Are Black Student-Parents Alright?: Stories of Stigma, Motivation, and Legacy-Building at Howard University

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INTRODUCTION

"I could feel everyone looking at me; I even heard some whisper, 'is she pregnant?'"

- Howard University Undergraduate Alumni

"A student came to my class with her baby, and I saw the look of frustration on the other student's faces. Even though the child sat quietly in the back, other students were visibly annoyed at the child's presence. I felt so bad for the mother. Even as the professor, I didn't know how to handle it; I just ignored it all and proceeded with the class".

- Howard University Professor

"After having my son, I became a better student. It's like everything changed, and now everything I did was for him, so I just went so hard from that point on. I graduated a year early with a 4.0."

-Howard University Undergraduate Alumni

"Walking across that stage (for graduation) with my baby was my most memorable moment at Howard. My baby did it all with me, every assignment, every test; so he definitely deserved to be up there with me."

- Howard University Undergraduate Alumni/ Current Graduate Student.

While most undergraduate students graduate within the desirable four-year graduation time frame, factors such as faculty involvement, grade point average (GPA), gender, and place of residence have been influential in timely graduation rates (Letkiewicz et al., 2014). Students experiencing financial stress are likely to take longer than four years. Students of color are most vulnerable to financial stress from loans, and students of color who are also parents experience compounding vulnerability. Approximately four million undergraduate students also take on parenting responsibilities, and more than one in five college students are parents of children under 18 years old (The Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2020). Student parents are vulnerable to economic hardships amidst the global pandemic and struggling U.S. economy. Sixty-eight percent of student parents live in or near poverty, as do 9 in 10 single-mother students (The Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2020). These parents face a host of unique social and economic constraints while in pursuit of their education, and "Black students and single mothers could be disproportionately affected by the economic effects of the pandemic, and they borrow more for their undergraduate education than other student parents and students overall" (The Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2020 p.2). Graduate student parents who are often pursuing education in their peak childbearing years are also experiencing unique challenges, yet few policies exist to support them (Springer et al., 2008). Student parents, while resilient, face a host of unique vulnerabilities in combination with the pandemic; therefore, institutions, community-based organizations,

and philanthropy must provide unique support for this vulnerable population of students to support their matriculation. Student parents have various unique educational needs from their peers who do not manage these additional responsibilities.

RESEARCH PROCESS

Drs Jenkins and Muhammad received Summer Research Funding from the *Center for Women, Gender, and Global Leadership* at Howard University to conduct research on parents and identify their experiences and needs. The research team consisted of three undergraduate research assistants:Nadrat Amos (Senior, Psychology, and Sociology Double Major, Legal Communications Minor, Howard University), Maya Canady (Junior, Sociology Major, Emory University), and Yasmine Grier (Senior, Honors Political Science Major, Sociology Minor, Howard University. In the Summer of 2022, the team conducted five virtual face-to-face interviews and three focus groups with 13 Howard University parents. Of the sample, 11 were former or current students, and 2 were former or current staff or faculty. All of the participants identified as Black mothers. Parents were asked questions about their experiences parenting and navigating their perspective roles at Howard University. This study was approved by the Howard University Institutional Review Board (IRB-2022-0345).

Research is ongoing and will continue until study expiration date June 13, 2023. Data from interviews, focus groups, and ethnography were analyzed using a combination of hand-coding techniques and through NVIVO (qualitative data analysis) software. Emergent themes were theorized and will be shared widely to initiate recommendations for improving experiences for parents at Howard University.

Limitations

This empirical research is not without limitations. The following are limitations that we plan to improve as we continue this research:

- Unidentified Population- we are currently unaware of how many students, faculty, and staff at Howard University are parents. This makes sampling this population a challenge. We are currently working toward identifying this population;
- Small sample size- we are still conducting interviews and focus groups to obtain a larger sample;
- Only Mothers- **we are currently seeking the participation of fathers and other parents** as we currently only have a sample of parents who identify as mothers. If you would like to participate, please click here .

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

The identified themes from focus groups and interviews were stigma, lingering pain, institutional barriers, institutional support, community building and bonding, and resilience and courage:

Stigma: Participants shared a sense of stigma associated with their parenthood identities. In focus groups and interviews, parents shared how their experiences were impacted by stigma and the emotions they felt.

