

# Graduate Pharmaceutical Education: An African-American Perspective

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**SUMMARY.** This paper reflects my experiences and concerns about graduate education, in particular, from the perspective of an African-American female. As a consequence of being a so-called "double minority" student, I have been provided with various opportunities as well as numerous migraine headaches.

As a minority in a majority institution, I have many unique needs that are generally not satisfied in such institutions. Understanding the concerns of minority students is definitely a prerequisite to providing an atmosphere for higher learning.

In this paper, I will attempt to express some thoughts—in reflections of my needs and concerns—that I think should be considered by institutions who are trying to provide support systems for minority students. In addition, I will offer some suggestions on how to make minorities feel welcome and part of the university system.

I can vividly remember (it was not so long ago!) when I had no idea that I would become a graduate student. Graduate education was the last thing on my mind as I actively pursued my Bachelor's Degree in Pharmacy. Needless to say, at some point, all of that changed. With the encouragement of my professors and the dean at Xavier University of Louisiana, I decided upon pursuing a doctoral degree in Pharmacy Health Care Administration. Thus, it all began.

Upon graduation from pharmacy school in May 1989, I matriculated to the University of Florida to begin my graduate studies. Although I was accepted in other graduate programs, I chose the University of Florida because of its strong commitment to minorities. The University is cur-

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rently doing a good job in providing a support system for minority students. For example, in June 1989, I attended a summer program which was sponsored by the Florida Board of Regents. The purpose of this convocation is to introduce minority students to the joys and rigors of graduate study. It was especially rewarding to me because it enabled me to get acquainted with other African-American students and to get a feel for the University as a whole. This summer program was run by the Office of Graduate Minority Programs.

This office also sponsors visitation programs that provide prospective minority graduate students with information about the University which is relevant in choosing an institution of higher learning. For example, during the visitation program, we were provided with general information about the university such as requirements for admission, housing, expenses, and financial aid. Arrangements were made for us to visit with faculty in our respective areas of interest. In addition, they acquainted us with the social and cultural aspects of the community and furnished us with a basic overview of what living in Gainesville would be like.

I cannot say enough about how much this administration and staff have helped and supported me, both in the past and at present. They have guided me through various problems that I have encountered in connection with the University. For instance, they showed me shortcuts in dealing with the administrative bureaucracy. Furthermore, they have provided me with additional monies such as supplemental fellowships when I was caught in financial binds. In essence, anytime I have had the need for some support, including emotional, social, or financial, there was always someone there to provide that needed support or to guide me in the right direction. As a matter of fact, were it not for these people, I might not be writing this paper today.

The University also houses the Institute of Black Culture which is an educational tool that facilitates Black awareness and enables all races to better understand African Americans and to appreciate their contributions to society. In the presentation of lectures, seminars, forums, tours, and class discussion groups, the institute assists in the joint venture of educating students about the history and cultures of Black peoples the world over.

When I began graduate school in the fall semester of 1989, I was somewhat surprised and perplexed at first. My concerns about and needs for African-American professors had never been more apparent. What I mean is that coming from a Black Catholic university, namely Xavier, I had never really felt the need to have African-American professors because they were always present. However, this was no longer the case.

All of my professors were white males with the exception of three white females in my department. It is sometimes hard for me to be optimistic about obtaining my graduate degree when there is no one around with whom I can fully identify. Even though I strongly feel that I do not lack the scholastic ability to succeed in graduate school, my motivation level occasionally reaches a new all-time low. I have attributed much of this low motivation to the lack of African-Americans in the role of pharmacy educators. Whenever I become overwhelmed with feelings of pessimism, I always turn to my undergraduate professors. They serve as my role models and as living proof that I too can become a professor.

Another situation that I have faced is that, time and time again, I have found myself to be the only African-American student in the classroom. Thanks to Xavier, I have felt neither intimidated nor inferior because of my self-confidence and the feeling of excellence that my alma mater has instilled within me. Nevertheless, I do experience feelings of loneliness. Despite the fact that my fellow students and professors are friendly and respectful, I always lack that feeling of relatedness. It gets especially difficult to learn when you are preoccupied with the fact that there is no one else like you around. It is really important to have other African-American students and professors so that there are people with which we can identify. This will not only benefit African-American students, but it will also enable all students to have a broadened educational experience.

These needs and concerns and feelings of being apart basically constitute my story. I am sure that other minorities have their own story, but I am confident that, at some point, our stories will share common elements. Nevertheless, I have tried to bring out some issues that concern me the most in regards to graduate pharmaceutical education. I have attempted to make known some things that should be considered by majority institutions who are trying to provide support systems for minority students.

First, it must be realized that there are unique forces which operate on African-American people that shape our approach to life. Due to many factors in our cultural background, our thinking styles are different. Second, educators must try to understand our cognitive processes and be able to incorporate this knowledge into their teaching. Third, educators should organize school curricula and programs with the primary purpose of meeting the needs of individual students. I think that this would have the significantly positive effect of providing an atmosphere that is conducive to learning. For instance, during a departmental seminar, I sometimes find myself in a position where I feel the need to "impress" my profes-

sors. Needless to say, this kind of unnecessary pressure, whether perceived or real, hinders my ability to perform. In light of such circumstances, those who are trying to support minority education must actively seek to understand the unique needs that shape our being. Finally, until the needs and concerns of minorities are really understood, the problems faced by minorities in majority institutions will never be resolved even on a partial basis. Institutions must make minorities feel welcome and an integral part of the university system.

In closing, I would like to offer a few recommendations to majority institutions who are trying to provide support systems for minority students. First, majority institutions need to actively recruit African-American professors and students. The university should sponsor at least two visitation programs per year that would expose students to what the university has to offer. In addition, universities need to have designated people who will go out to other schools with the expressed purpose of recruiting minority students. However, recruitment is only half of the story and the other half comprises my next suggestion. Recruitment should be followed by plans to retain minority professors and students. Drop out rates have posed an especially serious threat to many efforts to increase enrollment of minority students. One approach to help remedy this situation could be for universities to develop offices of graduate minority programs such as the one at the University of Florida. These offices would serve as sources of support and guidance for minority students. I think that such actions would represent a genuine effort, on the part of the institution, to include minorities as an essential constituent of the university system. Finally, majority institutions should seek to form affiliations with predominantly black universities. This cooperative endeavor could foster a relationship that would enhance the ability to attain a more broadened academic base for all individuals involved. For example, students and faculty from both schools could come together in forums and seminars where thoughts and ideas would be openly exchanged. This would be a learning process for everyone in that they learn from and about each other. In addition, this alliance could make the difficult tasks of both recruiting and retaining African-American professors and students one that can be more easily accomplished. I realize that these suggestions require much time and energy with very careful planning. Nevertheless, any institution that is really interested in providing support systems for minority students will find, in my opinion, that the end result of such hard work was really worth the effort.

In the meantime, however, I am going to continue to pursue a doctoral degree in Pharmacy Health Care Administration for many reasons. How-

ever, the primary impetus behind my obtaining a doctoral degree is so that I can serve as a role model to other African-American students. In addition, I am hoping that I can play a part in relieving other African-American students of some of the burdensome problems that I have had to bear.