruitment, hiring numbers of faculty of color, scholarship, academic and professional contributions within the academe and professional realm, they received treatment within the academe that was much different from their White colleagues. The experiences left emotional and psychological scars that were overlooked by their White counterparts. Regardless of their academic and professional achievements, faculty of color were often evaluated at a lower-ranking/score than their colleagues, which negatively impacted their chances for tenure and promotion.

Settles *et al.* (2021) identified in their research how teaching evaluations are utilized as an evaluative criterion for rank and tenure. Referencing prior studies, it was recognized that evaluations resulting in retention or promotional efforts reflected students' unfavorable ratings towards African American educators when compared to White educators (Settles *et al.*, 2021). How the institutions handle these challenges to increase rank efforts is yet to be determined, as current research seems to be limited in this area. Nevertheless, factors like this deter time that could be awarded to research efforts, thus contributing to the unfulfilled career track aspirations and promotions of African American educators (Martinez *et al.*, 2017).

2.2. Feeling Valued

African American educators are challenged in their careers because of their unique experiences in the various roles they play within the systems they are part of—within their family, friendships, relationships, and jobs. The value system they are being held to, and are holding themselves to, sets them apart, and they may often battle with feeling valued in their roles and positions as professionals. There is a struggle to balance the overall motivation to keep it all together—professing the strong African American phenomenon. Because this struggle exists, their progression may not be understood or supported within traditional educational settings or higher-achieving systems, which may cause isolation (Arnold *et al.*, 2016).

Treatment of African American women faculty by African American men faculty is contrary because of their sex, whereas both White male and women faculty treat them differently because of their race and sex (Williams & Johnson, 2019). Differential treatment of this caliber, recognized or not, possibly contributes to the African American women's isolation and disinclination to fully submerge themselves into the academic community that may seem welcoming. The African American woman needs and values are often not considered. Furthermore, African American men seem to be disregarded as academically inclined by White professors and students; thus limiting diverse hiring practices to those they “get along with”—which devalues the African American male's character and worth (Jay, 2018; Golash-Boza, 2016).

Feeling valued means there is worth to an individual's existence, an appreciation that whatever an individual does is more than enough, and respect is shown for what an individual brings to the table. However, several institutions continue to operate with a dominant cultural norm that displays a Western worldview and values. In doing so, the structure reinforces a systemic cultural exclusion that manifests in the devaluing of African Americans at any table – which extends to the counselor education field, where they often feel unheard, uncared for, and unworthy (Matthew, 2016).

2.3. Being Heard

It is a challenge to hear someone, but more importantly, make them feel like you

hear them. Counselor educators are trained in this specialty as counselors to really hear or actively listen—which is one of the most important micro-skills of any theoretical form of counseling. This specialization requires listening with a purpose—to comprehend and respond in a way that signifies a deeper level of insight (Heyliger, 2014). Oftentimes, it is the things that are not spoken that require this masterful art form to be put to the test. However, this is not just a skill for counselors and counselor educators to acquire, but also for those in any leadership position that hopes to build strong relationships with their peers and colleagues.

As noted, there are not very many African American counselor educators in leadership roles. Regardless of who is currently holding the leadership position in academia, having a sense of trust and alliance has to be built in order for minorities to feel comfortable enough to share any concerns or solutions to problems (Arday, 2018). Issues are often made light of and downplayed when brought up. Although using their voice to bring about any social change is warranted, more work can be added to pacify the need for having their voice heard – shifting from a system problem to more of an individual problem. Very little research has been done in this area, but some studies have added to this voiceless notion (Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Dollarhide *et al.*, 2018). Hopefully, more studies will be encouraged by the gap in the literature to highlight the contributions of African American counselor educators, which lends credibility to the importance of having a voice and feeling valued in the profession.

