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Spring 2011

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Citation Information

Wright, Brenda W.; Good, Donald W.; and Lampley, Jim. 2011. Persistence in Learning: Expectations and Experiences of African American Students in Predominately White Universities. *Journal of Learning in Higher Education*. Vol.7(1). 81-87.

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Persistence in Learning: Expectations and Experiences of African American Students in Predominately White Universities

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**PERSISTENCE IN LEARNING:
EXPECTATIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF
AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS IN
PREDOMINATELY WHITE UNIVERSITIES**

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ABSTRACT

This study addressed the academic, cultural, and social expectations and experiences of 20 African American juniors and seniors at two predominantly White universities in the Southern Appalachian region of the United States. The participants' described experiences revealed how institutional practices promoted or obstructed their persistence to graduation.

Findings indicated a dissonance between the students' academic, cultural, and social expectations and experiences primarily caused by unanticipated racist experiences in the classrooms, on the campuses, and in the campus communities-at-large. Positive relationships with administrators, faculty members, and staff emerged as the most significant contributors to the students' capability to safely and successfully navigate academic, social, and cultural pathways leading to graduation. Recommendations based on the results of the study are provided for university administrators, faculty, and staff who are committed to improving the college experience and persistence to graduation rates for students of color matriculating at predominantly White universities.

INTRODUCTION

Administrators and faculty members of institutions of higher education who are serious about diversity must consider the present experience of minority students in their institutions in order to enhance their ability to educate these students. Much data exist concerning the reasons all categories of students exit college, but data focusing on the persistence of students, specifically African American students, is relatively scarce. African Americans who choose to attend college today have numerous options to consider. Among these choices are public and private schools, liberal arts or technical colleges, single-sex or coed universities, community colleges, Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs), and Historically

Black Colleges or Universities (HBCUs). These contemporary options symbolize a significant departure from the severely limited access to higher education opportunities afforded African Americans during previous periods in American history.

Despite tremendous strides that have substantially changed the higher education landscape for African Americans, present-day choices are not completely devoid of academic, cultural, and social challenges. More specifically, African American students choosing to attend predominantly White institutions are consistently confronted with challenges to succeed in university and community environments primarily structured to meet the needs of the majority popula-

tion. Different policies and practices are needed to educate and to serve these students (Stikes, 1984).

PURPOSE OF STUDY AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The purpose of this study was to detail and describe the academic, social, and cultural expectations and experiences of participating African American juniors and seniors at two predominantly White universities in Southern Appalachia. The study was conducted to discover and describe expectations and experiences of the participants as they successfully attempted to navigate academic, social, and cultural pathways that could allow them to persist to graduation.

The research questions were derived from the literature relative to African American students' academic, cultural, and social expectations and experiences at predominantly White institutions. The collective stories of the participants could provide valuable insight through exploration of the following questions:

1. How do African American juniors and seniors describe their academic expectations and experiences?
2. How do African American juniors and seniors describe their cultural expectations and experiences?
3. How do African American juniors and seniors describe their social expectations and experiences?
4. How do African American juniors and seniors describe institutional practices that promote or obstruct their persistence to graduation?

RELATED LITERATURE

The U. S. Supreme Court outlawed segregation in public schools with the landmark ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954; subsequently the U. S. Congress passed the *Civil Rights Act* in 1964 and the *Higher Education Act* in 1975. These decisions and legislative acts dra-

matically changed the landscape for higher education opportunities for Black Americans and set the stage for diversifying college campuses across the country.

Until the 1960s, a defining decade in our nation's history, only a minimal number of Blacks were accepted into predominantly White schools (Burrell, 1980). Prior to that time, Negro or Black colleges were established to meet the educational needs for Blacks to become constructive and contributing members of American society (Clark, 1967). According to Allen (1987), Black students are choosing to matriculate at predominantly White institutions at significantly higher rates than at historically Black colleges.

