

## **JMC Deans of Color Lead With a Purpose: A Qualitative Study**

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*This qualitative study contextualized the leadership experiences of journalism and mass communication (JMC) deans who self-identified as persons of color. While anonymously participating in a virtual focus group, these deans expressed bringing a higher purpose to leading their programs. This study aims to elucidate the benefits of increasing the diversity of JMC leadership and illuminate the need to improve the working environment for current and future JMC leaders of color.*

*Keywords: Journalism and Mass Communication Leadership, JMC Deans, JMC Schools/Colleges, JMC Leaders, JMC Diversity, Higher Education Administration, Higher Education Diversity, Leaders of Color, Deans of Color, Higher Education Administrators of Color, Qualitative Study*

Higher education journalism and mass communication (JMC) programs have identified the need to create diversity initiatives so their units will better reflect the society their students will eventually serve. The scholarship surrounding diversifying JMC units is not exorbitant. Published articles mainly focus on the journalism accreditation diversity standard, and various aspects of diversifying JMC curricula, faculty, staff, and students. There are even fewer empirical studies focused on diversifying JMC leadership and those happened within a ten-year period of the late 1990s and early 2000s (Dates & Stroman, 1999; Hoag & Anderson, 2008; Izard et al., 2008; Sheen & Mihailidis, 2007). The literature focuses on the benefits of having leaders of color and suggestions for encouraging faculty of color to pursue leadership roles (Dates & Stroman, 1999; Hoag & Anderson, 2008; Izard et al., 2008). Scholarship in other higher education fields typically utilizes qualitative and mixed-method approaches to gain in-depth perspectives of the leaders of color since this group typically represents such a small percentage of academic leaders. This first-of-its-kind qualitative study of JMC leaders of color gives candid insight into how they view their leadership roles through the lens of being persons of color. These accounts might also serve as teachable examples for other leaders about how race impacts the perception of leaders of color, and the various challenges these leaders attribute to their skin color, something they were born with and something that has no bearing on their ability to lead.

### **Literature Review**

#### **JMC Diversity Research**

JMC diversity-focused literature often monitors aspects of the diversity standard created by the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications (ACEJMC, 2019a), which is the only higher education journalism accrediting body in the world. Accredited programs represent some of the most highly regarded, well-resourced, and highly enrolled programs in the world. Crawford (2014) posits that these factors lead programs

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that are not accredited to utilize elements of the accreditation standards to compete directly with the accredited programs for students, faculty, and resources. The diversity standard, which was adopted in 1985 and was first actionable in 1990, states that for a program to be compliant there must be a written diversity plan that expresses how the unit will achieve an inclusive climate and curriculum. The unit must also document how it will recruit and retain a diverse faculty and student population (ACEJMC, 2019b). Jones, Stroman, Callahan, Dates, Egwu, and Whitmore (2007) found that the diversity standard often ranks as the highest of the nine standards for non-compliance. Jones et al. (2007) found after reviewing the diversity standard from 1989 – 2002 that the standard should likely receive credit for aiding in the increase of student and faculty diversity within programs over that period. However, Becker, Vlad, & Stefanita (2015) did not find any links to faculty diversity increases with accreditation.

JMC scholars have created several quantitative studies that illustrate the size and diversity of JMC programs in the U.S. The most recent enrollment survey sampled 182 of 475 programs (Gotlieb, McLaughlin, & Cummins, 2017). The programs reported nearly 100,000 students in 2015 with two-thirds of them being women, and more than a third of those enrolled were students of color (Gotlieb et al., 2017). A different survey focused on JMC faculty found that 45% were women and 21% were faculty of color (Becker et al., 2015). Several JMC surveys overwhelmingly identified a racial disparity of JMC leaders with 87% - 90% being White males (Sheehan & Mihailidis, 2007; Applegate, Oneal, & Blake, 2001; Oneal & Applegate, 2001).