2.4. Microaggressions

There is an underlying privilege demonstrated across sectors that can be deemed as a passive or blatant display of ignorance. Treating individuals of an oppressed group with slight verbal, behavioral, and environmental negativity in the workplace is the overall characterization of microaggressions (Paludi *et al.*, 2015). Microaggressions are insulting. Microaggressions are sometimes intentional, but always quite derogatory. Nevertheless, it happens, and a priority to continuously address the concerns in a safe space is warranted.

According to one research, African American faculty identify microaggression themes in their practice of scholarship and within the classrooms (Marbley *et al.*, 2014). The lack of support to increase understanding of an equal multifaceted worldview within the system(s) perpetuates an “it’s personal” issue—causing alienation in African American educators challenges to overcome such academic barriers. Universities may tend to placate the situation by doing things like sporadically posting relevant content in their newsletter/webpage from the Diversity and Inclusion sector to show solidarity. This unwavering systemic disposition imparts a perception that some students may gravitate towards—thus responding with such a microaggressive mentality in the classrooms toward faculty of color—extending from the reality of entrenched racism in society (DeCuir-Gunby *et al.*, 2020).

Although research regarding microaggressions toward African American

online educators is limited, there is considerable research that validates the cultural alienation, intersectionality, and professional identity struggles that the women may experience (Avent Harris *et al.*, 2019; Yao & Boss, 2020). The qualitative research conducted by Avent Harris *et al.* (2019), identified specific themes regarding women counselor educators. Yao and Boss (2020), recognized how women of color navigated online spaces, echoing prior works on microaggressive experiences. Results throughout the research studies identified how working online offers a sense of availability and accessibility that is misconstrued and often at a disadvantage when communicating in, typically, oversized classrooms. African American educators try to establish a constructive environment by welcoming students to class/introductions, responding to students in the private forums and through email communications; however, they experience frequent ill-mannered insults from students, as they navigate the course room—with less approval than White faculty (Settles *et al.*, 2021). Subsequently, some faculty struggle with being self-aware of how they respond to microaggressions, as well as how it affects their ability to establish an efficient relational dynamic that continues to promote learning but addresses the issue—which can be challenging as a counselor educator faculty working in a traditional setting (Harris *et al.*, 2019).

2.5. Having a Sense of Community

Online teaching, without any face-to-face components like hybrid models, is a term used to identify a distance educational experience that is curriculum-based, encouraging technological use to connect students and instructors (Perrotta & Bohan, 2020). As an online faculty in a higher learning setting, there is a necessary capacity to utilize vast resources to reach out to students. The various requirements, which may be different across the college/university learning structures, rely on a central theme of connectedness to students and cohorts. Relating to students is an important part of developing a sense of community for them, as is grading and providing feedback. Nevertheless, the relational pedagogy embodies constant intellectual connection, causing some deficiency in interpersonal connection (Major, 2015: p. 28). Regardless of an instructor's attempt to connect and develop students' learning, there seems to be an increased lack of awareness of bias as online students tend to rate the disposition of building rapport and connectedness low for African American educators (Settles *et al.*, 2021). Although teaching in an online setting allows for a considerable expansion of developing endless possibilities of connectedness (Major, 2015: p. 228), the challenge to establish a sense of community as an instructor, and more so as faculty, still exists.

The time and effort invested in teaching online may challenge faculty in reserving time for sustained and in-depth collaborative investigation of their online teaching pedagogies and student learning (Baran & Correia, 2014). Institutions may try to help by creating intellectual/interpersonal opportunities for committee involvement, breakout sessions in meetings, and having conferences. However, those opportunities may not necessarily work for African American counselor

educators due to the aforementioned oppositions of being heard, feeling valued, coping with microaggressions, and not being supported and recognized. For communities that are developed for more social involvement and comradery, African American counselor educators may be less likely to become involved. Once this occurs and it is evident, at what point does a sense of community become a priority, as it is obvious the feeling of membership, trust, need fulfillment, and emotional connection is thwarted. A sense of community is essential to African American counselor educators in the promotion of their well-being (Pedersen *et al.*, 2015; Decuir-Gunby *et al.*, 2020); therefore, more understanding and research on how to recognize and combat this challenge is necessary.

