

**VOICES OF BLACK  
GRADUATE DEANS IN  
ADVANCING GRADUATE  
EDUCATION AT  
HISTORICALLY WHITE  
UNIVERSITIES**

**Edited by** Henry T. Frierson

DIVERSITY IN HIGHER  
EDUCATION

**VOLUME 27**

VOICES OF BLACK GRADUATE  
DEANS IN ADVANCING  
GRADUATE EDUCATION AT  
HISTORICALLY WHITE  
UNIVERSITIES

# DIVERSITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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EDITED BY

**HENRY T. FRIERSON**

*University of Florida, USA*



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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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# LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS

<i>Suzanne Barbour</i>	Duke University, USA
<i>Amanda Bryant-Friedrich</i>	Wayne State University, USA
<i>Karen Butler-Purry</i>	Texas A&M University, USA
<i>Leandra Cate</i>	James Madison University, USA
<i>Twyla J. Cummings</i>	Rochester Institute of Technology, USA
<i>Michael Cunningham</i>	Tulane University, USA
<i>Shani Fleming</i>	University of Maryland Baltimore, USA
<i>Henry T. Frierson</i>	University of Florida, USA
<i>Emilia M. Hodge</i>	University of Florida, USA
<i>Carolyn R. Hodges</i>	University of Tennessee, USA
<i>Cherisse Jones-Branch</i>	Arkansas State University, USA
<i>Chevelle Newsome</i>	California State University, USA
<i>Mark J. T. Smith</i>	University of Texas at Austin, USA
<i>Linda M. Thomas</i>	James Madison University, USA
<i>Anissa Irvin Vines</i>	University of North Carolina, USA
<i>Roger J. Ward</i>	University of Maryland, USA

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# FOREWORD

Shirley M. Malcom

When I heard from Hank Frierson and Carolyn Hodges about their plans to convene Black graduate deans at Historically White Institutions (HWIs), I immediately offered AAAS headquarters as a place to meet in Washington, D.C. which is an attractive destination for leaders in higher education; there are always lots of people to see and agencies and departments to visit. The AAAS building is conveniently located at Metro Center, between the White House and Capitol Hill, and was already familiar to some of the deans since it is also the home of the Association of American Universities (AAU).

This was not the only time Hank Frierson and I had worked together on issues related to graduate education. We collaborated on a 2016 meeting of graduate deans and other institutional leaders held at Carnegie-Mellon University to discuss how to address the challenges of growing a diverse STEM faculty, a goal that we can only reach by closely re-setting the way we identify, recruit, mentor, prepare, retain, support, enable, and hire the faculty of the 21st century. We needed to home in on the opportunities and responsibilities of universities on how to do the hard work of creating a faculty culture of inclusion even as the barriers of unfavorable judicial rulings, state-level anti-affirmative action referenda, and a hostile political climate continued to mount. Frierson describes the establishment of the group in this volume and its growth over time as it moved from a small space to a much larger conference room in the AAAS building. Dean Hodges was a wonderful collaborator in this work. As a professor of German, her active engagement was always a reminder that STEM fields did not have a monopoly on low graduate participation and success levels for students of color!

What were the pathways of these deans into leadership roles in graduate programs? What did Black graduate deans at HWIs bring to the work of graduate education? And how did working together give these deans their “super-powers?” These are some of the topics explored in the chapters that follow.

## **BUILDING ON A BASE OF LIVED EXPERIENCE**

Though not a graduate dean, I was honored to be allowed to convene with this group. As a long-time advocate for diversity in STEM, especially in graduate education, I was eager to learn from their experiences. Of course, I had my own memories of the graduate schools I attended. But I did not feel comfortable building understanding on my own idiosyncratic path.

My experiences reflected that of so many Black people of my age who came late to the idea of graduate education. But unlike many of my Black colleagues whose K-12 education was in the segregated South, I received my undergraduate education at an HWI while most of my college-going classmates attended HBCUs.

