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

Brenda W. Wright  
East Tennessee State University

Donald W. Good  
East Tennessee State University, gooddw@etsu.edu

Jim Lampley  
East Tennessee State University, lampley@etsu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://dc.etsu.edu/etsu-works

Part of the Higher Education Commons

Citation Information

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Works at Digital Commons @ East Tennessee State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in ETSU Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ East Tennessee State University. For more information, please contact digilib@etsu.edu.
PERSISTENCE IN LEARNING: 
EXPECTATIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF 
AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS IN 
PREDOMINATELY WHITE UNIVERSITIES

Brenda White Wright  
East Tennessee State University  
Johnson City, Tennessee  

Don Good  
East Tennessee State University  
Johnson City, Tennessee  

Jim Lampley  
East Tennessee State University  
Johnson City, Tennessee

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 social expectations and experiences?
3. How do African American juniors and seniors describe their cultural expectations and experiences?
4. How do African American juniors and seniors describe institutional practices that contribute to 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 dramatically 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, Nee, Terenzini, Pascarella, & Hagedorn, 1999; Centra, 1973; Chavous, 2002; Guiffrida & Dourith 2006; Haralson, 1996; Lyons, 1973; Malaney & Shively, 1991; Wallace & Bell, 1999). In short, the research literature states 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, Kuriansky, 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.

**METHODO LoGY**

**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 (Eissner & 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 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, making 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 same levels of grades on college campuses. 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 is an opportunity “to shine” while others described the experience alternately as frightening and shocking.

The additional pressure of their intellectual competition 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 affirmitive 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 undermine 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 some experiences 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 Black life and 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 the power imbalance of Black students who have the power to pass or fail them. In contrast, Black students on predominately White campuses often self-segregate as a coping mechanism for persistent challenges to their self-worth and racial identity. In 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 that discriminates against a church and faced the same experiences as their home churches. 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 providing 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-
Expectations and Experiences of African American Students in Predominantly White Universities

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 they face on predominantly White campuses. 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 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.

**REFERENCES**