Aja shared, "*But I think it starts with ... the stigma attached to being a parent, that was a huge challenge, a HUGE challenge. And that challenge is now different because you're not working with people's mindsets, and you're working with societal bias. And it's deeper than we can even imagine through our own experiences. There are people that we need to talk to that aren't parents to understand how they view us to even understand this stigma more. Knowing that those looks or that those thoughts (result in) me, knowing that I was not or I didn't feel wanted. That was a very present challenge*".

The stigma faced by student parents regardless of how they chose to deal with it, was a salient theme throughout interviews. Stigma was directly connected with the lingering pain associated with being a student parent.

Lingering pain: The interviews with student parents were emotional for many of the participants. The pain or challenges remained even after graduating and moving into their careers. Being a student parent is a process that does not end with graduation.

This was specifically contextualized by Monica, who stated, "*the emotions were so challenging that even right now I feel them.*" Similarly, Ines shared feelings of regret for lost time and teared up as she reminisced on her days as a student parent "*I just remember going to my youngest room because he was just a baby and rocking him to sleep and just crying. Because I was missing so much time with him at night. And it was heartbreaking because I would see him in the morning, you know before he went to daycare, and I just remember just praying that they wouldn't feel slighted because I wasn't there. And that they would be okay*".

Mothers' painful emotions throughout their time as student parents resurfaced as they shared their experiences. None of the mom participants decided to end their interviews as they managed the emotions that were brought on from the stories they re-lived during the interviews and focus groups.

Institutional Barriers: Mothers also shared some of the significant institutional barriers that contributed to their experiences. Monica was an undergraduate student who would commute to campus regularly with her child and used the bus shuttle to get from public transportation to campus until she was told she was no longer allowed. "*There's a policy that says that children under a certain age can't ride the shuttle. So I asked for the supervisor's number. And I spoke with the supervisor. And they told me that that was the policy. And I let them know that I had been riding the shuttle for many months before this. Nobody ever let me know. And I was obviously hurt that they would have a policy like that.*"

When Wonda, another undergraduate student, learned of her pregnancy, she immediately sought out any available support from the university. "*So I tried to call up the.... I want to say it's like the accommodation disability office. And I'm like, do you guys*

offer any type of leave so I can, you know, stay home for six weeks before I go back? And they were telling me, like, it doesn't count that none of that counts. And I just don't understand how that doesn't count. You're going in the hospital, you have a hospital stay, you're going through a medical procedure, but they're telling me it doesn't count. And like they told me, I had to reach out to my professors individually".

Unlike Monica and Wonda, when Kim was a student, she had no expectations from the institution to support her as a parent. "*I never ever, for one minute, assumed that Howard would have any support for me. And I never, ever assume that any of my professors would have any empathy or sympathy for me, because my pregnancy was a choice, my giving birth was a choice*".

Institutional Support: While clear barriers existed at the institutional level, support was available throughout the campus. Students shared how individuals throughout the campus community supported them in various situations regarding their parenthood needs. Some student parents found refuge in the silence among their professors, who accepted their choice of bringing the baby into the classroom, and others benefited from the more deliberate and overt support of professors and staff at Howard.

Kim shared her experience of bringing her child to class with her and not knowing what to expect from her professor but being prepared for the worst. "*I didn't know if they were going to tell me, you know, you can't bring him in here. Or you can't do this or that. I didn't know; all I know I was prepared that if they did... I'm in the administration of justice, and I'm already kind of getting my rebel mind together. So you know, I was ready to protest. Like, you know I'm trying to get my education, and you want to put me out? ..my mind was going. And it was crazy. Because most of my professors didn't say a word. And most of them didn't even, it was almost like a no, you're not acknowledging, it was almost like, I'm gonna turn a blind eye and pretend like, I don't see this baby, strapped across your chest or whatever.*"

These individuals on campus supported mothers in numerous ways. They provided mothers with feelings of belonging and relieved the anxiety they felt from being stigmatized, even if only temporarily. These supports are powerful and exist across the campus through various generations of Howard's faculty and staff.

Community Building & Bonding: Moms in this study were adamant about the need to feel understood and for a sense of community on campus.

Monica was an undergraduate student and mother of one child when she decided to take action around the need for a community of parents on campus. She was instrumental in developing *Mothers of the Mecca*, a student-led organization that supports student parents on campus. She describes her experience with *Mothers of the Mecca* (MOM) and how it started. "*The community within the group. Oh, my goodness. Um, so it started off with, I believe, just about four people, four women. And then, as word got out, and as I met more people, we grew to about, like, 11 or 12 members. And we have meetings*

that discuss [like] resources, things that we needed, possible daycare options, and watching each other's children. But we also did a brunch at UTC one time; I still have pictures from that. We went to SoulCycle. Like we had some workout sessions, and we went to the zoo, the DC that the zoo in DC. So we did a lot of things together. That didn't just focus on the challenges we face, we focused on the growth and, and how we could enjoy each other."

