Of all groups, as bona fide intellectuals, [African American women] are the furthest removed from society’s expectations of their place, the least expected to succeed on merit, and the most vulnerable to insult.

Nellie Y. McKay

Introduction

In one of the earliest studies that examined the climate for African American women scholars at predominantly white institutions (PWIs), Moses (1989) declared that their professional development or job satisfaction was not achieved without constant struggle. The findings noted some of the typical problems experienced by African American women faculty and administrators:

1. constant challenges or being viewed as “other” and therefore believed to be inferior;
2. lack of professional support systems;
3. excessive scrutiny by peers, superiors, and students;
4. an unstated requirement to work harder to gain recognition and respect;
5. assumptions that positions were acquired through affirmative action and that therefore the faculty members lacked the necessary qualifications;
6. tokenism, that is, being viewed as a symbol of race rather than as an individual; and
7. denial of access to power structures normally associated with their position(s).

The last decade of the twentieth century seemed to foster an increase in research specifically focused on African American women in academe and the way the intersection of race and gender impacts their experiences (Benjamin 1997; Berry and
Mizelle 2006; Collins [1993] 2000; Cooper 2006; Gregory 1999; Mabokela and Green 2001; Turner 2002b). African American women scholars are often faced with multiple marginality (Turner 2002b), where they may be accorded a particular status or subjected to certain treatment due to their race and gender. As a result, the experiences of African American women scholars at PWIs are distinct from those of their male counterparts.

Additionally, the fact that the “double minority” status (Stevenson 1993) of African American women may be perceived as an advantage in the hiring process may result in the presumption that gender and race were the primary reasons for these women securing positions in academe, rather than their competence as scholars, teachers, and/or researchers. As a consequence, the actual skills, expertise, and accomplishments of African American women scholars may be dismissed or ignored. That presumption may also affect the way students see African American female faculty at PWIs. hooks (1994) asserts that white students view African American women faculty as the “mammy” and, because of that, expect that they—regardless of their educational attainment or occupational status—will assume various caretaker roles. Daufin (1995) concurs and explains that since some white students can only imagine African American women as servants or caretakers, they may be unable to accept or adjust to the idea of having to work for African American women faculty. Those students may resent an African American woman who has power over them and is in a position of authority; the result may be lower-than-average student evaluations and an increased number of complaints regarding assignments and overall teaching competence.

Subtle messages of inferiority and incompetence from university administrators and faculty may reinforce the students’ negative perceptions of women of color (Stevenson 1993). As a result, women faculty of color may encounter deans and department chairs who fail to support them when faculty/student conflicts arise. Wright and Dinkha (2002) found that some women faculty of color were pressured to make grade changes to accommodate students who voiced strong objections, which only succeeded in creating a hostile and unhealthy climate. As Gregory stated, “It is evident that we still have much work to do to encourage the permanence of African American women scholars; regardless of talent, a faculty member cannot reasonably function in an inhospitable academic environment” (1995, 96).

It is critical that the experiences of African American women scholars be prominently featured and recognized, given the challenges that they may face as a result of what Stanley (2006b) terms “double bind” syndrome—the combination of being a woman and a woman of color. By conducting and advancing research on African American women in higher education, institutions can become more aware of their challenges as well as their successes. This essay gives voice to the experiences of “Professor Andra,” an African American female faculty member. Andra was the only female among the sample participants of a study that explored the experiences of African American faculty who were formerly employed at Urban University (the pseudonym assigned to the institution), a PWI. The narrative describes Andra’s encounters in her former academic department at Urban, her presumed incompetence, and her eventual decision to leave the institution. The essay also highlights the strategies that helped Andra to cope in what was sometimes a hostile environment and offers recommendations that may lead to creating a more welcoming climate.
Methodology

Johnsrud and Sadao (1998) addressed the difficulty of designing and conducting research that has as its focus ethnic and minority faculty members (which they defined as Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Hawaiian, Filipino, black, Hispanic, Native American and Pacific Islanders). The number of respondents is often small; therefore, quantitative methods are not always applicable to this kind of research because accurate conclusions cannot be drawn. Additionally, simply categorizing and reporting findings based on ethnicity, gender, rank, or discipline can lead to a loss of the individual aspects of the participants’ experiences, as well as their differences.