The preponderance of literature regarding African American students at predominantly White institutions focused on their perceptions, experiences, issues of access, adjustment, and achievement (Allen, 1988; Bradley, 1967; Burrell, 1980; Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella, & Hagedorn, 1999; Centra, 1970; Chavous, 2002; Guifrida & Douthit 2006; Haralson, 1996; Lyons, 1973; Malaney & Shively, 1991; Wallace & Bell, 1999). In short, the research illustrates that Black students on White campuses reported persistent challenges in adjusting to a culturally different, academically demanding, and socially alienating environment. Consequently, these studies showed that Black students on these campuses did not experience high levels of cultural acceptance, academic success, and social engagement.

College experiences make a definite difference in students' persistence-to-graduation. According to Kuh (1999), the published research linking African American students' expectations, learning, and overall satisfaction with the collegiate experience has been limited; however, Allen (1987) pointed out that the racial makeup of a college campus does affect the college experiences of Black students.

The majority of the nation's Black college students continue to enroll in predominantly White institutions (Carter & Wilson, 1996). Researchers have reported that these students are often not prepared for the actual experiences they encounter (Malaney & Shively, 1991). Gloria, Kurplus, Hamilton, and Wilson (1999) reported that at predominantly White institutions, African

American students persisted or were retained at 66.3% of the rate for Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU). This suggests a need for more effective persistence programs at predominantly White institutions.

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Using the lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT) provided the best framework for this qualitative study to increase understanding about the everyday world perceptions and realities of the African American student participants.

Site Selection

This study was conducted at two predominantly White institutions in Southern Appalachia. The campuses are approximately 50 miles in proximity to one another with similar campus and community demographics. These universities were selected based on several factors including the potential applicability of the research (Eisner & Peshkin, 1990). Administrators on both campuses expressed interest in this study and provided access to key informants and support for developing cooperative rapport with various gatekeepers across the university-at-large. Interviews and observations occurred in public venues that provided a transparent and confidential process.

Sample

The study utilized a purposeful sampling process, and the critical selection criterion for the study yielded 20 Black juniors and seniors "in good standing" with their universities. This specific demographic was chosen because of the students' decisions to remain at their respective universities beyond their freshman and sophomore years.

Data Collection and Analysis

Fundamental to qualitative research is extensive collection of data from multiple sources of information (Creswell, 2007). Data were collected primarily via interviews and observations.

During the data analysis process, detailed descriptions, stories, categorizations, and interpretations of the data collected were included. The analysis process involved organizing the data to develop patterns, make meaning of the data collected, and link together the stories told. The final step in the data analysis process was to merge the patterns from each data collection tool into a cohesive theoretical framework.

FINDINGS

Academic Expectations and Experiences

The themes which emerged when examining academic expectations and experiences were academic expectations and reality, classroom-program demographics, having to prove oneself, faculty-student interactions and relationships, racial stereotypes, and White student behaviors.

Most of the students described themselves as having consistently received As and Bs during their high school years. Several of the students commented that they expected to duplicate those achievements as college students. In some cases, they did better than expected and in others, they did not. Because they were all juniors and seniors, they had learned how to avoid academic failure.

When they are the "only ones" in a majority environment, African Americans have added challenges not experienced by White peers. When this occurs, there seems to be an invisible, but very apparent, laser beam that focuses directly upon "the only." For many African Americans in this situation, experiences are constantly filtered, screened for racism in every moment, and appropriate responses are prepared in advance that will not get you failed or fired. Some students viewed this as an opportunity "to shine" while others described the experience alternately as frightening and shocking.

The additional pressure of their intellectual competence was expressed as "having to work twice as hard to get half as far." Minorities often feel the need to prove they are more than an "affirmative action duty" that is tolerated more than accepted or wanted. Even though the students were successfully persisting towards graduation,

they were still confronting daily challenges that threatened to erode their academic confidence and competence.