I entered the University of Washington in 1963 as a pre-med major, a barely 17-year-old young Black woman from Birmingham, Alabama, traumatized by the city I left behind. Coming as I did from the Jim Crow South, I had had no experience interacting with whites or persons from any other racial/ethnic groups, either as fellow students or with faculty members. Having attended segregated schools that were “under-resourced” I expected that I would have to work harder than anyone else just to keep up and to demonstrate that I had the capacity to succeed.

UW required its students in pre-professional programs to declare a major, and I declared zoology which made me, at that time, the only Black undergraduate student in a department of 800 undergraduate majors; nor were there any Black faculty members or graduate students. Early in my senior year, I decided that I did not want to attend medical school. Making that kind of decision is tough, especially because I had been living with that career goal for some 10 years. I went to my adviser. “Why not academic science,” he asked. I had never thought about graduate school, obtaining a PhD instead and joining a college or university faculty. As I had never seen anyone who looked like me in that role, I had not imagined it possible. I respected my advisor, so his suggestion seemed like an affirmation of my value and my capacity to achieve this goal of obtaining a PhD degree.

When I agreed, he immediately sprang into action. Coming late to this decision there were things I had not done or experienced. He moved me into the departmental honors program, thus making me eligible to graduate “with distinction;” he urged me to take an honors seminar course where I would be forced to dig into primary literature; as a required field course, I signed up to take the course he was teaching that next term, “Natural History of Marine Invertebrates.” I had the opportunity to serve as a teaching assistant when in spring term many of the graduate students were unavailable, having left the campus to begin their field work at Friday Harbor.

My advisor provided a reference letter for my graduate school application to UCLA. I was not his best student, but he saw something in me and helped me see it within myself. For some of my high school classmates who attended HBCUs, their movement into graduate school was a lot more intentional and less accidental than mine. With professors who encouraged their attendance, many had the good fortune of seeing someone who looked like them in the faculty role. But the limited availability of graduate programs at HBCUs, especially in the sciences, meant that for those of us seeking doctorates in the late 1960s, we most often ended up at HWIs.

At HWIs, we found isolation; I was already expecting that. I also had a poor understanding of how to navigate this new graduate school space. Some of the

lack of understanding of what we needed in graduate school was because of what we did not get or did not know enough what to ask for!

My experiences were generations removed from today's students. Imagine my surprise as I heard many of the same issues and concerns being raised: how to finance and avoid graduate-related debt, how to stay on track, finding a caring and responsive mentor, dealing with the isolation and low expectations of others, and so on.

## CONSTRUCTING A NEW PATH

The things that would have benefited these future deans when they were in their graduate programs, the things that were missing for them, likely became part of the starting point for many. The cumulative administrative and leadership experiences they took on as faculty members or administrative professionals combined to provide exquisite preparation for the roles that these graduate deans later assumed. They became "students" of their own institutions to understand where power was held, how it was distributed and what they could do to leverage their positions to develop graduate programs that could work for all. And when they came together over the years, they learned from each other. The units they led varied widely – mostly masters, highly doctoral and everything in between. Their units carried different names and were packaged with different administrative units. At least one member of the deans group led a unit in which he had a tremendous amount of power over all aspects of the institution's graduate programs, controlling the stipends budget for the entire university! Most others navigated a more distributed system leveraging their resources "persuasively" and negotiating with the departments, colleges and other stakeholders to achieve institutional missions. They invested funding to incentivize doing things right and doing the right things in recruitment, in taking chances on students who did not necessarily fit the profile of the departments' admits, bridging support to give students, who were near the finish line, the gift of time and funding to write and complete their dissertations unencumbered by the need to support themselves from external sources.