3. Strategies for Building a Sense of Community for African American Online Educators

3.1. Cultivating a Sense of Community

There are still vast disparities amongst African American faculty and their colleagues and many more challenges that are faced. Based on the review of the literature, the barriers faced can be helped by what has been defined as a sense of community (support from faculty, having access to resources, recognition of membership/sense of belonging, trust, and mentorship). A sense of community is seen as a means to cultivate a positive working environment that will help to promote advancement for African American educators. Faculty who reported not feeling a sense of community had lower morale, lower retention rates, feelings of invisibility, feelings of isolation, and lower confidence within the academic setting (Frazier, 2011).

There are multiple ways in which a sense of community can be established in an online setting, as based on the theoretical and conceptual views used to define the phenomenon. Sense of community is cultivated through the support of faculty/mentorship, having access to resources, recognition of membership/a sense of belonging, and trust. Based on the empirical research, mentoring, advocacy, access to resources and recognition of membership are ways an organization can help faculty to feel better connected to the university.

3.2. Mentoring

Mentorship serves an important role in the academe. It provides new faculty and counselor educators with a sense of connection to senior faculty, serves as a catalyst for growth, collegiality, as well as promotes job satisfaction. African American faculty have an opportunity to gain support and guidance from members within their respective programs and departments. Woo, Kim and Park (2019) determined there was a correlation between faculty burnout, turnover and job satisfaction. Their research determined the need for mentoring of junior faculty to improve job satisfaction and lower the rate of turnover. Not only does mentoring provide professional and social support for junior faculty, but it also contributes to their mental and physical wellness.

The absence of mentoring programs can contribute to the rate of turnover of African American counselor educators, and more is needed to address this concern by examining whether there are “documented strategies and long-term strategic plans” (Aguirre, 2002, as cited in [Holcomb-Mcroy & Bradley, 2003](#), p. 232) in place which in turn will increase the contributions of minority faculty in counselor education programs. As part of a long-term strategic plan, mentoring and peer programs are needed to support junior faculty and provide them resources to champion their growth and development within counselor education programs and the academe. The lack of a strong support system and network only serves to minimize the contributions and value of African American counselor educators and does not foster their tenure within the counselor education program, the university, as well as the academe.

When new/junior faculty gain employment within online counselor education programs, considerable mentors should partner with new faculty to assist them in transitioning into their new role. Establishing a structured mentorship program may include clearly outlined roles and expectations for both the mentor and the mentee to ensure alignment with departmental and university goals. Mentors may guide through a comprehensive departmental orientation that includes policies, procedures, and expectations for teaching, research, and service. A centralized resource guide specific to online counselor education programs will be helpful, detailing available tools, professional development opportunities, and institutional support systems. The university should encourage mentors to conduct a walkthrough of these resources, ensuring new faculty understand how to access and utilize them effectively. For course-related support, mentors can address course-related matters such as managing online platforms and navigating student concerns, without minimizing the new faculty expertise and skills or providing too much overwhelming insight and information. Building collegial relationships can be organized through informal online gatherings to expand professional network and build community. Mentors and mentees may mutually schedule bi-weekly or monthly meetings during the first academic year to evaluate how well mentorship is going, discuss progress, address concerns, and make adjustments. The program can use the collected data from the evaluations to refine and improve the mentorship process. This mutually collaborative partnership should align with the overall goals and mission of the counselor education program/department and university. By implementing these actionable steps, institutions can create a supportive environment that enhances the transition of new faculty, fosters a sense of belonging, and positively impacts the retention of African American counselor educators.