JMC leadership research usually focuses on the skills needed to run academic units or the perceptions of those leading the units as a chair, coordinator, dean, or director (DelGaizo, Frymier, & Mottet, 2013; Dilworth & Lander, 2007; Kochersberger, 1988; Weymuth, 1999). While there is not much JMC leadership research focused on diversity, what does exist concentrates on recruiting and retaining faculty of color and women and in turn grooming those faculty members for leadership positions (Defleur, Kurpius, Osborne, & Hamilton, 2010; Izard et al., 2008). Dates and Stroman (1999) found that JMC leaders of color could help their institutions commit to creating and maintaining a diverse and inclusive unit and that JMC units that lack diverse faculty and leaders could suffer in their ability to recruit and retain students of color. Baldasty, Bramlett-Solomon, and Deuze (2003) offered multiple suggestions for increasing diversity in JMC units (e.g., provide resources to reward diversity efforts, weave diverse topics throughout the curriculum, and get non-minorities comfortable engaging diverse topics.) They also noted that it is imperative for JMC administrators to embrace diversity efforts and create a welcoming atmosphere for an inclusive unit.

### **Higher Education Diversity Leadership**

The research focused on JMC leaders of color is sparse, and it also lacks anecdotal accounts from leaders of color. Higher education research of academic leaders of color reveals that those in business, education, law, and social work feel that they must work harder than their peers to prove that they belong, and they suffer the indignities of being disrespected because of their race by students, faculty, staff, colleagues, and superiors (Harvey, 2004). Scholars have posited that the increase in people of color on university campuses is unnerving to the longstanding traditions of the predominantly White campus communities, and these institutions can be conservative when it comes to making changes to the academic environment (Altbach, 1991; Valverde & Castenell, 1998; Wong, 1991). Wolfe and Dilworth (2015) found a narrative exists that blames the small percentage of leaders of color on those individuals' lack of relevant qualifications but ignores the systemic and social structures that

allow those in power to maintain that power. One report found that early ascension into administrative roles eventually limits leaders of color from continuing to climb the leadership ladder because they are unable to compile the extensive research portfolio needed for senior positions (Status of Ethnic and Racial Diversity in College and University Administration, 2009).

Gasman, Abiola, and Travers (2015) asserted that historical legacies, prejudice, and racism are common barriers that discourage and prevent people of color from pursuing or maintaining leadership roles at predominantly white institutions (PWIs). Kezar (2008) posited that the political nature embedded in higher education institutions can derail the leadership careers of persons of color because attempts to change the campus culture to be inclusive of different communities will be seen as taking away resources from dominant groups. Human resources scholars addressed behavioral and organizational barriers in higher education for women and people of color as it relates to handling potential discrimination in the workplace (Evans & Chun, 2007). They suggest that the marginalized groups should first understand that they could face discrimination in the workplace and use this knowledge to help them learn self-coping mechanisms to best handle and respond to potential discrimination. The authors suggest that the role of human resource officers is to help make the campus culture more inclusive and to help the marginalized groups identify potential networks for mentoring and coping with the organizational and behavioral barriers (Evans & Chun, 2007).

Leaders of color are often expected to spearhead a diversity and inclusivity plan, but they cannot successfully institute the plan alone. Stanley, Watson, Reyes, and Varela (2019) focused on the creation and implementation of higher education diversity plans and found that the overall campus leadership must be committed to changing the culture, and there should be shared responsibilities throughout the campus community. The researchers also noted that the goals must be rooted in providing opportunities and educational development, and that diversity and inclusion policies and practices must be assessed frequently to address unexpected changes (Stanley et. al., 2019).

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study used the Critical Race Theory (CRT) to frame the research questions for the JMC deans of color (Carducci, 2016). CRT also influences the methodology as deans of color participated in storytelling by expressing their views of leading JMC programs as it relates to being persons of color through an online discussion board. Critical race theorists (Carducci, 2016; Parker & Villalpando, 2007) have described five basic tenets of this philosophy. The scholars believe race and racism are central features in American society. Race-neutral language is deployed to preserve White privilege. The research published aims to help end oppressive practices. Lived experiences of marginalized groups are powerful resources of knowledge, so qualitative methodologies are often used. The scholarship is open to multiple disciplines including education, psychology, sociology, history, and legal studies.