The deans developed intervention programs, such as undergraduate summer research experiences, to close the gap between what students were bringing and what students needed to function successfully as graduate students, especially in the case of those from marginalized communities or under-resourced institutions. In some cases, the deans had to make special effort to make previously "invisible" pathways visible. In other cases, these deans had to take on the structures themselves as institutional programs were evolving, growing, shifting, right-sizing or where, in one case, programs had to be re-constructed/restructured following campus devastation and program disruption following Hurricane Katrina.

## **WHEN YOU'VE SEEN ONE GRADUATE PROGRAM. . . . .**

One of the authors reminded us, as she was reminded early on as a graduate dean, of the tremendous variability among graduate programs, including those led by the members of the deans group. Each dean's context was very different. But the variability across the programs became the group's "superpower!" The range of program structures has provided a wide array of stories, examples, and solutions to problems shared across the institutions whose graduate programs they have led.

The volume offers advice on program strategies, on connecting with other administrative structures, navigating relationships, finding allies, and much more. The authors focus on advancing their missions and promoting graduate programs that support success for all enrollees. But never far away is the whispered reality that they view their work through the lenses of their identities, and they and their work are viewed by others through those individuals lenses of identity who may have differing perspectives altogether. As Black scholars and professionals assuming these leadership roles, are they experiencing these positions differently? When they come in, is there more skepticism about their capability? Is there more pushback on their decision-making? Are they more likely to experience scape-goating? Are there more questions around their authority? And if they are women, are more barriers erected to hinder their successes?

The lenses that these highly accomplished, highly capable people bring to their roles have allowed them to see further and to frame their work differently. If they can take care that those most likely to be marginalized can succeed, all can succeed, and that should be viewed as a general principle.

In the past in other writings, I have bemoaned the fact that graduate education has lacked key metrics related to productivity and impact. Unlike at the undergraduate level, there had not been concepts of completion rates or of attrition or "failure to retain." People who leave graduate school have sometimes been assumed not to have been up to the task or to have changed their minds. In other words, the degree seekers failed. When those ideas prevail within a system, there is little appetite to consider how instead systems might have failed students. These deans dare to consider that perhaps we need to look a bit deeper, and then to do something. This is a major value to the voices that they bring to discussions of graduate education.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This volume acknowledges and pays tribute to three long-serving and contributing Black American graduate school deans. In the mid- to late 1980s, Russell Hamilton of Vanderbilt University, Mack Johnson of California State University, Northridge, and Claudia Mitchell-Kernan of the University of California, Los Angeles, were the first Black Americans to lead graduate education at historically white universities in the United States. Through their examples, those three scholars paved the paths for others to successfully follow as leaders in graduate education across the United States.

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# INTRODUCTION

Carolyn R. Hodges

*University of Tennessee, USA*

The graduate deans who have contributed to this work are all dedicated teachers and scholars who took on what is arguably one of the most complex jobs in higher education, that is, leading graduate and professional education across multiple programs, disciplines, and colleges. Whatever charges they were given by institutional leadership, be it to increase enrollment, enhance or reduce doctoral degree production based on labor market demands, revise policies to create efficiencies in degree production to combat attrition and long time-to-degree completion rates, find new resources to fund students, or restructure the graduate school governance and model of operation, they set about to “remap” graduate education in ways that would elevate the institutions’ effectiveness and status. In carrying out their charges these deans, all employed at historically white institutions (HWIs), resolutely pursued the goal of expanding the cultural and ethnic demographic of the graduate student population to grow and sustain a more diverse and inclusive work force. At the same time, many of them were leading in contexts where they themselves were minoritized, very often as the first of their race to hold the position at the institution and, in some cases, the single Black person within the upper level academic administration.