3.3. Advocacy

The development of a sense of community will come from the work of marginalized faculty, those who are considered allies, as well as the organization. All counselor educators can advocate through increased levels of awareness

pertaining to their colleagues. Once there is awareness and acknowledgment of inequities of their African American women colleagues, counselor educators can identify areas in which they can help. A sense of community is then developed/strengthened because African American women will feel supported and receive equity within the academe. [Perez and Carney \(2018\)](#) conducted a study on institutional oppression of minority counselor educators. The results from this study show a need for institutions to take more accountability and also support the staff when faced with oppression, such as microaggressions. It was also recommended that organizations such as CACREP and ACES create guidelines and incentives to promote advocacy within the organization to further support their minority staff ([Perez & Carney, 2018](#)). Research on implementing programs to advocate for minority faculty and effectively reduce microaggressions is limited. However, a study by [Kossek et al. \(2024\)](#) demonstrated that face-to-face training on microaggressions led to increased awareness and understanding of inclusive behaviors.

3.4. Access to Resources

Having access means that there is an opening for admittance, a seat at the table if you will. As noted prior, African American educators may be admitted or gain access into an institution, however, the comfort level is decreased with the noted challenges—thus not feeling welcome, developing a sense of isolation, or experiencing insecurity in their role. Even so, the lack of diversity in leadership limits the capability of being heard, acquiring legitimacy, or having secure access ([O'Meara et al., 2018](#)). African American faculty often face obstacles in accessing the resources and support necessary to thrive in their roles. These resources include both social connections and institutional support. Specific examples of resources that African American educators lack access to in online institutions may include mentorship opportunities, meaningful networks with colleagues, receiving administrative support for career advancement, and accessing culturally responsive teaching materials that align with their unique perspectives and challenges ([Han & Onchwari, 2018](#)). However, building a strong sense of community can be a powerful strategy to overcome these challenges and obtain the necessary resources.

Establishing a community allows for access to resources. A diverse and collaborative group may impart personal responsibility for each individual, when formulating such a community ([Kenney, 2018](#)). Obtaining this foundational belonging establishment can aid in increasing the overall well-being of African American faculty, as the relationships are not formed for personal gain ([Nowell & Boyd, 2014](#)). This allows for a different quality of relationship that increases interpersonal connection by building trust, and ensuring being heard—receiving the assistance and resources needed. There is more of a community effort in allocating resources, as well as advocating in larger numbers to meet the needs of African American educators to be successful and fulfilled within their career. A broader

presence of marginalized diversity can increase support, and access. It is important to encourage and embrace the efforts and contributions of African American educators to create safe spaces, as well as appropriately lead the efforts to incorporate and maintain such within the institution to strengthen collaboration, belonging, and resourcefulness (Jones *et al.*, 2021). This positive direction meets the challenges of being heard, having a sense of community, decreasing the sense of isolation, and being valued as they continue to teach and engage in research and scholarship within the academe.

3.5. Recognition of Membership

A crucial aspect of fostering a sense of community is not just individual feelings of belonging, but also formal recognition from administration and colleagues. Formal recognition refers to the deliberate acknowledgment, validation, and celebration of an individual's contributions, achievements, and perspectives within academia. This recognition extends beyond symbolic gestures, encompassing tangible practices and policies that affirm one's value, ensure equity, and foster an inclusive environment. Such acknowledgment solidifies an individual's status as a valued team member (Trespacios & Uribe-Florez, 2020). Membership emerges when individuals invest time, energy, or resources in a group, cultivating a strong sense of belonging. This mutual commitment involves an emotional connection that makes individuals feel genuinely part of something larger. Common deficiencies include a lack of actionable plans to increase African American representation in faculty and leadership roles, reliance on traditional evaluation metrics that undervalue the unique contributions of minorities, and insufficient accountability for departments failing to meet diversity and inclusion goals. Too often, diverse perspectives are dismissed as unwelcome challenges (Byrd, 2022). This lack of recognition is particularly pronounced for African American women faculty and counselor educators, who frequently encounter disparities in pay and rank compared to their non-minority peers (Griffin & Reddick, 2011; Hinton, 2010; Jones *et al.*, 2015; Shillingford *et al.*, 2013). When universities fail to acknowledge or address disparities, divisions can arise, undermining both membership and a sense of belonging. Therefore, explicit and equitable recognition of membership is essential to address these systemic challenges effectively.