The potential loss of the unique aspects of ethnic and minority faculty members’ experiences is particularly serious with African American women because much of the research on this population has traditionally been subsumed under such topics as women, women and minorities, or people of color (Carter, Pearson, and Shavlik 1987–88; Moses 1997; Rains 1999; Turner 2002b). As Hine pointed out, historians assumed that the experiences of black men applied to black women and the history of white women likewise related to black women. As a result, “it was left to the small number of black women scholars to insist that black women’s experiences, precisely because of their race, gender, and class, were different and distinct in fundamental ways from those of black men and white women and deserved to be studied in their own right” (1997, 333).

Gordon (1992) suggested that voice scholarship helps to illuminate the experiences of persons of color in the academy, and the use of qualitative methodology responds to critical questions raised by scholars of color about the way research is conducted in communities of color since the lack of voices there reduces the usefulness of the knowledge that we can gain from the individuals’ experiences (Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995). Errante (2000), hooks (1994), Kvale (1995), and Lincoln (1995) also emphasized the value and significance of using qualitative and interpretive inquiry to listen to persons of color. Lincoln (1995) declared that researchers must strive to “fairly listen to and portray voices, particularly disenfranchised ones” (283) so that those previously silent voices can be heard. Delgado (cited by Tate 1997) concurred and argued that the stories of persons of color come from a different frame of reference, which therefore gives them a voice that is different from the dominant culture and deserves to be heard.

To facilitate exploration of the faculty experiences, open-ended interview questions in a semistructured format were used. The initial interview with Andra was conducted in person at the institution where she is currently employed; the interview was audiotaped and lasted approximately ninety minutes. A follow-up interview, which was also audiotaped, was conducted via telephone and lasted sixty minutes; the interviews were transcribed, coded, and analyzed to identify themes and determine the meaning that Andra attached to the experiences. Analyses were conducted immediately so that data collected from the initial interview could help to formulate the questions for the follow-up session.

Participant Profile

Prior to her employment at Urban University, Professor Andra was working as a faculty member at an institution in the southeastern part of the country; during her fourth year of employment, an administrator of Urban University’s School of Health and Human Services (SHHS) visited Andra in an effort to recruit her.
Andra stated that the opportunity sounded very attractive and that—in terms of the recruitment process—she received a “full court press.” The offer came along at a time when Andra was ready to advance her career and professional development:

I started as a lecturer, and you know you’re worried about your contract all the time; then eventually I was an assistant professor, and then I just thought, okay. I was just ready to leave the institution when the representative from Urban showed up. It was a good opportunity. I thought, ‘Oh, okay. This is not bad.’ And, at that time, the program I was in was a very small program, and I wanted to spread my wings a little bit, so I did want to be at a larger institution. So that was it. That and the kind of interest they showed looked very attractive.

And so, armed with fifteen years of practical experience in the mental health field, a PhD from an institution on the East Coast, and prior teaching experience at a large public university, Andra accepted the position at Urban. Her research interests included community mental health practice, program development and evaluation, clinical practice with overwhelmed families and individuals across the life span, and diversity. When Andra joined the faculty as a tenure-track assistant professor in the SHHS at Urban, she was recruited as one of a cohort of several other African American faculty members by the dean of the school at the time: “They did something very smart at the School of Health and Human Services, and you have to give Solomon a lot of credit for this; he decided enough talking about we can’t find any minorities, and eight of us were recruited at the same time, and so those early years it was really wonderful to have such a nice cohort of African Americans.” Note: At the time of our first interview, Andra was completing her first year after leaving Urban as a tenured associate professor at a small private institution on the East Coast where she was the only African American faculty member in her department.