The students in the study expressed a range of positive and negative faculty influences, interactions, and relationships. Despite the prevalence of racism and racist incidents in and out of the classroom, most of the students reported that the majority of their instructors were friendly, helpful, and supportive. In response to the request to “describe your general relationship with faculty,” 17 of the 20 students had favorable depictions of faculty who shared of themselves with their students and took a personal interest in their academic success.

Many of the factors that contribute to the academic success of Black students are often the same characteristics identified for all college students. However, Black students on predominantly White campuses must cope with the additional burdens of racism, discrimination, and pejorative stereotypes confronting them in the classroom. In addition, these students are often asked to speak as the expert on all things related to the “Black” experience in this country. White students are rarely if ever asked to speak or act for their whole race. The pressure to “represent the race” and counter negative stereotypes are added pressures to Black students whose number one goal is academic success. When these issues arise, the Black student is faced with the choice to be silent, risking the perpetuation of the stereotype or to speak up and risk alienation by their peers or worse, to be perceived as hostile and disrespectful by their faculty. More often than not, students are cautious about confronting professors who have the power to pass or fail them. In either case, the decision takes an emotional toll on Black students that is foreign to their White peers. The energy expended in the rejection of negative stereotypes or the justification for more positive viewpoints causes Black students to sacrifice time learning and forging ahead academically. Many students do not have the time or energy to engage in this type of classroom activism.

Racist tensions on a campus exist because of racist behaviors that, of course, are not exclusive to faculty but also exist between Black and White students. No setting is immune from a racist incident. For minority students at a PWI, such an

episode can “pop up” when least expected. One of the more subtle forms of racism that the students discussed was the apparent “surprise” of White students that a Black student might be their intellectual equal.

Cultural Expectations and Experiences

The themes which emerged related to cultural expectations and experiences were the campus culture, racial insults, the “noose incident,” segregation on the campus, town and gown aspects, and campus and community police issues.

Responses to the reality of being Black on a predominantly White campus were as varied as the individual student’s cultural expectations and experiences. To a person, they admitted that they enrolled at their universities despite concerns, doubts, and fears relative to their adjustment, coping, engagement, and educational outcomes. Despite their best preparations through campus visits, orientations, and institutional assurances of an affirming, welcoming environment for all students, their realities of life on monocultural campuses in the setting of monocultural communities shaded the true campus climate. Even though the students knew they would be attending a predominantly White institution with a significantly low percentage of Black students, several of them expressed their shock and surprise to find more Black students on campus than they expected.

Only one of the students interviewed stated that her campus climate was inviting and enriching, placing the responsibility on the students to make it a positive experience. Another student shared similar feelings about a student’s responsibility to make it the best. The remainder of the students gave varying degrees of campus climate descriptions including positive, negative, and outright hostility. When specifically asked if they felt welcomed and embraced by the majority community on their campus and if the experience was what they expected, responses differed greatly, ranging from strongly positive to strongly negative.

Arguably, no other word in the English language sums up the African American racist experience as “nigger,” often referred to as the “n” word. That the word remains alive and well in our soci-

ety and on the campuses of the institutions under study was confirmed by several students.

During the interview process, on one of the campuses under study, a “noose incident” occurred that, understandably, the Black students found highly upsetting. Adding to their frustration was their viewpoint that the response from university administrators was slow and communication was inadequate. At a student forum, the students were told that only a limited amount of information could be shared in order to protect the individuals involved in an ongoing investigation.

The students pointed out that two issues were occurring simultaneously: (a) there is little social intermingling among different racial groups and (b) some of them chose to self-segregate from other racial groups. Black students on predominantly White campuses often self-segregate as a coping mechanism for persistent challenges to their self-worth and racial identity. In spite of several instances where Black students were making the choice to self-segregate, there were other times of formal and informal interactions in social settings among diverse students. Several of the students reported that they were encouraged by faculty and staff to become engaged in multicultural activities.

The students inherited not only a community where discriminatory acts are prone to occur but also a local police force that they alleged demonstrate their bias against Black students. According to the students interviewed, being comfortable in asking for police assistance was often not the case for Black students. On the contrary, their stories indicated, based on their experiences, that students have little confidence and trust that campus security will respond to their needs. This should be an alarming revelation to campus administrators and a call for action to investigate and eliminate behaviors and practices by campus security that were detailed by these students.