A sense of belonging/community can improve retention starting as early as faculty orientation (Green *et al.*, 2009). During orientation, faculty get a "first impression" of the work culture and can also begin to develop a connection with the existing faculty and administration. In an online setting, it can be particularly difficult to develop a relationship without some form of orientation, rather online or face to face. In addition to being oriented, regular communication, inclusion of input on various issues, and clarity on job duties were also found as important tools in improving a sense of community as it relates to recognition of membership (Green *et al.*, 2009; Ferencz, 2017). Traditional educational settings, specifically counseling programs, should take these aspects into consideration when addressing issues within the academe.

4. Conclusion: Advantages of Fostering Sense of Community

A lack of community for African American faculty in online education seems to have profound implications. The online environment can already be isolating, and without a supportive community, African American faculty may feel particularly alone. A lack of connection to colleagues can lead to decreased job satisfaction and increased burnout. Community members often share knowledge and resources, which can be crucial for career advancement. Without a strong sense of community, faculty may feel like outsiders or tokenized. Isolation and lack of support can contribute to increased stress, anxiety, and depression.

Institutionally, a lack of community can lead to higher faculty turnover rates, especially among African American faculty. Without a supportive environment, the institution may struggle to retain and attract diverse faculty. A lack of community can negatively impact student success, as faculty may be less engaged and collaborative. A lack of support for African American faculty can damage the institution's reputation as a welcoming and inclusive place to work. Furthermore, it can lead to a lack of diverse perspectives in online education research and practice. Without a diverse faculty, students may not have access to the same educational experiences and opportunities to accommodate a diverse world.

Nevertheless, a strong sense of community for African American faculty in the counseling field is multifaceted. It represents more than just professional affiliation; it is a cornerstone of support, empowerment, and identity. A strong sense of community can provide a supportive environment to counteract isolation and burnout. Increasing cultural competence, a sense of community can also foster a shared commitment to serving diverse populations. A united front is also established to address any systemic inequities that may arise. Additionally, intellectual growth and knowledge production are stimulated through research and scholarship that contribute to the overall advancement of diversity within the counseling field.

The journey for any faculty in higher education is not an easy one, even more, the journey of African American educators has historically and continues to be disproportionately more difficult than their counterparts. African American educators' experiences of the aforementioned challenges of microaggressions, being valued and heard, as well as acquiring tenure are a small fraction of the difficulties represented. However, there is just enough concern to encourage more research and continued advocacy efforts to improve sustainability and lessen the inequality gap. Developing and maintaining a sense of community is seen as a way to alleviate some of these challenges by building/strengthening the connection that is felt by African American educators. This becomes a critical factor in supporting and ensuring equity, recognition, and longevity. It will serve as a valuable tool for counselor educators, as they look for ways to secure tenure, engage in research, and become advocates and experts within the academe.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