Resilience & Courage: While the mothers we spoke to recognized the difficulties of being a student and parent, they perceived and credited their children as the motivation for their accomplishments.

Lori described her experience as an undergraduate parent as a challenge that she was grateful for. "*I had my son after one year. And it was a beautiful struggle, you know, that's how I would define it, as a beautiful struggle*". Delicia, another undergraduate student parent, accredited her drive to her children. "*I would say I had a bigger purpose because I was definitely everything I did was for my kids. So I just knew that I had to push through*".

While there were moments of stigma, as demonstrated by many participants in the study, in opposition, mothers like Kim also demonstrated pride and were inspired by their children to achieve what they had set out to. "*So, I think the courage came because contrary to what my mother would have it, I planned my son, and I wanted to have my son. And I was very unapologetic about being pregnant and very excited about the birth of my son.*"

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM DIRECTLY IMPACTED STUDENT PARENTS

The research shows that most parents experience a sense of the stigma associated with being a parent at Howard University, but this was more prevalent for student parents than faculty and staff. Faculty and staff were persistent in their ability to rely on their colleagues and coworkers as community support, while only some students expressed having a network of support on campus.

Most student parents were generally unaware of any community or support to assist them while in school and relied on outside networks.

Campus Community Support

During interviews, the lack of campus support was a common theme that emerged among participants. Specifically, Howard University Alumnus. Juanita wrestled with reasons for the lack of campus support, she shared, "*there were no resources for moms in undergrad because I think at that time, nobody expected anybody to be a mom, and undergrad.*"

Howard's parents need support from the campus, including professors, departments, students, clubs, etc. Now that we have captured preliminary empirical data indicating a

significant sense of stigma associated with parents being more intensely student parents, the HU community can work to destigmatize parents.

- Be mindful, don't whisper or stare.
- If you are a faculty or staff, think about ways that your policies might be altered to support students who are also responsible for caring for children.
- Be mindful of policies in place that might make it more difficult for students to accomplish their daily tasks.

Creating Safe Spaces

Participants voiced concerns around various needs connected to the lack of safe spaces on-campus to connect with peers, nurse or pump in peace, and sit and reflect upon one's day on campus with a baby.

Mental Health Supports

Howard's parents report significant emotional and mental fatigue. While the request for mental health support that addresses the complexities of navigating parenthood responsibilities with professional responsibilities was deliberate from some mothers, others described what they needed in ways that describe mental health services.

Resource Development and Sharing

Resource sharing is essential for the Howard University community. Parents need an easily accessible resource-sharing hub/ network that allows the circulation of relevant information on events, discounts, and other resources.

Availability Of On Campus Childcare

Infant care is currently not available on campus at Howard University. Parents with children under two years old must seek childcare accommodations off campus. Additionally, childcare costs are expensive, especially for students and parents of multiple children. Parents need resources that assist with childcare barriers and costs. Every participant discussed child care in our interviews.

Research & Community Identification

There is a need for more research in this area. To more precisely understand the needs of Howard's parenting community, we need to continue to speak to parents and better understand their experiences. To contribute to our ongoing study, click here.

LEGACY AND THE FUTURE OF PARENTHOOD AT HOWARD

Student parents shared a sense of pride about being part of the legacy of Howard University. The idea of leaving a legacy behind for their children was also demonstrated powerfully by many moms.

Zariah was adamant about the importance of legacy. "*Listen, I got stuff to do, and I have to leave a legacy for my son. I planned my son. So there was never any doubt in my mind that I was going to finish school. I was determined to finish school so that I could set that legacy for my son*".

Similarly, Sharon, HU alumni, was a graduate student while parenting. She discussed legacy as her motivation. "*So I was going to be disciplined, I was going to be focused, I was going to give my all in order for me to be able to survive. And my survival has always been, since I had my son, about me creating a life and a legacy that was going to be for my son, period, you know, so now I got my grandbaby*". Sharon later shared that she recently got her granddaughter's name put on a brick at the university so that she could see that she had a legacy and belonged when she was old enough to visit Howard and understand that her grandmother received her Ph.D. there.