Although she had more than ten years experience as a professor, Andra indicated that the first year at her current institution had probably been the best that she had ever had; she attributed that to her positive interactions with her colleagues, as well as the affirming nature of the institution:

People have extended themselves in ways that I’ve found unbelievable; in fact, I found it hard to trust. Because after the Urban experience, you know, you’re waiting for the knife to come out or the other shoe to drop. There is a sense of community, and there is a mission that’s been fused throughout the institution. The janitor can tell you what the mission of the college is—very proudly; every student here can tell you what it is. Its mission is service to humanity by developing students’ spirits, minds, and bodies. And they’re dead up serious about it. Anybody who comes to this college has to do some community service as a student.

Narrative

Andra was employed at Urban University for nearly ten years, where she achieved tenure and was promoted to associate professor one year prior to leaving the institution; and while the move to Urban was initially a positive one for Andra, it became more stressful over time: “The early years were not nearly as stressful as the later years. I think at first you’re just trying to know each other, and we did have this
supportive network. We were so happy just to be with each other learning the system. Then after a while, you begin to see little things.”

Wright and Dinkha (2002) stated that women faculty of color undergo a number of experiences that may affect their productivity and ability to develop professional identities. “Environmental stressors not only influence their ability to make valuable contributions but may over time encourage them to seek positions elsewhere or to leave the academy altogether” (102). After nearly ten years at Urban, Andra reached the point of no return and determined that she needed to leave the institution:

It was so stressful, and after a while I had no hope for change. There are just some things that need to be done at the school, and I didn’t see them happening. By the time I was going up for tenure, I knew that this was probably not a place that I could stay. But then you’re committed. It’s like, okay, I did all this work, you do this tenure thing, so I might as well. So the year after, I was just tired. I just could not—after going up; do you know what I mean? Start a big job search after all that, so I don’t know how else it could have played out, but the thing I did learn is to leave a place sooner, rather than later. So all of those things played a role; I just didn’t have any hope anymore.

Despite the fact that Andra left a department at Urban, where she was one of a five-member cohort of African American faculty, to work at an institution where she is now the only African American faculty member, she indicated that the trade-off was worth it because of the differences in climate of the two departments: “When you would tell people your reality at Urban, it would always be denied. You know, it was really kind of the cheese stands alone—it wasn’t as if you felt that you had any allies. We often talked about when we get off the elevator at the school, you could feel yourself just tensing up and just, okay, let me get ready to do battle. I don’t need this. And when I talked to this faculty [at her current institution], there was such a sense of camaraderie.” That image of preparing to do battle is also portrayed by an African American woman faculty member in the video Through My Lens (University of Michigan 1999), which captured the experiences of women of color faculty at the University of Michigan. In the video, the faculty member relates that each day she had to make decisions about what things are worth dying for and what things she needed to walk past or ignore in her work; Andra expressed similar sentiments as she reflected on her work life at Urban.

Working in a Challenging Climate

When faculty of color experience an academic workplace that is chilly and where they feel alienated, they will be less satisfied with nearly all aspects of their positions and work environments (Turner and Myers 2000; H. Astin et al. 1997). Establishing a critical mass of faculty of color in academic institutions is frequently cited and recommended as a strategy for minimizing feelings of alienation and cultivating a more welcoming climate (Branch 2001; Moody 2004; Stanley 2006a,b; Turner 2002a). The rationale behind this recommendation is that the very presence of other faculty of color in the workplace helps the scholars to become part of the campus community (Laden and Hagedorn 2000) and lessens their feelings of isolation. This was undoubtedly the thinking behind recruiting the faculty cohort of which Andra was a member; and in fact, Andra did emphasize that—in terms of the relationships
that she formed—her time at Urban was invaluable: “I really learned a lot there. I really learned a lot of the pitfalls of academic life. I developed some relationships there that I’ll have the rest of my life. So I’ll never regret that. I would say that in the beginning you’re hopeful. I think there’s a kind of honeymoon period and so that was okay. And then you start to say, ‘huh; something’s wrong with this picture’ as your awareness grows. The last few years were really painful, and I stayed too long.”