References

- Abinoja, L. D. (2023). Intersectionality: The Experience of Race and First-Generational Status on Sense of Belonging. Doctoral Dissertation, University of Illinois at Chicago.
- Ahmad, S., Mohd Noor, A. S., Alwan, A. A., Gulzar, Y., Khan, W. Z., & Reegu, F. A. (2023). Elearning Acceptance and Adoption Challenges in Higher Education. *Sustainability*, *15*, Article 6190. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su15076190>
- Arday, J. (2018). Understanding Race and Educational Leadership in Higher Education: Exploring the Black and Ethnic Minority (BME) Experience. *Management in Education*, *32*, 192-200. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0892020618791002>
- Arnold, N. W., Crawford, E. R., & Khalifa, M. (2016). Psychological Heuristics and Faculty of Color: Racial Battle Fatigue and Tenure/Promotion. *The Journal of Higher Education*, *87*, 890-919. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2016.11780891>
- Avent Harris, J., Trepal, H., Prado, A., & Robinson, J. (2019). Women Counselor Educators' Experiences of Microaggressions. *The Journal of Counselor Preparation and Supervision*, *12*, Article No. 2.
- Baran, E., & Correia, A. (2014). A Professional Development Framework for Online Teaching. *TechTrends: Linking Research & Practice to Improve Learning*, *58*, 95-101. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11528-014-0791-0>
- Bradley, E. G., & Mead, N. E. (2022). Underrepresented Faculty Mentoring at a Distance: Program Implementation and Evaluation. *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning*, *30*, 142-158. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13611267.2022.2031086>
- Byrd, D. (2022). How Diversity Fails: An Empirical Investigation of Organizational Status and Policy Implementation on Three Public Campuses. *Education Sciences*, *12*, Article No. 211. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci12030211>
- Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs. (2024). 2023 Vital Statistics Report. <https://www.cacrep.org/about-cacrep/cacrep-annual-reports-andvital-statistics-reports/#cacrep-vital-statistics-reports>
- Dade, K., Tartakov, C., Hargrave, C., & Leigh, P. (2015). Assessing the Impact of Racism on African American Faculty in White Academe: A Collective Case Study of African American Women Faculty. *The Western Journal of African American Studies*, *39*, 134.
- Davis, D. R., & Maldonado, C. (2015). Shattering the Glass Ceiling: The Leadership Development of African American Women in Higher Education. *Advancing Women in Leadership Journal*, *35*, 48-64. <https://doi.org/10.21423/awlj-v35.a125>
- DeCuir-Gunby, J. T., Johnson, O. T., Womble Edwards, C., McCoy, W. N., & White, A. M. (2020). African American Professionals in Higher Education: Experiencing and Coping with Racial Microaggressions. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, *23*, 492-508. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2019.1579706>
- Dollarhide, C. T., Mayes, R. D., Dogan, S., Aras, Y., Edwards, K., Oehrtman, J. P. et al. (2018). Social Justice and Resilience for African American Male Counselor Educators: A Phenomenological Study. *Counselor Education and Supervision*, *57*, 2-17. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ceas.12090>
- Ferencz, T. (2017). Shared Perceptions of Online Adjunct Faculty in the United States Who Have a High Sense of Community. *Journal of Educators Online*, *14*, 55. <https://doi.org/10.9743/jeo.2017.14.2.6>
- Frazier, K. N. (2011). Academic Bullying: A Barrier to Tenure and Promotion for African-American Faculty. *Florida Journal of Education Administration & Policy*, *5*, 1-13.

