

Conversations and Community

Exploring Belonging through the Lens of Black Women Engineers

Introduction

This Capstone explores the career experience of Black Women Engineers and describes the themes that emerge from analyzing their perspective. It illustrates how crisis decision-making, belonging, balance and perspective, and workplace climate all color their experience. Finally, it offers ways engineering stakeholders can strengthen efforts to develop community – using guidance from a hearer-oriented communication model.

Methods

- Literature Review of peer reviewed/scholarly research on STEM Identity and Attribution Bias, Retention in Engineering and Skilled Professions
- Snowball sampling of participants for semi-structured qualitative interviews
- Analysis of themes as a Black Woman Engineer (autoethnography)

Literature Cited (Not All Inclusive)

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Kalev, A., Dobbin, F. and Kelly, E., 2006. “Best practices or best guesses? Assessing the efficacy of corporate affirmative action and diversity policies.” American sociological review, 71(4), pp.589-617.

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Roberts, Laura Morgan, Anthony Mayo, Robin Ely, and David Thomas. “Beating the Odds: Leadership Lessons from Senior African-American Women.” *Harvard Business Review* 96, no. 2 (March–April 2018): 126–131.

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Results

Interviewee experience provides insight into why Black Women are still leaving Engineering after years of working on pipeline “issues”.

Community

Community is key and is often lacking – it fosters resilience required for longevity. Microaggression, isolation, and undermining actions withhold community. Special support is necessary as people are predisposed to prefer homogeneity.

Perspective in Achievement

Striving to be the best cannot be at the expense of community – shifting perspective helped find their voices, observing their own interests and desires.

Crisis Recruiting

Participants are sold on the benefits of entering engineering without insight into the challenges to expect and the support required to thrive

Climate

Workplace culture plays heavily into belonging – colleagues validate or invalidate their personhood. Interviewees share stigma of being treated as less-than and benefit of workplaces where they could be their authentic selves.

Recommendations

- 💡 Allow margin (time) for building community – *internally or externally*.
- 💡 Provide resources to employees to learn the skills of difficult conversation and communication across cultures.
- 💡 Recruit where the diverse candidates are. Treat HBCUs and affinity orgs as valuable partners to address challenges of “homosocial reproduction.”
- 💡 Support resilience – strategies may include activities not “normalized” by engineer majority culture.
- 💡 Interrogate approaches to bad actors which treat minority engineers as less-than – is the ideal culture the experience?

Further Information

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