Carducci (2016) reported that critical scholars looking to conduct higher education leadership research should examine and critique the differences in power relationships between the normal group and women and people of color instead of continuing to grow research around White heterosexual men. The studies could look at how policies are shaped and the impact the leadership has on students, faculty, staff, and the curriculum.

This qualitative study uses CRT to explore how deans of color make meaning of being persons of color while leading JMC programs. CRT research in higher education has focused on the students, faculty, and organizational systems, but little on academic leaders of color, so

this research adds additional elements to the critical race theory catalog. The research questions below were used to guide this study.

### Research Questions

- RQ 1:** What role does ethnicity/race play in the way JMC deans of color describe their efforts to lead their units?
- RQ 2:** What challenges to their leadership do JMC deans of color face that they perceive is due to ethnicity/race?

### Methodology

JMC deans and directors of color were identified for this qualitative study because their position typically allows them to have a more direct impact on their units than department or division chairs. A listing of (N = 101) JMC colleges and schools were identified through the AEJMC list of journalism schools and departments (AEJMC, 2019). Additional web searches were conducted to verify the status of the JMC units, and to identify possible programs absent from the AEJMC list. A virtual census of the units' websites revealed (N = 102) leaders because one program used co-leaders, and (n = 18) leaders of color. The virtual census attempted to identify the race/ethnicity and gender of the top leaders based on their physical features, names, research interests, bio information, and social media profiles. Researchers studying the diversity of the AEJMC board of directors used this method when records did not reveal the directors' race/ethnicity (Moody, Subervi, & Oshagan, 2013).

An IRB-approved multi-tiered consent form was emailed to the selected deans. The consent form described the study and asked the deans to confirm that they were JMC leaders of color. An anonymous virtual focus group situated inside a password-protected online learning management system (LMS) was selected to convene the purposeful sample of leaders of color. Online message boards can be effective at conducting anonymous focus groups for exceptionally qualified participants that possess the skills to communicate via web-based platforms (Deggs, Grover, & Kacirek 2010; Rezabek, 2000).

Of the targeted (n = 18), (n = 4) deans of color responded to the consent form and participated in the Virtual Forum for JMC Leaders of Color accounting for a (22%) response rate. Several deans expressed appreciation for the study but declined to participate. One dean expressly stated that since there are so few JMC deans of color, they did not want to be linked to the study for fear of being identified and having their comments held against them. Focus group sample size research remains unclear because there is not a definitive answer to what constitutes saturation for data collected through this method preceding or following a study (Hennink, Kaiser, & Weber, 2019). A recent study identifying potential ways to estimate focus group sample size stated that providing a universal sample size for focus groups is not useful due to the multitude of variables and reasoning for the studies (Hennink et. al., 2019).

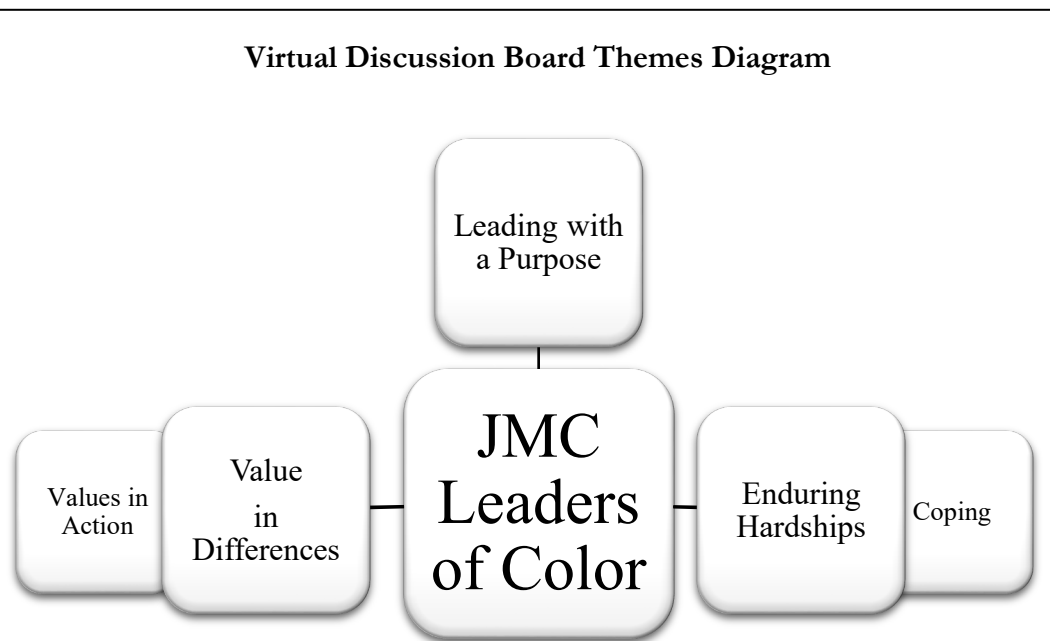
The deans were given access to an LMS platform through an email link after consenting to participate in the virtual focus group. Once inside the LMS, they were given instructions on how to properly post their answers to four topical questions, each with its own message board. The deans anonymously typed their narrative responses and posted them to the message boards. Each dean was given the opportunity to review their responses for accuracy before they were collected and analyzed. The information collected does not highlight gender, race, or ethnicity to preserve anonymity. Generic language like "deans of