- Golash-Boza, T. (2016). A Critical and Comprehensive Sociological Theory of Race and Racism. *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*, 2, 129-141. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2332649216632242>
- Grant, C. M. (2012). Advancing Our Legacy: A Black Feminist Perspective on the Significance of Mentoring for African-American Women in Educational Leadership. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 25, 101-117. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2011.647719>
- Green, T., Alejandro, J., & Brown, A. H. (2009). The Retention of Experienced Faculty in Online Distance Education Programs: Understanding Factors That Impact Their Involvement. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, 10, 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v10i3.683>
- Griffin, K. A., & Reddick, R. J. (2011). Surveillance and Sacrifice: Gender Differences in the Mentoring Patterns of Black Professors at Predominantly White Research Universities. *American Educational Research Journal*, 48, 1032-1057. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831211405025>
- Hale, N., & Bridges, C. W. (2020). The Experiences of Counselor Educators Transitioning to Online Teaching. *Journal of Educational Research and Practice*, 10, 145-160. <https://doi.org/10.5590/JERAP.2020.10.1.10>
- Han, I., & Onchwari, A. J. (2018). Development and Implementation of a Culturally Responsive Mentoring Program for Faculty and Staff of Color. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Partnership Studies*, 5, Article No. 3. <https://doi.org/10.24926/ijps.v5i2.1006>
- Hinton, D. (2010). Creating Community on the Margins: The Successful Black Female Academician. *The Urban Review: Issues and Ideas in Public Education*, 42, 394-402. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-009-0140-3>
- Holcomb-McCoy, C., & Bradley, C. (2003). Recruitment and Retention of Ethnic Minority Counselor Educators: An Exploratory Study of CACREP-Accredited Counseling Programs. *Counselor Education and Supervision*, 42, 231-243. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6978.2003.tb01814.x>
- Jay, S. (2018). *Race to the Top: An Investigation of the Challenges African-American Males Face in Higher Education*. Rowan University.
- Jones, B., Hwang, E., & Bustamante, R. M. (2015). African American Female Professors' Strategies for Successful Attainment of Tenure and Promotion at Predominately White Institutions: It Can Happen. *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice*, 10, 133-151. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1746197915583934>
- Jones, S. R., Cobb, C., Asaka, J. O., Story, C. R., Stevens, M. C., & Chappell, M. F. (2021). Fostering a Sense of Community among Black Faculty through a Faculty Learning Community. *Adult Learning*, 32, 165-174. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1045159520977909>
- Justin, B., & Heyliger, W. (2014). Academic Administrator Leadership Styles and the Impact on Faculty Job Satisfaction. *Journal of Leadership Education*, 13, 34-49. <https://doi.org/10.12806/v13/i3/rf3>
- Kenney, J. (2018). Surviving Whiteness and White People: The Coping Strategies of Black, Entry-Level Student Affairs Professionals. *Journal of Student Affairs*, 28, 121-134.
- Kossek, E. E., Buzzanell, P. M., Wright, B. J., Batz-Barbarich, C., Moors, A. C., Sullivan, C. et al. (2024). Implementing Diversity Training Targeting Faculty Microaggressions and Inclusion: Practical Insights and Initial Findings. *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 60, 50-86. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00218863221132321>
- Kumi-Yeboah, A., Dogbey, J., Yuan, G., & Smith, P. (2020). Cultural Diversity in Online Education: An Exploration of Instructors' Perceptions and Challenges. *Teachers College*

- Record*, 122, 1-46. <https://doi.org/10.1177/016146812012200708>
- Major, C. H. (2015). *Teaching Online: A Guide to Theory, Research, and Practice*. JHU Press.
- Marbley, A. F., Bonner II, F. A., & Tuitt, F. (2014). *Black Faculty in the Academy*. Taylor & Francis.
- Martinez, M. A., Chang, A., & Welton, A. D. (2017). Assistant Professors of Color Confront the Inequitable Terrain of Academia: A Community Cultural Wealth Perspective. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 20, 696-710. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2016.1150826>
- Matthew, P. A. (2016). *Written/Unwritten: Diversity and the Hidden Truths of Tenure*. UNC Press Books.
- McMillan, D. W., & Chavis, D. M. (1986). Sense of Community: A Definition and Theory. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 14, 6-23. [https://doi.org/10.1002/1520-6629\(198601\)14:1<6::aid-jcop2290140103>3.0.co;2-i](https://doi.org/10.1002/1520-6629(198601)14:1<6::aid-jcop2290140103>3.0.co;2-i)
- Nistor, N., Daxecker, I., Stanciu, D., & Diekamp, O. (2015). Sense of Community in Academic Communities of Practice: Predictors and Effects. *Higher Education*, 69, 257-273. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-014-9773-6>
- Nowell, B., & Boyd, N. M. (2014). Sense of Community Responsibility in Community Collaboratives: Advancing a Theory of Community as Resource and Responsibility. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 54, 229-242. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-014-9667-x>
- O'Meara, K., Templeton, L., & Nyunt, G. (2018). Earning Professional Legitimacy: Challenges Faced by Women, Underrepresented Minority, and Non-Tenure-Track Faculty. *Teachers College Record: The Voice of Scholarship in Education*, 120, 1-38. <https://doi.org/10.1177/016146811812001203>
- Ovetz, R. (2020). The Algorithmic University: On-Line Education, Learning Management Systems, and the Struggle over Academic Labor. *Critical Sociology*, 47, 1065-1084. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920520948931>
- Paludi, M. A., Martin, J. L., Gruber, J. E., & Fineran, S. (2015). *Sexual Harassment in Education and Work Settings: Current Research and Best Practices for Prevention* (pp. 135-155). Praeger/ABC-CLIO.
- Pedersen, P. B., Lonner, W. J., Draguns, J. G., Trimble, J. E., & Scharron-del Rio, M. R. (2015). *Counseling across Cultures*. Sage Publications. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781483398921>
- Pérez, J. F. C., & Carney, J. V. (2018). Telling of Institutional Oppression: Voices of Minoritized Counselor Educators. *Counselor Education and Supervision*, 57, 162-177. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ceas.12108>
- Perrotta, K. A., & Bohan, C. H. (2020). Reflective Study of Online Faculty Teaching Experiences in Higher Education. *Journal of Effective Teaching in Higher Education*, 3, 50-66. <https://doi.org/10.36021/jethe.v3i1.9>
- Settles, I. H., Jones, M. K., Buchanan, N. T., & Dotson, K. (2021). Epistemic Exclusion: Scholar(ly) Devaluation That Marginalizes Faculty of Color. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 14, 493-507. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000174>
- Shepherd, C. E., & Bolliger, D. U. (2023). Institutional, Program, and Professional Community: A Framework for Online Higher Education. *Educational technology research and development*, 71, 1233-1252. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11423-023-10214-3>
- Shillingford, M. A., Trice-Black, S., & Butler, S. K. (2013). Wellness of Minority Female Counselor Educators. *Counselor Education and Supervision*, 52, 255-269. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6978.2013.00041.x>

