

Women of Color:

A Summary of Higher Education and Career Experiences

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How women of color view the value of their higher education degrees and ultimately how their status impacts their environment academically, economically in the workplace.



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Contents

1.	Introduction	1
2.	Women of Color in Higher Education	2
3.	How does a college degree contribute to career entry and progression of women of color in the workplace?	5
4.	Conclusion	7

The University of Phoenix Career Institute™ develops research-based solutions that break down broad, systemic barriers Americans face in their careers. To inform its ongoing mission, each year the Institute fields the Career Optimism Index™, one of the most comprehensive studies on career perceptions to-date, providing insights into workforce trends to identify solutions that support American workers. Authored by University of Phoenix College of Doctoral Studies researchers and faculty, this whitepaper series explores the research from the Career Optimism Index at a deeper level, exploring the “why” behind the data.



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1. Introduction

This paper emerged from a need to know how women of color viewed the value of their higher education degrees and ultimately how their status impacts their environment academically, economically in the workplace. There is extensive literature reflecting the status of women of color in higher education, how they persist in obtaining an education, the cost of their pursuit to improve their lives and the impact of their role in the workplace after obtaining their degrees. They continue to seek opportunities for growth, pave the way for others behind them, improve their socio-economic conditions and use their voice to resolve long standing disparities and overcome challenges and barriers to success. Their limited academic readiness, preparation and level of mentoring may contribute to barriers influencing their success in higher learning institutions.



The data acknowledges the challenges of women who seek more and do more as a result of their aspirations to obtain higher learning and assume positions of leadership in areas where they are underrepresented and often ignored as they approach and break through many of the proverbial glass ceilings. Through relevant research and a recent study conducted by the University of Phoenix's Center for Workplace Diversity and Inclusion Research (CWDIR), this report highlights the numbers, conditions, values, and experiences that impact women of color in higher education and their presence in today's workforce.

2. Women of Color in Higher Education

Students of color in higher education make up 45.2% percent of the undergraduate student population and 32.0% percent in of the graduate students of colorpopulation (American Council on Education, 2019; 2020). Approximately 45% of undergraduate students are students of color: Hispanic/Latino: 20%; Black/African American: 14%; and Asian/Pacific: 7% (Brown, 2019). Yet, the Hispanic/Latino population is seeking levels of higher education at an increase of 13%, whereas Black/African American students are less likely to enroll in college shortly after graduating high school with an increased rate of 1.1 percent (American Council on Education, 2019; 2020).

Overall, 43% of Americans believe they are not receiving fair compensation (UOPX, 2021). Further, women of color often encounter increased disparities in this area. The number of Black/African American (21%) and Latinx (20%) women earning an associate's or bachelor's degree by age 29 is lower than their white women peers (39%) (AAUW, n.d.). The percentage of women of color earning a four-year degree within six years is 55% of Hispanic/Latino students and 39.8% of Black/African American students in comparison to 64% of white students (AAUW, n.d.).

Many Americans believe they are most successful within their careers when prepared with the right tools (UOPX, 2021).

The credential or degree earned by women of color impacts their earning power and life opportunities. Yet, when considering degrees likely leading to high earning potential, there is a stark underrepresentation of women of color in engineering, computer and information science, business, management and marketing, social sciences, biological and biomedical sciences, visual and performing arts and history (Libassi, 2018).

According to the American Council on Education's 2019 and 2020 supplemental reports, higher education underserves and underrepresents students of color in multiple areas to include student enrollment, persistence, completion rates, borrowing, debt and unemployment after graduation. The educational indicators presented in the Council's report reflect the pervasive systemic barriers the Black/African American community

encounters in higher education which overwhelmingly impact their educational outcomes. Their academic preparation, readiness, mentoring and debt counseling for higher education impact their current status. Students of color academic preparation and readiness for higher education begins while in high school for many students. Some secondary schools and some higher education institutions provide formal programs to enhance student readiness and preparation for the rigors of college and university life (McKee & Delgado, 2020). Additionally, learning institutions are being challenged to provide curriculum and departmental support specifically recognizing and addressing the disparities impacting women of color at graduate and undergraduate levels (McKee & Delgado, 2020). In addition to the economic and health challenges presented during the Coronavirus pandemic, social justice and racial disparities have been at the forefront of the sustainability of students of color in higher education.

The Advancement of Women of Color in the Workplace

According to the University of Phoenix's Career Optimism Index, there are pervasive challenges facing working adults as they navigate their careers and women of color are not immune from these. There is significant disparity between the percentage of women of color within the U.S. population (18%) and the number that are represented among four-year degree holders (9%). This disparity is especially clear considering that white women represent only 31% of the U.S. population but comprise 41% of four-year degree holders (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019).

