

The cover features several stylized, light green leaf motifs scattered across a pale yellow background. These motifs are simple line drawings of leaves on a stem, appearing in various orientations and sizes.

# AFRICAN AMERICAN CULTURE AND HERITAGE IN HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

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**Kassie Freeman**

 *Greenwood*  
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African American  
Culture and Heritage  
in Higher Education  
Research and Practice

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# African American Culture and Heritage in Higher Education Research and Practice

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Edited by  
Kassie Freeman

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Figure 6.1 from the article "Learning in Institutions of Higher Education" by Dr. Lemuel W. Watson, Illinois State University, published in *Planning & Changing*, Fall/Winter 1996, Volume 27, No. 3/4.

In memory of my great-grandfather, Matthew Freeman;  
my grandparents, Estella and Emmitt Wilson  
and Missouri and Felix J. Freeman;  
and to my parents, Joseph and Laretta Freeman  
for their undying belief in the power of education  
and for their passing on to me the importance of the  
power of the belief in a Supreme Being

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# Introduction

*Kassie Freeman*

The inspiration for this book came from two sources: the book *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, written by Carter G. Woodson (1933), and the ideas expressed by Chinua Achebe, African novelist, in an interview with Bill Moyer. In his book, Woodson wrote, "The Negro will never be able to show all of his originality as long as his efforts are directed from without by those who socially proscribe him. Such 'friends' will unconsciously keep him in the ghetto" (p. 28). In his interview with Bill Moyer, Achebe recounted how that when he read the novel *The Heart of Darkness*, he was cheering on the hunter until he realized that he was one of the savages being described. Both Woodson and Achebe were describing the importance of each culture telling its own story and/or how the storyteller shapes the imagination and beliefs of those who read or listen. As Achebe discusses, the story can even influence those being negatively written about to subconsciously accept the beliefs of the writer, and, as Woodson indicated, the one who tells the story can unconsciously keep African Americans in the "ghetto."

As an African American storyteller of higher education research, I am amazed at how the educational "story" portrays African Americans—labeling us, for example, as "at-risk," "underachievers," and "unintelligent"—and like Achebe, I recognize that I am one of those individuals being described. I can say with absolute confidence that the African American culture is often inadequately depicted in higher education research, or our cultural perspective is often altogether missing. Although Ogbu (1978), Banks (1988), and other anthropologists and multiculturalists have been writing about culture for some time, not until I began my research study on a group of African American high school students across cities and school types did the research stories that they told about their wants and desires for higher education make me clearly realize the necessity for including culture and heritage in higher education research, for their stories provided an



originality, as described by Woodson (1933), that is often not captured by researchers.

Culture and heritage—why are they necessary characteristics to consider in research and policy making? Through culture, individuals' realities are constructed. Ogbu (1988) indicated that people involved in social policy and intervention programs tend to think of culture as what is in a person's immediate environment or family. However, culture, as defined by Ogbu (1988), "is a way of life shared by members of a population. It is the social, technoeconomic, and psychological adaptation worked out in the course of a people's history" (p. 11). As Brown (1963) said, "The simple fact is that people usually think, feel, and act as they do because they were brought up in a culture in which these ways were accepted, not only as good and right, but as natural. It is the sum total and the organization or arrangements of all the group's ways of thinking, feeling and acting" (pp. 2–3). As such, Brown further stated, "In insisting that cultures must be studied as wholes we are really saying that no custom, belief, or behavior can be understood out of its social or cultural context" (p. 15).

Cultural context, then, can be defined as interrelated characteristics that provide a perspective—frame of reference—for understanding individuals' and/or groups' ways of knowing and being. These interrelated characteristics generally include the sum total of the make-up of individuals. By way of example, cultural context is to the individual as conceptual framework is to research. When either is missing, the purpose, clarity of meaning, or sense of direction seems to be unclear or lost. Therefore, when research is absent a cultural context, it is like a missing part of a puzzle. Findings and policies can never be clear because essential parts (the why and how) of the meaning are absent.

For those who argue that all groups in America should be studied under the rubric of the American culture, such an argument underestimates the heritages and frames of reference of different culture groups. For some time, Banks (1988) has indicated that "certain perspectives, points of view, and frames of reference are normative within each culture and microcultural group" (p. 77). While it is not the case that every individual in a group holds a particular view, it does mean that some perspectives occur more frequently within a cultural group than do others (Banks, 1988, p. 78). When research is conducted out of cultural context, findings and applications are often misunderstood or misinterpreted.

Consequently, who conducts research and where and how it is produced have tremendous implications for both the authenticity and the outcomes of research findings and public policy. Programs are developed and instituted, court cases are influenced, and funding patterns for institutions of all types are established based on the outcomes of research, whether from the very basic level of statistics or from full-scaled commissioned studies authorized by different agencies.