color” and assigned pseudonyms “JMC Leader (#)” are used throughout the survey. The deans answered four topical prompts created utilizing the research questions and the literature review. Two CITI certified independent coders conducted a six-phase thematic analysis approach on the deans’ responses outlined in research by Braun and Clarke (2006).

## Findings

This exploratory qualitative study unearthed personal narratives that highlight the experiences of deans of color which could benefit those interested in diversifying the leadership of JMC programs. The narratives also revealed the ugly side of the academy that mimics the personal accounts found in the literature focused on academic leaders of color in other disciplines.

Figure 1 illustrates the following identified themes: leading with a purpose, value in differences, and enduring hardships. Two sub-themes emerged: values in action and coping with hardships (see Figure 1). The three main themes closely align with answering research question one, “*What role does ethnicity/race play in the way JMC deans of color describe their efforts to lead their units?*,” while the two sub-themes address the second research question, “*What challenges to their leadership do JMC deans of color face that they perceive is due to ethnicity/race?*”



*Figure 1. JMC Leaders of Color Virtual Discussion Board Themes Diagram*

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Thematic analysis revealed that JMC leaders of color who participated in the online discussion board bring a sense of purpose to the deanship that is driven in part by their ethnicity/race. This is manifested in the value the leaders place on the differences they bring to their programs. The following is a curated portion of the candid reflections given by the deans about their experiences. Identifying information has been redacted.

### *Leading with a purpose*

The JMC leaders of color all expressed a need, a passion, or a purpose to lead JMC programs. JMC Leader 2 captures the sentiment in the following response.

Once I became a professor, I saw that administration was the way to have the most influence on students' academic careers. I saw the power of teaching White students and students of color in the classroom, but I also perceived institutional roadblocks to success of any and all students. If you want to disrupt power, you've got to have power.

JMC Leaders 2 and 4 respectively discussed giving a voice to the underrepresented in their academics.

Talent is distributed equally but opportunity is not. What we can do as administrators is ensure faculty searches, syllabi, curricula, student recruitment, et al., is done with inclusion in the broadest sense.

Students have said it's important to see people of color represented in teaching and other leadership roles.

JMC Leader 4 also summed up common phrases “give back,” “pay back,” and “pay it forward,” repeated by the leaders as rationales for leading.

I have been blessed to have mentors in industry and teachers who made positive differences in my life. This role is an opportunity for me to give back and help “pay it forward” to assist others.

JMC Leader 1 demonstrated that leading with a purpose is not just a point of pride.

I never hesitate to speak from my perspectives and experiences as a [person of color] in academia. I am proud of my professional commitment to diversity and people of color and this comes out in my professional demeanor and perhaps my decision-making.

### *Value in differences*

Each dean expressed that being a person of color brought intrinsic value to their leadership role. JMC Leader 2 mentioned sitting on decision-making committees where their voices might be the difference between marginalized groups being acknowledged or ignored.