Concerns in particular that were constantly on their minds were: What strategies, methods, and policies need to be devised and implemented to increase the number of Black students matriculating into and completing graduate and professional programs? How can we ensure clear and trustworthy communications between graduate deans at historically Black colleges and universities and Black graduate deans at HWIs to substantially broaden participation in graduate education? How do we manage the ongoing challenges faced by Black graduate deans as change agents at HWIs? These are the questions which guided discussions in one of the early meetings of a group of eight Black graduate deans who, having interacted at meetings of the Council of Graduate Schools (CGS), first convened in 2013 as an informal special interest group with common interests and missions (Hodges, “Personal Communication,” June 12, 2014). A dozen years later, that group, whose membership has experienced replacements and

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growth and has more than tripled in number, now returns to those questions as a framework for this volume to highlight an area of Black leadership in higher education that has not yet been addressed.

A voluminous amount of literature on graduate education exists that focuses on student engagement in advanced studies, that is, on the milestones as well as obstacles faced on their journey to degree completion and on the various professional development resources leading to career success. Many of these publications serve primarily as self-help guides aimed at those who are planning for and progressing through graduate and professional studies, degree attainment, and professional employment. In addition, publications offering support to institutions are also provided through research and funding generated by scholars within educational and professional organizations and by policymakers who have a stake in promoting graduate education. Their scholarly contributions, generally published in annual and special feature reports, provide a wide array of data, on, for instance, access and success in graduate study for all students, program quality and assessment tools, trends in program development and delivery, and policies and best practices that address levels of degree attainment across intersections of gender, race and ethnicity, class, age, and physical abilities.

Notable among those producing that research and serving as advocates for graduate education are professional organizations that lend support to faculty, staff, and administrators in managing those issues. Four groups that play a major role as collaborators with graduate educators are: the CGS which, boasting a broad-based international and national membership for over six decades, describes itself on the website as “the national voice for the graduate dean community. . . [and] the only national organization in the United States that is dedicated solely to the advancement of graduate education and research” (“About CGS,” n.d.); the Council of Historically Black Graduate Schools (CHBGS) which, formed in 1970 to build partnerships and opportunities for resources that “support and promote graduate education at historically black colleges and universities” (“About Us,” 2024), also more broadly extends their outreach to Black students by offering associate membership to graduate programs not based at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) (“Membership,” 2024); the Association of American Universities (AAU), which, founded in 1900 and composed of 71 of America’s leading research universities, promotes a PhD initiative whose “objective is to make the full range of PhD career pathways visible, valued, and viable for all students” at AAU member institutions (“AAU PhD Initiative,” n.d.); and the American Association for University Women (AAUW), which has championed women and girls since 1881 and fosters a dynamic strategic plan whose values are “intersectional, inclusive, intergenerational, and empowering” (“About the AAUW,” n.d.). Through its strong international and national support and partnerships and robust research agenda and mentoring initiatives, the AAUW is able not only to generate significant research on gender and racial equity in higher education but also to offer numerous fellowships and grants for graduate and postgraduate women students working on a variety of projects, for example, scholarly research, community-based initiatives, and professional development opportunities.

## DISRUPTING THE PAST TO TRANSFORM THE FUTURE: EXAMINING BLACK LEADERSHIP IN GRADUATE EDUCATION

What is largely missing from all of these insights on graduate degree delivery and attainment, however, are detailed examinations of leadership in graduate education in general and of the presence and impact of Black leadership in graduate education in particular. Three recent volumes of note which address Black leadership in higher education give close attention to the people of color serving as leaders in the academy. In *Truth Without Tears: African American Women Deans Share Lessons in Leadership*, Carolyn R. Hodges and Olga M. Welch consider the role of race in leadership as they share experiences in their positions at HWIs, with Hodges as vice provost and dean of a Graduate School and Welch as dean of a School of Education (2018). A 2022 edited volume, *The Future of Black Leadership in Higher Education: Firsthand Experiences and Global Impact* (Kuykendall et al., 2022) features an assortment of perspectives on strategies for success proposed by Black men and women leaders from various levels in higher education who relate contrasting experiences at HBCUs and HWIs, presenting an array of leadership theories and promoting the mentoring of aspiring leaders beginning at the graduate level. M. Cristina Alcalde and Mangala Subramaniam explore the challenges faced by women of color in higher education leadership roles in their edited volume, *Dismantling Institutional Whiteness: Emerging Forms of Leadership in Higher Education* (2023). The introduction, “Gendering and Racializing Contemporary Leadership in Higher Education,” sets the tone for a robust examination of women of color in leadership at HWIs and how they “engage in transformative and inclusive forms of leadership to bring about change” (p. 1).