While hiring a critical mass of faculty of color to avoid placing one of them in solo status is recommended to facilitate their retention (Stanley 2006a, b; Moody 2004; Turner 2002a), the fact that a campus or department is ethnically and racially diverse in number doesn’t necessarily translate into an environment that is positive for faculty of color. Johnsrud and Sadao (2002) found evidence that a campus that had three times the number of minority faculty members than most institutions of its type still experienced instances of intolerance and exclusion. For women faculty of color at PWIs, that may mean encountering what Thompson and Louque (2005) termed a “culture of arrogance”: a climate that is hostile or unwelcoming. In Andra’s case, despite being a member of a cohort of other African American faculty, she reported incidents of invisibility, salary inequities, lack of support from administrators regarding students, and stereotypical comments and racist behavior from colleagues as well as students. Andra’s description reveals the climate that she and other faculty experienced in Urban’s SHHS:

It felt hostile, and you know some very directly racist incidents happened. At one point, people in the school—it was African Americans, and I think gays and lesbians—got Ku Klux Klan notes under our doors. Or sometimes just plain old racist things were said. Or they’ll tell you about how their momma and poppa and uncle and everyone else in their family hates niggers, but they don’t—that’s a quote. You just would be amazed at how direct it would get. So there were just some overtly, very challenging things that went on, and then there were some more subtle things.

William A. Smith contends that African Americans and other people of color experience racial battle fatigue as a result of encountering racism on a continual basis; specifically Smith characterized racial battle fatigue as “a response to the distressing mental/emotional conditions that result from facing racism daily (e.g., racial slights, recurrent indignities and irritations, unfair treatments, including contentious classrooms, and potential threats or dangers under tough to violent and even life-threatening conditions)” (2004, 180).

Andra detailed another incident that occurred while she was at Urban that would seem to contribute to racial battle fatigue and was very telling about the climate within her department:

We had a faculty member who really should have been asked to retire some time ago, and we were in a committee meeting. I was chairing, and Debra was sitting next to me, and we’re trying to move forward. He takes out the USA Today newspaper and begins to read a column, and I thought, you know, I don’t think this is appropriate. He’s reading it out loud, and it was tangential really—had nothing much to do with what the meeting was about—and so I asked him to put it away, copy it and send it around if you really want people to read it, and he went off. He went totally off on me.
Stood up, started spitting in my face, talking about “you people”: “What’s wrong with you people? If an African American person was reading next to you, you’d let it go on, and I just think that when you people get a little power, you abuse it.” And Debra is sitting next to me, and her leg is shaking. My white colleagues left the room—ran out. Yes, they did. Debra, bless her heart, she stayed and tried to defend me, but then he started attacking her. And that had a profound impact on me. I said, “Okay, I’m getting the picture.” This faculty member had just been bizarre, just had done awful things, and it was tolerated.

St. Jean and Feagin (1998) explain that while the phrase “you people” may not appear harsh to white speakers addressing African Americans, it can be offensive because it signals a lack of civility, and in this case, implied disdain for Andra as an African American. St. Jean and Feagin went on to report that “the US Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit handed down a decree that pervasive use of such phrases as ‘you people’ and related epithets are enough to prove that a workplace has a racially hostile climate” (129).

The respect that faculty of color garner from their peers may also play a role in creating a positive work environment. However, Andra indicated that some of her colleagues at Urban did not recognize that her expertise extended to areas beyond diversity: “I have twenty-seven years experience in mental health with people of color; I had this conceptualization about overwhelmed families, so I had lots of interests, but the only interest that I was ever given credit for was diversity. You just sit down and be black and you better be black in the way we were comfortable with.” Turner and Myers (2000) argue that one of the greatest frustrations for African American faculty is the realization that their visibility in their departments or at their institutions may be based solely on race.