Being an administrator of color at a PWI means your very presence in a meeting is a signal, a reminder, a symbol -- especially if you are the only one. It means discussing and thinking about all kinds of oppression...because you understand some issues first hand.

JMC Leaders 1, 4, and 2 respectively expressed that their presence as high-ranking administrators served as an important symbol that their institution took diversity and inclusivity issues seriously, and that they, as leaders, can address these issues from a personal standpoint.

Some constituents...see me as a potential role model to students. I suspect some even see me as an outcome of my program's commitment to diversity.... My race has informed decisions such as hiring, student recruitment, and even curriculum. In all of these cases I reiterate the importance of a diverse faculty and staff, and of course student population.

One benefit, sadly, might be that so few at PWI's understand people/students of color that my voice is valued (though we all know that not one of us can speak for all of "us" --whatever "us" might be). This is the case if I am the only administrator of color in the room (which, by the way, is not at all how I want it to be).

Being a person of color, I understand our students better than some colleagues because I have a similar lived experience.

The leaders expressed other ways their value can be connected to their ethnicity/race: hosting diverse speakers, helping students participate in minority journalism organizations, and encouraging diversity and inclusivity initiatives. However, JMC Leader 2 says the value of leaders of color goes beyond handling diverse topics.

Some people might underestimate how well-versed administrators of color are in many topics, challenges, realms. We have to be. We don't get where we are just because of color—often, in spite of it.

### *Values in action*

The leaders of color discussed how they put their values into action for their campus. They created diverse initiatives, educated colleagues on the need for diversity, and used their administrative power to diversify job candidates. JMC Leaders 1 and 4 respectively discussed how a lack of diversity adds more responsibilities.

I developed a proposal to create a school-wide diversity committee. I “justified” the added responsibility by linking additional duties to my professional commitment to diversity and racial inclusiveness.

Since there are so few people of color in dean roles in the academy, I am often called upon to serve on search committees and other service obligations. There's not more pay associated with these experiences. It's simply part of the service expectation.

JMC Leader 4 discussed the need to restart a job search.

Faculty Search Committees are expected to ensure there is a diverse pool of candidates and there have been times when searches were rebooted because the pool was not diverse.

JMC Leaders 4 and 1 respectively stated that leaders of color must often educate their campus community on diversity and inclusivity issues.

I had a faculty member question why we needed a Diversity Committee. I explained diversity and inclusion are core values for our institution and unit. Diversity and inclusion also is a standard for accreditation by ACEJMC.

There was a need to include a course in one of our majors that examined issues of race, gender and class. I developed a course that I had developed and taught at my previous universities.

### *Enduring hardships*

The deans endure hardships they perceive as being related to their race/ethnicity and find ways to cope with the tangible and intangible challenges to their leadership. JMC Leader 4 credited race/ethnicity as the reason behind several occurrences of being undermined by colleagues and a donor.

I have experienced White colleagues yelling at me or talking over me in a meeting. I have survived a few faculty and staffers making personal attacks and sabotaging my work under the cloak of anonymity.

I was shocked to see a White male donor describe me as the diversity director since I have never had that job.



JMC Leader 1 shared a challenging scenario.

The only possible challenge has been professional relationships with two of my staff/administrative colleagues.... I could never confront the actual individuals involved, and instead worked with third-parties. There was little they could do, so my professional relationships were adversely affected.

JMC Leader 3 expressed a challenge particular to leaders of color at minority serving institutions.

The office of dean on this campus is held in high regard and the issue of race is not an issue. That said, the external reception in the greater academic world including but not limited to PWI institutions, accrediting bodies, review journal boards, and other industry players, can be challenging.

JMC Leader 2 said leaders of color always keep their guards up for impending hardships.

I personally don't feel slighted or disrespected because of my color, but I am always aware of the possibility or subtlety of such biases.

### *Coping with hardships*

Leaders of color cope with hardships as they continue to pursue their purpose. JMC Leader 1 shared experiences of malicious rumor spreading by a fellow dean and purposeful miscommunication by a direct report. The dean could not get relief through regular reporting channels so attempts were made to avoid the individuals.