This book highlights Black graduate deans at HWIs, an unprecedented group who give voice not only to their efforts to address the issue of underrepresentation by their focused attention on building a more diverse student population but also reflect on how that goal intersects with their own experiences as Black professionals leading for change in the academy. Their presence was not always heartily embraced but instead at times was met with patronizing consideration, challenges to their authority, or dismissive regard about their proposals. In their interactions with each other over the years, they vigorously addressed the task of leading for change in the perception of the students they wanted to recruit, support, and mentor as well as in the responses to value added to the institution through the approaches and initiatives they advanced. The information they shared about their goals and their challenges also served as a source of communal support and a means to heighten the visibility of their graduate and professional programs, not only among themselves but also nationally in their involvement in professional meetings. For instance, after learning about the group’s ongoing initiative, CGS lauded their efforts, since the demonstrated commitment of the group suggested possibilities for collaborative initiatives across institutions, and, for CGS, gave support to its long-standing diversity statement “Building a Diverse, Equitable, Accessible, and Inclusive Graduate Community: A Statement

of Principles,” initially adopted in 1996 and updated in 2003, 2009, and 2019. The work and accomplishments of these Black deans reflect a key commitment stated in the CGS statement of principles, namely, that achieving excellence in graduate education depends on not only access, but the creation of communities that are inclusive – valuing difference and promoting a sense of belonging. Toward this end, graduate schools and graduate programs must clearly state their commitments to advancing diversity, equity, access, and inclusion, making it clear that these values support the achievement and engagement of all students (2019).

## **ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK**

The book opens with a foreword offered by Shirley M. Malcom, a renowned administrator and devoted advocate for science education, who serves as Senior Advisor to the CEO and Director of the Stem Equity Achievement (SEA) initiative at the American Association for the Advancement for Science (AAAS). As a collaborating facilitator for the activities of the graduate dean group, she served up highly valued insights and advice that were incorporated into the group’s agenda and discussions. The topics covered in the book include perspectives on triumphs and tribulations of building model projects for expanding and sustaining diversity and inclusion, the challenges of institutional versus public and/or political views on the mission of graduate education, and obstacles and opportunities confronted by Black deans at HWIs as the new face of leadership serving as agents of change.

This volume is divided into three major sections: one focusing on structures, one on programmatic initiatives, and a third on reflections and reflective experiences. The chapters comprise a variety of approaches, ranging from quantitative and qualitative descriptions and assessments of innovative programs to experiences with revamping graduate school governance and structures, to autoethnographic narratives on professional growth in academic leadership. The section on structures includes five chapters that unveil the complexity of graduate education as revealed in the variety of organizational configurations for graduate education undertaken by the contributors. Henry T. Frierson opens the section with an informative essay unveiling the evolution of Black dean leadership in “A Brief Historical Overview of the Presence and Implications of Black American Graduate Deans at Historically White U.S. Universities.” The chapters that follow reprise the theme of remapping graduate education. Carolyn R. Hodges writes about rebuilding the graduate school’s vision and structure in “Minding the Gaps: Leading for Change in Graduate Education”; Roger J. Ward addresses institutional ranking and quality in graduate education in his personal experience related in “Reinventing the Graduate School at a Research-Intensive University: A Case Study.” Coauthors Twyla J. Cummings and Karen Butler-Purry address specific challenges associated with the re- or deconstruction of the name of the graduate education unit in “What’s in a Name? Office of Graduate Education versus the Graduate School.” Roger J. Ward, Shani Fleming, and Leandra Cate discuss staffing dedicated to the oversight of diversity and inclusion matters in their

chapter, “Understanding the Role, Impact, and Value Proposition of the Chief EDI Officer in a Graduate School at a Historically White Research University.”