Research that has been conducted on African Americans has most often been conducted by individuals unfamiliar with the historical and cultural considerations of African Americans. For example, the most frequently quoted authors writing on African Americans in higher education are non-African Americans. African and

African American researchers such as Ogbu (1988) have indicated that to fully understand the achievement motivation of different cultures, it is necessary to consider differences in historical and structural experiences and the way values are transmitted and acquired. More specifically, researchers often do not begin with a good knowledge and understanding of the conceptual systems of African Americans. Consequently, programs, court cases, and funding patterns often are decided based on assumptions that lack a cultural context and that have been based on deficit models (what African Americans cannot achieve) that have been developed by non-African Americans.

This historical system of knowledge production and dissemination, where non-African Americans have conducted and disseminated information, has severely minimized the capabilities of, underestimated the potential of, and prescribed inappropriate remedies for African American youths at all educational levels.

At the higher educational level, researchers have tended to focus on increasing the motivation and aspiration of African American students in higher education, excluding cultural considerations. The prescription for attracting and retaining African American students, faculty, and administrators has been based on models that have paid little, if any, attention to the heritage and culture of African Americans. Moreover, through their policies and practices, policymakers and educators alike have tended to attach the "at-risk" label to non-Asian minority students due to perceived personal and family factors defined by traditional models. Few studies, however, have examined models that could influence African American students' academic achievement and movement through the educational pipeline based on their cultural characteristics.

Books on race and minority issues in higher education are in abundance. As well, there are books written specifically about different aspects of African Americans in higher education, such as those written by Nettles (1988) on the Black undergraduate experience in America, Gurin and Epps (1975) on a study of students in historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), Allen and Epps (1991) on Black students' experiences at White public and historically Black public universities, and Fleming (1984) on the different experiences of Black students at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) and HBCUs. However, this book is a first attempt of some of the most noted African American senior scholars, promising junior scholars, and graduate student researchers to address research and policy issues specific to the culture and heritage of African Americans. In particular, this book provides a cultural context for examining research and addressing policies related to African Americans. It addresses a much neglected area in higher education research literature.

Different from other books, the intent of this book is to suggest the importance of including a cultural context for those who research and write about African Americans. The authors who contributed chapters for this book specifically wrote about some aspect of the African American culture. The book examines such questions as, What is the relationship between African Americans' culture and experiences, and how should their culture be integrated into research and practice?

How do African Americans' intra- and interrelations differ in higher education? How does understanding the African American culture as it relates to higher education research enhance policy making and practice? What role do HBCUs play in African Americans' participation in higher education? What are the policy and practice implications of past and current research on African Americans in higher education?

To address these and other questions, the book has been divided into three parts: Part I—Considering African American Culture in Higher Education Research; Part II—Examining African American Higher Education Research Issues and Paradigms; and Part III—Addressing Higher Education Policy and Practice as They Relate to African American Culture. In order to set the context for this book, Reginald Wilson provides an overview of African Americans' participation in higher education. In Part I, Raymond A. Winbush provides a perspective on research paradigms for reflecting on a Black world view. Mia D. Alexander-Snow more specifically discusses aspects of the African American culture, while Tamela M. Heath examines integrating cultural influences into research and practice as they relate to African American students and their self-concept development. Part I is concluded with Carolyn J. Thompson's writing about the implications of the historical origin of change on African Americans in higher education.

The authors in Part II tackle some of the pressing African American higher education research issues, and in each case, they provide a cultural context. Walter R. Allen asks who shall control the minds of African American students and provides a study to examine the question. Lemuel W. Watson provides a conceptual framework to consider for enhancing students' educational gains. Lori S. White discusses the issue of Black student identity and community. Sybril M. Bennett reviews the issue of self-segregation. To explore the issue of increasing African American faculty presence in PWIs, William B. Harvey reviews it from an "unnatural" perspective. In the last chapter in Part II, James Earl Davis examines a perspective to assess cultural capital and the role of HBCUs in educational reproduction.

Finally, the writers in Part III address higher education policy and practice as they relate to African American culture. Wynetta Y. Lee provides decision-making processes for the meaningful involvement of African Americans in policy, practice, and performance. Related to that same topic, Bruce Anthony Jones asks the question, Is the relationship between evaluation effort and institutional culture like mixing oil and water? In the next two chapters, my research and Clancie M. Wilson's research explore two particularly troublesome areas concerning policy and practice as they relate to African Americans. I examine African Americans and college choice, and Wilson examines higher education and teacher preparation. In the last chapter, Beverly Lindsay addresses the topic of higher education polices and professional education in American Black Colleges. The book ends with my concluding thoughts.

We hope this book will be useful to educators and policymakers as they seek to understand issues related to African Americans in higher education. It has been

our intent to provide a book that could particularly be useful in higher education courses, including foundation, research, and policy courses, as it provides a context unique to African Americans. For policymakers, we hope this book will be useful as they think about targeting resources, both financial and service-oriented, for African Americans' pre- and postsecondary educational needs. As more colleges and universities are including multicultural courses, we want this book to be useful as a supplementary text in providing a perspective on topics related to African Americans.

This book has been a family affair from the beginning to the end. It has come about through mutual admiration, respect, and friendship. We hope all of those who read it will find it informative and useful.

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