I chose to all but ignore interacting with one person, unless I had to work with them on a specific initiative, which I did without incident. Because the second person reports to me, I chose to take the “high road” and deal with this person as professionally and courteously as I could. Because I work and interact with this person on a daily basis, it has proved to be a bit of a challenge knowing that this person has worked to undermine me and my work.

The leader was resigned to trying to ignore the issue or “be the bigger person” as a coping mechanism, which places this leader in familiar territory with JMC Leader 4, who offered additional tips for coping with these challenges.

Through it all, I have tried to take the high road, educate others about my role and focus on the students and the work to be done.... Having a personal support system is important. Listening also is incredibly important and building one-on-one relationships through conversation.

## Discussion

JMC deans of color do not shed their life experiences of navigating the fabric of oppression found in the fields of higher education, journalism, and mass communication once hired to lead JMC units. They do not have the privilege to be unaware of their race/ethnicity, so they knowingly assume the direct and indirect pressures to make their unit and campus more equitable for marginalized groups. They accept that pressure because they are driven by a purpose to help all JMC students have a better sense of what it means to serve their entire community and to help marginalized groups feel like an integral part of the campus. The leaders strive to make their units more inclusive and diverse when it comes to the budget, curriculum, faculty, leadership, programs, research, staff, and students because history shows that these issues have not been key priorities, or they become short-lived priorities.

The deans understand the value that their race/ethnicity brings to the position because they have the power to impact culture, demographics, and policies. Tangible examples of their value can be found when the deans are asked to speak for all students/faculty/staff of color because they are the only person of color in the room. The deans can help limit unintended adverse effects on marginalized communities when campus plans are not specifically focused on those communities. They can also emphasize recruiting and retaining faculty, students, and staff of color by prioritizing these elements within the budget, training, and operational policies. One leader mentioned restarting a hiring search because the search committee did not submit a diverse list of candidates in the final pool.

Deans of color also possess intangible qualities that showcase the value of their race/ethnicity. The deans mentioned how their position as a person of color in power acts as a symbol of the progress their universities and JMC units are making towards diversity and inclusion. The leaders mentioned that they are also seen as role models within marginalized communities. They expressed that their presence on various committees can remind other committee members to consider marginalized communities. One dean highlighted that the resourcefulness needed to achieve such a prestigious position as a person of color means that the leaders are bringing a host of skills needed to navigate the complex nature of the deanship.

Deans of color allow their purpose to lead and the values that they bring to their JMC units to overshadow the challenges they perceive to be associated with their race/ethnicity. They shared tangible challenges they feel were a result of being a person of color. Deans expressed being yelled at and talked over in meetings by White colleagues. One leader mentioned having to deal with a direct report that was sabotaging their work and inputting incorrect times on their calendar. The deans have felt disrespected by potential donors that visibly held other university deans in higher regard. One dean mentioned facing some challenges with outside JMC entities like accrediting bodies, review journal boards, and other JMC groups.

The deans of color also highlighted some intangible challenges based on their race/ethnicity. They do not always feel like they have a place to report their concerns adequately without having them dismissed. This leads them to create workarounds, which may not be efficient or sustainable, to complete tasks. The leaders also feel a sense of isolation when they are expected to be the sole and constant voice for marginalized groups. They discussed needing to create a personal support system that might not exist within their college. The challenges related to their race/ethnicity add barriers to getting policies and practices implemented which in turn can impact performance reviews and the tenure of their leadership.

Further qualitative and quantitative research is needed to identify broader patterns as it relates to JMC leaders of color including studies focused on associate deans, assistant deans,

coordinators, and chairs. Adding these individuals from all levels of JMC programs, and not only JMC schools and colleges, will theoretically produce a larger sample size of leaders of color. A follow-up conversation could be held with the initial participants as well as inviting the other deans of color to participate again to strengthen the number of participants. The small sample size could continue to be a limitation because several deans expressed fear of being associated with the study as a reason for not participating in the discussion board.

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