On the other hand, Andra felt that there were times when Urban used faculty of color for its own gain, to reap the benefits of the cultural tax (Padilla 1994): “You’re used a lot for your race, and that just comes with the territory. They are going to trot you out and trot you around as their African American person, but that’s not considered in terms of your workload. It doesn’t count. They are going to expect you to mentor and take care of students of color, but you’re not going to get credit for that, either. I learned a lot. They wanted our visibility in the service arena, but they didn’t want to reward you for it.”

As Padilla stated when explaining the concept of cultural taxation, while there is an expectation that faculty of color will accept various service activities, the institution may fail to appreciate and/or recognize the service, particularly when it comes to promotion and tenure. While the service performed by African American faculty may significantly impact students’ success, Andra communicated the feeling that it was not appreciated by the institution: “I can tell you that if it was not for some of us, many of the students of color and some of the white students would have left. We were very student-centered, but that’s not rewarded, and there are so many things you do that aren’t recognized.”

**Interaction with Students**

A diverse faculty can provide all students with role models that represent various racial and ethnic groups. However, prior to entering college, students receive subtle
and not-so-subtle messages regarding persons from other racial and ethnic groups. Smith, Yosso, and Solórzano (2007) stated that the vast number of race-specific stereotypes to which white students are exposed prior to entering college likely affect their view of people of color. Andra described the way that hooks’ (1981) contention that African American women are viewed as the mammy stereotype applied to her own experience with students at Urban: “I always felt that many of them kind of underestimated me. It was almost like the mammy syndrome. They wanted me to be their mammy. ‘Oh, Mammy, I feel bad; take care of me, mammy.’ But they forgot Mammy had a brain and the same kind of PhD as others. Some nasty little things have happened in the classroom. You’re supposed to always be chuckling and nurturing no matter what they do. You’re not supposed to demand the same level of performance. ‘You’s the mammy.’”

Aguirre (2000) suggested that faculty of color often encounter white students whose perceptions are biased. One of the most prevalent biases is that the faculty member is simply an affirmative-action hire and, as a result, he or she becomes marginalized in the eyes of those white students. For some white students, their entrée into higher education may provide the first opportunity to interact with persons of color. Andra felt the issue should have been broached on her teaching evaluations: “Things went on in the classroom . . . . Very often we had people from Podunk, USA, who had never seen a person of color in any role of authority. That was very challenging, and when we would try to talk about that—I even wanted to put an item, a question of my own, on the teaching evaluations that tried to address that, but I was told absolutely not.”

Also in terms of classroom experiences, African American women faculty often describe instances of having their credentials questioned or challenged by students; this resonated with Andra: “Well, some people had a harder time than others, but I think you’re challenged about things like ‘how do you know that?’ or there is more testing and sort of questioning your right to give them anything less than an A.”

**Lack of Support for Faculty**

Stevenson (1993) asserted that women faculty of color may encounter administrators who sabotage the interactions that teachers have with students. Andra expressed discomfort with the school’s culture of valuing students over faculty: “The boundaries between faculty and students were really blurred in lots of ways, and that was something that we just were not comfortable with. It comes down to taking your word or a student’s word. In terms of faculty of color, the student is going to win that battle. The other thing is sometimes when you had to make very hard decisions and flunk a student, both directors would override that decision, so we would have just ridiculous people who never should have graduated; they would get out.” Stevenson (1993) also noted that department chairs and deans sometimes undermine faculty when asked to intervene in student/faculty or faculty/peer conflicts, particularly when they rebuff the explanations offered by faculty of color. An incident when Andra was facilitating a diversity group with students while at Urban illustrates the point:

