

Why Black Women Get Stuck at Mid-Level Management

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I had no idea how white librarianship was until I was halfway through completing my Master of Library Information Science degree. As I was completing my degree, I started to search for positions in the field and was interviewed for a few positions, but in succession, I was rejected from all of them. I was hurt and frustrated by my experience. However, thanks to therapy and the work outside of therapy, I decided to revisit a research paper I did for one of my courses and review the paper with a different perspective than what I had before. By taking a critical look at my paper, I realized that I faced an uphill battle in the library world, and I wanted to share some of the information I discovered in my research.

Did you know that librarianship is 82 percent white and prominently female? I found this statistic through the [Department for Professional Employee 2023 Fact Sheet](#), I, like you, was unaware of this statistic. As stated by the [Department for Professional Employees 2023 Fact Sheet](#) in 2022, only 4.3 percent of librarians identified as Black or African American, which declined from 9.5 percent in 2020.

To better understand why there is a lack of Black women librarians, let's take a step back into history to gain a better understanding. Record and Green (2008) state librarianship first appeared in the United States in the colonial period with the founding of Harvard College, which appointed its first librarian in 1667; early academic librarianship was low-status, unskilled, and an obscure profession, with only male members in the role. In the late nineteenth century, with the increase of research, the need for larger collections and access grew, leading to the

With the influx of women joining the profession, Melvil Dewey opened the first School of Library Economy at Columbia College in 1887. He advocated for training women in librarianship, leading to more females entering the profession. As more women entered the field, it became feminized, doing little for women since they were assigned duties that men found secondary compared to managing. With males dominating senior-level positions, sex discrimination prevailed, keeping females in menial low-wage jobs while men ascended to leadership positions with better pay Golub (1990).

The foundation of librarianship was established by white men who set the standards. Even as the profession became feminized as white women were allowed into the field, this only permitted white men to hold authoritative positions. Since the inception of librarianship, the very foundation of the profession was built upon patriarchy and white supremacy, which still ripples throughout the field today.

The lack of diverse representation in the information profession bleeds into leadership roles, only reinforcing the dissonance many Black women librarians are all too familiar with. However, many Black women librarians have successfully transitioned from entry-level to middle-level posts. In the Bugg (2016) study of academic librarians of color and their path to middle management, we learn from the participants, which consisted of one Asian male and mostly African American female librarians, who explained their journey into middle management. For some participants, the opportunity to move into a managerial post came from the reconstitution of positions or internal vacancies that needed to be filled. For others, the moment came about by applying to positions and meeting the criteria required for the job.

Of course, when participants were asked about shifting to senior management, one respondent expressed interest in moving into a senior leadership post; the remaining respondents provided their reasons for not pursuing senior-level positions. Some of the reasons they offered were: not wanting to give up their tenure, feeling unprepared to take on an executive role, and lack of motivation. Some of the participants' explanations for not succeeding in senior-level management were seeing what their supervisors experienced repel them from taking on increased responsibilities, being content with their position, or their work being uninspiring (Bugg, 2016).

educated African American female participant who supervised mostly white men and explained how one white male subordinate constantly challenged her position and competency when she interacted with him. A fellow respondent who was also a Black woman and a manager echoed a similar sentiment; when correcting her white employees' unprofessional behaviors, they would resist her authority. The participant further states her colleagues perceived her as mean and unreasonable when instructed to do a task but acknowledged she was the only African American in her department and few faculty/staff of color on her campus. Clearly, race played a large factor and hindered Black women librarians when it came to leadership roles.

One solution to assisting Black women librarians in gaining senior-level positions is mentorship. To ensure Black women librarians succeed in leadership positions, many institutions are offering mentorships to equip them with the skills they need to excel at the senior level. Mentorships provide support and the knowledge an information professional needs to transition successfully into an executive post (Sears, 2014).

However, it's best for the mentee to be paired with an established Black woman librarian, but this is not always possible. At the very least, the mentor should be aware of self-perception among Black Indigenous People of Color librarians and encourage them to consider management and leadership roles (Kumaran, 2015).

If more institutions took into consideration what Black women librarians have to go through just to enter into the profession, let alone stay, then there could be significant changes to ensure Black women librarians and fellow librarians of color cannot only reach but soar in executive roles.

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