The five chapters comprising the section on programmatic initiatives offer examples of the contributors’ creative efforts in developing unique programming to enhance graduate education. Frierson discusses a model he developed to utilize financial resources more effectively in “A Funding-Incentive Approach to Assist in Increasing Students of Color Ph.D. Enrollments and Ph.D. Graduation Rates for All,” followed by another model for funding in which Emilia M. Hodge and coauthor Frierson present “Graduation Success: The Outcome of a Doctoral Dissertation Completion Funding Program.” Recognizing the importance of collaboration and learning through intergroup interactions, three deans write about initiatives to augment success in graduate studies: Chevelle Newsome shares “Navigating Symbolic Interactions: The Role of the Graduate Preparation Academy in Facilitating Success for Underserved Graduate Students;” Frierson and Anissa Irvin Vines collaborate in the chapter, “The Influence of a Graduate School’s Summer Research Program on Undergraduates of Color Attaining Public Health Graduate Degrees and Careers,” and Amanda Bryant-Friedrich shares details and insights on a program designed to stimulate progression to degree completion in her chapter, ““Primum non Nocere:” A Restorative Approach to Access and Success for ALL in Graduate Education.”

In the third section of the book, which focuses on reflections and reflective experiences, the deans offer perspectives on lessons learned in their professional journeys. Linda M. Thomas writes about “Navigating the Path to Graduate Dean and the Wisdom Gained,” followed by Michael D. Cunningham, who submits “Privileges and Responsibilities: Reflections on Black Leadership in Graduate Education at a Private Historically White University”; Mark J. T. Smith shares “Data Informed Interventions for Graduate Education,” and Suzanne Barbour offers “Pearls of Wisdom For New and Aspiring Graduate Deans on Transitioning into a Graduate Deanship.” Two chapters feature views from unique situations, in which Cherisse Jones-Branch offers insights on “The Particular Experience of Being a Black Dean at a Historically White and Rural University,” and Roger J. Ward discusses “A Road Less Traveled: An Unconventional Path to the Graduate Deanship at a Historically White Research-Intensive University.”

The deans who have contributed to this volume are trailblazers whose work has been crucial in setting the direction of graduate education not only for the deans who follow them at their particular institutions but also for graduate education in the United States overall. Because there are so many different models for graduate and professional education and varieties of programs across multiple disciplines and colleges, these pioneering deans cannot necessarily have an immediate influence on individual institutions outside of their own but nevertheless can make, have made, and continue to make a difference on a broad level by virtue their advocacy for access and equity for all students planning for and engaged in graduate studies. This is particularly important now, as higher education is faced with internal turmoil as well as external political assaults that challenge its long-held self-image as promoting and living up to the highest

standards for social and racial justice. Those concerns make it all the more critical in the current social and political climate to examine issues of Black leadership in graduate education.

Thus, we intend the chapters to be a resource for presidents and provosts who hire and collaborate with graduate deans; for faculty engaged at all levels of graduate education in all aspects, from recruitment, to classroom engagement, to mentoring for degree completion and professional development and career engagement; for current and emerging Black leaders in graduate education; for Black and white leaders engaged in building and serving diverse learning communities; and for university boards of directors, especially in those cases where government officials can exert influence on state funding allocated to their institutions. It is essential that those directly involved and who are affiliates in the enterprise of higher education understand the roles of Black graduate deans as continually evolving as part of a collaborative effort of teachers, administrators, and public advocates in the ongoing work of remapping graduate and professional education to ensure and sustain student access to and participation in a broadly diverse and inclusive postgraduate experience.

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# STRUCTURES

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