I got pushed into doing this diversity group with these students, and it was one of the most painful experiences I’ve ever had with students. This student challenged me all the way down the line. In one meeting, the student got so angry [that] she threw down her knapsack and stomped out of the
They Forgot Mammy Had a Brain

room and slammed the door. It was awful. In fact, this student told me that African Americans didn’t know much about their own experience and that I ought to read Robert King’s *Oliver* because in her experience, whites have helped more. This is a lesbian student, and there was always the comparison. I even tried to say oppression is oppression. The shape is different. It’s apples and oranges, but they’re both fruit. And this is a filthy rich student, by the way, and nobody has ever suffered like she did, and there was some real poignant sharing by some of the African American students in the school, and she dismissed it.

So I went to the director of the graduate program, who had been one of the people kind of pushing me into it. I said, “I’m really having a problem.” She told me, “I don’t want to be triangulated.” And I thought, “What?” It just hit me that my word was not as good as that of this student. And the final slap in the face was that after this awful experience that was very painful for some of the African American students in the group, the director nominated this student for graduate student of the year, and she got that award at graduation. And frankly, that was the end of my relationship with that faculty member.

Thus, not only did the white student make disparaging remarks to a faculty member, but administrators discounted the effect of the incident on Andra as well as the African American students. The student’s behavior was subsequently reinforced and essentially validated when she was nominated for and eventually received an award.

**Interactions with White Female Colleagues**

While the comments from students cannot be excused, there was the expectation that white women faculty colleagues would be more culturally aware. Andra recounted patronizing comments from white female colleagues who believed their limited experience with the civil rights movement and work in an African American housing project meant that they were experts on matters of diversity:

There is one faculty member, for example, who is always saying how she worked with Dr. King and she marched in the ’60s. That’s her image of herself. She doesn’t want to hear about anything she’s doing now that is subtly racist . . . but you scratch underneath that surface, and the same stuff is there. We had another faculty member who’d say—and this used to drive us to distraction—“I worked in Cabrini Green Projects for one year, and therefore I know it all. There is nothing you can really tell me that I haven’t experienced.” I mean she would say things like this, and it takes more than a year in the projects to understand what’s going on.

St. Jean and Feagin asserted that negative comments and actions that African American women receive from white women are as numerous as those endured from white men, and that those comments are “one more way whites manipulate or demean the status and lives of African American workers” (1998, 127).

**When Race and Gender Collide**

As has been demonstrated, when race and gender intersect, there are challenges that distinguish the experiences of women faculty of color from those of her male
colleagues. As a result, African American women faculty may be marginalized, as illustrated by this experience Andra had:

There was a faculty meeting, and I was making comments, and it would be pretty much ignored. A white male would then make the same comment, and then everybody heard it—oh, isn’t that brilliant. So those kinds of things would happen quite frequently. You’re not heard, and myself and two other African American women faculty colleagues, we made the most noise, but people would literally not hear what we said, and then we would have a white faculty member repeat it, and they would react as if it was the second coming.

The double marginalization that African American women face can make it difficult to determine whether the reactions and behaviors directed at them are due to race, gender, or a combination of both (St. Jean and Feagin 1998). When asked whether she perceived the incidents she encountered resulted from race or gender, Andra stated unquestionably that she felt they were due to race: “I think when people look at us, they see a black woman, not a woman who is black, and so the first thing that they relate to is your race.” Indeed, St. Jean and Feagin (1998) found that in the majority of cases of gendered racism against black women, the women concluded that the discrimination was due to race, rather than gender.

Conversely, Andra also experienced what Rains (1999) calls designated visibility—unwanted visibility that is solely a function of skin color: “Well, your mistakes are noticed, very much so. And whatever shortcomings you have, they’re very, very visible. It’s just when you get to your achievements, somehow you become less visible, but any shortcoming you have is magnified to the nth degree.”