Women of color contend with inequities in terms of overall pay with them receiving only 61 cents for every dollar that their white male counterparts earn (Gobrien, 2019).

By disproportionately occupying lower-paid positions, overall pay of women of color within administration is reduced resulting in them being paid less than 90 cents on the dollar across all levels including staff, professional, or administration, causing them to experience the intersection of two challenges—gender and race (Bischel & McChesney, 2017).

Bias directed at women in the workplace is well documented as are the biases faced by people of color. Both areas are typically analyzed separately. To fully appreciate the level of difficulty women of color encounter, it is necessary to look at this from another perspective.



“Intersectionality” refers to the combination of discrimination or bias experienced by individuals with overlapping identities. The intersection of being female combined with being a person of color presents unique challenges (McChesney, 2018)

In some professions, women of color find they may be the only woman of color within their working groups. Being the ‘only’ in nearly any workplace automatically generates curiosity from colleagues and supervisors. People who describe themselves as being an ‘Only’ also say they feel more microaggressions in the workplace and often believe their decisions are questioned or challenged than white counterparts. According to a survey by Hunter-Gadsden (2018), 51% of ‘Women Onlys’ said they need to provide more evidence of their competence than others do during the normal course of business. By contrast, just 13% of men felt that way.

Further, women of color are far less likely than white colleagues to say they have allies at work (McKinsey & Company, 2020). Likewise, they are less likely than women of other races to say their supervisor advocates for them when new opportunities arise at work. Women of color report having fewer interactions with senior leadership, adding to their perception of not having an equal opportunity to advance at work.

3. How does a college degree contribute to career entry and progression of women of color in the workplace?

Our Study

A university self-study was conducted to examine how women of color, who obtained a bachelor's degree from the University of Phoenix from 2014-2018, (1) utilize their degree and (2) determine value from their bachelor's degree conferred by the University of Phoenix. The self-study was conducted in two phases: Phase one utilized a quantitative, online survey to collect responses from 921 respondents. Phase two utilized qualitative interviews to collect more in-depth data from 32 female graduates of color.

Notable Findings

- Female graduates of color value their degrees in a variety of ways. Of note, 93% of the women of color surveyed reported a personal sense of accomplishment from achieving their degree. Additionally, 83% of the respondents saw themselves a role model in their communities and workplaces.
- The ability to challenge societal perceptions (stereotypes) about women of color and role modeling were emerging themes across most qualitative interviews. For example, the majority of participants discussed scenarios detailing how they believed they were perceived by colleagues and managers before obtaining their bachelor's degree and how they believed the degree allowed them to challenge negative stereotypes of women of color in the workplace and society.
- Many of the participants agreed that the positive value they noted most as a result of earning their degree was an enhanced sense of self-worth and the opportunity to advance their career. Thirty six percent of respondents mentioned receiving a promotion and 56% started a new job since graduation.

- Earning Potential/Job Stability/Employment Benefits were major reasons for returning to school and participants noted an actual impact in these areas after receiving a degree. Forty eight percent noted a positive impact of socioeconomic status. Over 10% of respondents have been seeking employment for 4-5 years.
- Fifty-four percent of respondents moved on to graduate studies after earning their bachelor's degree.

Many of the participants agreed that the positive value they noted most as a result of earning their degree was an enhanced sense of self-worth. Second to this was the value of earning status in their community. Some felt there was no influence or negative influence in earning their bachelor's degree.

Sample Qualitative Responses

- **I feel like for women of color to be knowledgeable and, and to be educated it just brings a lot more enhancement to their life both personally and professionally.**
- **I don't think that any amount of experience would've gotten me in the door without a degree. I think it kind of allowed me to be involved in conversations that I wouldn't typically be involved in as starting topics and things like that. And my degree also put me in certain rooms that non-white people are rarely able to get in into.**
- **When he found out that I had a degree, it put slightly more value to me, as not just a person, but as a potential coworker.**

4. Conclusion

The evidence is overwhelming. More than a conversation at the table is needed to address the challenges faced by women of color in higher education and the workforce. Strategic actions are needed to help address the many disparities noted by all researchers on the value and status of Women of Color in higher education. Strategic actions by schools, colleges, universities, businesses, the government, and all stakeholders are being challenged to create new ways to respond to the needs of Women of Color.

Information is power when appropriately used to make systematic changes to alter and repair the way we do business.

Mindsets must pivot to afford women of color the same opportunities that others sometimes take for granted as privileges. We are at the grassroots of making changes that impact the future for women of color and the nation. While 48% of prospective students may not see a clear path forward in their careers when entering higher education (UOPX, 2021), this study highlights various areas of value associated with obtaining a bachelor's degree. In addition to the suggestions presented in our discussion, it is imperative that our priority must also shift to make this a matter of national importance.



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