Some of the parents' most memorable moments at Howard were the ones where they could share their HU legacy with their children. "*being able to take my baby to homecoming, allowing her to see the parade, allowing her to see me walk across the stage. Those would be the most memorable moments for me*".

Howard has a profound legacy. Its reputation extends far beyond individual experiences but makes up a collection of excellence that is understood at the mention of the prestigious HBCU. We are a community of pride. We are a community of resilience. We will continue to enhance our legacy by showing up where we are needed.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Nicole D. Jenkins, Ph.D.](), is the mother of Axel Jenkins and a Bonus Mom to Kayla and Noah Jenkins. She spent her undergraduate and graduate years as a student-parent and remembers the sacrifices made during the pursuit of her education, like the nights when storytime was cut short so that studying could commence. So, the unique experiences of student parenthood remain near and dear to her. She received her Ph.D. and M.A. from the University of Nevada Las Vegas in the Department of Sociology. In 2013, she received an A.A. in Criminal Justice from The Community College of the Air Force after serving six years of active duty in the United States Air Force as Security Forces (Military

Police). She is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology and Criminology, teaching undergraduate and graduate courses. Her past research project incorporates two years of ethnographic data collection in a Las Vegas African hair-braiding salon. She discusses labor, identity-making in the African diaspora, work-family balance, and the racialized politics of appearance for Black women. Nicole is currently completing her first monograph, an ethnography entitled "'CROWNed: Black Women's Entanglement with Beauty, Work, and Family," and is supported by Princeton University Press' *Supporting Diverse Voices: Book Proposal Development Grant.* The manuscript is an extension of her dissertation research and examines the lived experiences of women of the African Diaspora throughout various institutions in the U.S., specifically, the institutions of beauty, work, and family. Her most current research projects center on parenting, Black motherhood, the CROWN Act, and natural hair discrimination. She currently serves as Faculty Advisor for *Mothers of the Mecca* in The Center for Women, Gender, and Global Leadership and Co-PI for *Mothers of the Mecca: Identifying Parents at Howard University.* To learn more about her research, visit her website.

Bahiyyah Muhammad, Ph.D., is a blessed mother of three (Jaelah-Millah, Jian-Alaa and Al-Muntaqim Jr. Muhammad). Associate Professor of Criminology at Howard University and Director of the Undergraduate Criminology Program. She teaches graduate and undergraduate courses in the Department of Sociology and Criminology. She received her doctorate from Rutgers University's School of Criminal Justice. Dr. Muhammad's major research interest is familial imprisonment. Focusing specifically on those issues pertaining to children of incarcerated parents. She has done hundreds of interviews with affected children, parents, and caregivers in the United States, Africa, Europe, Uganda, Cambodia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Thailand, United Arab Emirates, and various Caribbean Islands. Her most recent work revolves around success and resiliency among children of prisoners. She is currently the co-principal investigator for the "*Mothers of the Mecca: Identifying Student Parents at Howard University*" research project. Dr. Muhammad is the Co-Founder of *Mothers of the Mecca* (MOM) and *Dads Academically Determined* (DAD). Both formerly student-led organizations for student-parents at Howard University.

Dr. Muhammad is founder of *Project Iron Kids*, an initiative to educate and empower children of incarcerated parents. She co-published the first coloring book for children of the incarcerated, titled *The Prison Alphabet: An Educational Coloring Book for Children of the Incarcerated.* Her work has been translated into Spanish, Arabic, Chinese and French. Dr. Muhammad's most recent children's book include, *Mommy Is Coming Home* (2021) and *Daddy Is Coming Home* (2021). In addition, Dr. Muhammad spearheaded a Howard University Alternative Spring Break experience connected to her *Prison Inside Out* course, entitled *Making Our Memories (MOM) Camp at a Federal Prison in Alderson*, West Virginia. During this once in a lifetime experience, incarcerated mothers spent an intimate week engaging with their children behind bars. During MOM Camp, incarcerated mothers and their children had a sleepover, watched Frozen with popcorn, had a talent show, played games, prayed together, made memories, bonded and much more.

Her selected publications include: "*Mothering from the Field: The Impact of Motherhood on Site-Based Research*" (Rutgers University Press, 2019), Resilient Black Love Among Children of Incarcerated Parents (Howard Magazine, 2021) and Professor Calls for Children to Be Included in Crime Solutions (Jamaica, 2022). Dr. Muhammad's research has been published in the *Journal of Criminal Justice and Law Review*, the *Journal of Gender, Social Policy, Peabody Journal of Education and the Law* and the *American University Business and Law Review*.

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