Support Systems
As a faculty member at Urban University, Andra was subjected to students who challenged her teaching methods, questioned her credentials, and disputed grades that they received; additionally, interactions with some of her colleagues were less than optimal. When Andra turned to administrators in her school for support, she either encountered resistance and/or felt that her concerns were ignored. As a result, Andra endured a work environment that was hostile and unwelcoming and fostered alienation. So how does a person cope? Two primary sources of support—a faculty cohort and peer mentoring—were vital to Andra’s professional survival during her years at Urban University.

The Faculty Cohort as a Counterspace
When Andra was recruited to Urban’s SHHS, she was one of an eight-member cohort of African American faculty members; at the time of her departure, five of the members remained. That group provided a venue for the African American faculty to share their common experiences, receive support, and engage in the collaboration that is often sought by African American faculty working at PWIs. Andra emphasized the importance of receiving support from and engaging with individuals who shared common histories, cultures, and experiences and who could truly be empathetic:

I think there is a common experience, so we really have and still do have—I mean we bonded very intensely through going through that same
experience. I mean Talia Newman is more like family; I speak to her mother on a regular basis, and she calls me “baby”—you know it’s like that. Grace Tilton and I are still very much in touch; Gianna and her whole family—we are still very much in touch. So I really developed some relationships there that I’ll have the rest of my life. So I’ll never regret that. Our kids are very close. So really, some profound relationships came out of that. So it was just wonderful not just personally but in terms of the kinds of ideas that we were able to exchange—we learned so much from each other.

It is not unusual for individuals to seek out other persons with whom they share similar backgrounds, cultures, and experiences (Bennett 1998; Feagin, Vera, and Imani 1996); this may be particularly significant for African American faculty at PWIs since they look to one another for support, validation, and reassurance. As a result, the faculty may create counterspaces, a term coined by critical race theorists Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2000); these are safe areas or relationships with other individuals with whom they share common experiences and where they will be encouraged and nurtured. That natural seeking of others with whom we have an affinity (Bennett 1998) explains why Andra indicated that for her, the cohort needed to be comprised of other African Americans: “You are more relaxed; you are more yourself, and you’re not doing the bicultural dance; you’re not watching every little thing you say when you have a good supportive network of your same group, there’s just nothing that can replace that.”

Mentoring

Mentoring as a form of support is believed to be essential to the career advancement and success of African American faculty (Diggs et al. 2009; Stanley 2006a, b; Tillman 2001; Turner and Myers 2000). For African American women faculty, it can be difficult to develop mentoring relationships (Cooper 2006; Woods 2001); however, Andra was the beneficiary of mentoring from a senior faculty member as well as peer mentoring.

Andra spoke highly of a senior faculty member at Urban who provided invaluable support and guidance, particularly during her preparation for promotion and tenure: “Yeah, I just would not have made it if it wasn’t for Grace Tilton. But you know, isn’t that an unfair responsibility to put on one person? I mean she did it gladly—I think because we really are good friends—but yeah, it was Grace, and my sense is that some of us would not have been tenured if Grace had not been on the committee.” The peer mentoring was a benefit of Andra’s membership in the faculty cohort; it also provided a venue for collaboration: “I think one of the things that did help me was having people—the cohort; again Talia and I are very close, and we write together; we have an article coming out, and we’re working on another one. Grace and I have presented together; we’ve got a really nice presentation that we do. Lola and I have presented together, so that’s what helped—the collaboration.”

Discussion

Mentoring relationships are particularly crucial for African American women faculty at PWIs since they can help to offset the challenges that the women will likely face as they move up the academic ladder (Cooper 2006; Gregory 2001; Locke 1997); mentors can provide needed encouragement and guidance, particularly
when the women find themselves in less-than-optimal academic settings. While Andra’s mentors were African American, there is literature that suggests mentors and mentees are not required to be the same race or ethnicity (Cooper 2006; Thompson and Louque 2005). In fact, Stanley (2006b) advocates the establishment of cross-race faculty mentoring relationships, stating that they aid retention and also prepare the mentees for conflicts that may arise when discussions about diversity occur.