- Snow, W. H., Roller, K. M., Wade, W., & Snow, J. W. (2023). Increasing Access and Success in Online Education for Students with Disabilities. *Journal of Technology in Counselor Education and Supervision*, 3, Article 6. <https://doi.org/10.61888/2692-4129.1062>
- Terosky, A. L., & Heasley, C. (2015). Supporting Online Faculty through a Sense of Community and Collegiality. *Online Learning*, 19, 147-161. <https://doi.org/10.24059/olj.v19i3.473>
- Trespalacios, J., & Uribe-Florez, L. J. (2020). Developing Online Sense of Community: Graduate Students' Experiences and Perceptions. *Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education*, 21, 57-72. <https://doi.org/10.17718/tojde.690340>
- US Department of Education. Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics (2021, March). *Digest of Education Statistics. Full-Time Faculty in Degree-granting Postsecondary Institutions, by Race/Ethnicity, Sex, and Academic Rank: Fall 2017, Fall 2018, and Fall 2019*. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d20/tables/dt20_315.20.asp
- Wallace, D., Budden, M., Juban, R., & Budden, C. (2014). Making It to the Top: Have Women and Minorities Attained Equality as Higher Education Leaders? *Journal of Diversity Management (JDM)*, 9, 83-88. <https://doi.org/10.19030/jdm.v9i1.8625>
- Williams, M. S., & Johnson, J. M. (2019). Predicting the Quality of Black Women Collegians' Relationships with Faculty at a Public Historically Black University. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 12, 115-125. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000077>
- Wingfield, T. T., & Adams, R. D. (2019). Reflections of Two Black Early Career Social Work Educators Teaching Mostly White Students at Predominantly White Institutions. *Reflections: Narratives of Professional Helping*, 25, 16-31.
- Woo, H., Kim, H., & Park, S. (2019). Burnout and Turnover Intentions among Junior Counseling Faculty: Moderating Role of Mentoring. *Journal of Employment Counseling*, 56, 85-94. <https://doi.org/10.1002/joec.12114>
- Yao, C. W., & Boss, G. J. (2020). "A Hard Space to Manage": The Experiences of Women of Color Faculty Teaching Online. *Journal of Women and Gender in Higher Education*, 13, 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19407882.2019.1639197>