Social Expectations and Experiences

The themes which emerged concerning social expectations and experiences were lack of social life, social engagement, spiritual connections, and student organizations.

Black students who choose to attend a rural predominantly White institution find the social experience especially challenging. There are very few outlets in these communities for social activities that appeal to Black collegians. As opposed to most of the students who described a social life that was “non-existent,” one student illustrated her social experience as “enriching” because she chose to participate in what her Black friends called “White activities:”

To address students’ needs for an active social nightlife, one of the universities has a student-run campus nightclub that provides a weekly variety of entertaining shows, concerts, and events. Some students stated that without this social outlet, the number of African American students, if not students in general, at the university would be significantly reduced.

As successful juniors and seniors on track to graduate, the participants attributed much of their persistence to their involvement with diverse campus organizations including the Student Government Association, Black Student Organization, fraternities and sororities, academic and cultural councils, and honor societies. More than one student stated that being involved is the only thing that kept minority students there.

Among the many challenges the Black students faced was the lack of opportunities to maintain their relationship with a church that provided them with the same experiences as their home fellowships. Several of the students interviewed found a connection to their faith and their culture through their involvement with the university’s Gospel Choir and local church activities

Each of the universities under study had a Black Student Organization, accessible to all students, that addressed the concerns and interests particular to the African American students. The Black Student Organization provides opportunities for students of color to interact and participate together in campus-wide activities throughout the school year. Some of the students had joined Black Greek-letter organizations. When asked if there were interactions among the Black and White Greek organizations. The students tended to quickly answer in the negative. Furthermore, according to the students who were members of a fraternity or sorority, racial ten-

sions existed between Black and White Greek-letter organizations.

Institutional Practices

The themes which emerged concerning institutional practices were student support services, student-centered listening leaders, the lack of Black faculty and importance of Black mentors, and recommendations for future Black students.

Emphasizing the need to be proactive, students described the importance of using student resources to help students reach their academic goals. Most of the students credited their success to specific Black staff members in Admissions and Student Services. Based on their remarks, it was obvious that these two offices had made a significant impact in their lives. Several of the students mentioned an admissions recruiter who went above and beyond to recruit and retain them to graduation. When asked what they would say to administrators if given the opportunity to make recommendations to their respective universities for improving the environment for Black students, the number one recommendation from several of the students was to have student-centered administrators who demonstrate a genuine concern for every student. For universities that communicate and advertise their support for diversity, the students are keenly aware that practices need to align with rhetoric.

The students expressed their need to connect with mentors who share their culture and who can empathize with the pressures and challenges that Black students face on predominantly White campuses. More specifically, they reported their desire to meet, get to know, and develop relationships with Black faculty.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following list of recommendations outlines strategies for improving the institutional environment for African American students on predominantly White campuses as suggested by this research study. There is a need for:

7. developing or strengthening cultural sensitivity training programs for all administrators, faculty, staff, and students

designed to create an inclusive and supportive campus climate; these programs must be "sold" in a manner that encourages support and diminishes resistance.

8. committing to the recruitment and retention of Black faculty, staff, and administrators;
9. developing comprehensive orientation and retention programs, with a focus on student success, to help Black students adjust to and engage with predominantly White universities;
10. developing or strengthening peer student and faculty mentoring programs;
11. providing and demonstrating strong support for Black student organizations;
12. providing and demonstrating strong support for Black-oriented social and cultural events;
13. providing a diversity-infused curriculum with African American Studies classes that are consistently taught by African American faculty members;
14. increasing scholarship opportunities to reduce the effect of student loans;
15. developing or strengthening programs with K-12 school systems that prepare all students for academic success in a multicultural collegiate environment; and
16. developing or strengthening partnerships with community leaders including community police that address racial issues and improve the local racial climate.

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