Ultimately, African American female faculty scholars must determine which mentoring relationships work best for them. Ideally, several different relationships will be established, based on various factors (scholarship, interests, cultural experiences, race, and ethnicity) since one mentor cannot (nor should try to) meet the complex needs of the faculty member.

Harvey’s (1994) assertion that simply increasing the numbers of faculty of color is not enough to retain them is evidenced by Professor Andra’s experiences. Institutions must also work to change climates and cultures to ensure that they feel welcoming to persons of color. As long as departmental and/or campus climates fail to welcome faculty of color, retaining those faculty will remain a challenge (Yoshinaga-Itano 2006).

Andra described racist incidents and a hostile climate, which she felt the leadership of the school failed to acknowledge or address. She had worked at Urban University for ten years when she made the decision to leave; she came to Urban as an assistant professor in the SHHS but had earned tenure and promotion to associate professor one year prior to her departure. Andra was one of a five-member cohort of African American faculty in her school while at Urban and touted the benefits of working with and having the support of other African American faculty. The cohort aided her professional development and survival and helped her to cultivate and establish what she characterized as lifetime friendships. However, despite having the benefit of a same-race cohort, Andra cited the climate in the school as her primary reason for leaving the institution. She emphasized that her earlier years at the institution, under the dean who initially recruited her, were positive ones. However, a change in leadership altered the racial climate, and Andra felt that ensuring a climate that nurtured all the faculty was not a priority for subsequent deans.

While faculty of color often encounter climates that are hostile and less than ideal, Turner and Myers (2000) state that faculty generally leave unwelcoming institutions, rather than the profession entirely. They attribute this pattern to the high levels of satisfaction associated with an academic career. Andra’s experiences at Urban did not diminish her interest in teaching; rather, she sought a more welcoming environment at another institution. Although Andra is now employed at a school where she is presently the only African American faculty member in her department, she indicated that the environment is far more positive than the one she experienced near the end of her tenure at Urban University.

Summary and Recommendations

While at Urban, Andra had various support systems at her disposal, including a faculty mentor and membership in a cohort of African American faculty. However, her experience at Urban suggests that these personal and institutional support systems may not be enough to overcome a climate hostile to women of color. Therefore, the following is recommended:
1. prior to initiating search and recruitment, it is critical that administrators and leaders conduct cultural audits to assess the “temperature” of the climates in their academic units;

2. institutional administrators must accept responsibility for cultivating and providing an educational environment that welcomes and supports all its participants, regardless of race, ethnicity, or gender;

3. academic administrators and leaders must demonstrate that all faculty are valuable and competent members of the campus community;

4. administrators should examine their own knowledge regarding women faculty of color and the challenges that they may face at PWIs;

5. administrators should demonstrate their commitment to cultural competence and faculty diversity by modeling skills and behaviors that can be emulated; administrators should commit resources for faculty development that includes mentoring and community building; to counter or alleviate feelings of isolation, administrators need to explore ways that women of color faculty can become connected within academic units on campus and/or within the community;

6. since African American women faculty, as well as other women faculty of color, may be in departments or disciplines where they are the only minority member or one of a few, the institution should provide resources so that the women can attend conferences and/or join professional organizations where they can cultivate and build a community of support;

7. campus administrators should conduct exit interviews with departing faculty to determine the reasons they are leaving institutions and consult with faculty who have remained to identify factors that can aid retention.

Conclusion

Because gendered racism separates the experiences of African American women in higher education from those of their male colleagues, it is important to analyze the distinct experiences of African American women faculty and increase the awareness of the double marginalization that they face on campus. In addition, studying the experiences of African American women faculty may reveal successful strategies for thriving and surviving that may be useful to other women faculty of color as they advance professionally and can lead to thinking that will eventually presume that these valuable faculty members are anything but incompetent.